

Mise En Scène and Film Style: From Classical Hollywood to New Media Art

By Adrian Martin

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WHAT, EXACTLY, IS MISE EN SCÈNE? AMONG THE KEY THEORETICAL TERMS DEPLOYED within film theory, its boundaries and essential properties are notoriously ill-defined. Translated from the French literally as ‘placing on stage’, it frequently designates any loose number of the constitutive textual features of the film image, a word seemingly defined anew with each use. Adrian Martin broaches this murkiness directly in his book-length analysis of the concept. Rather than arguing at the outset for an essential understanding of *mise en scène*, the book introduces an historical account of the concept’s various definitions and uses as well as, through a set of exemplary close readings, helpful suggestions of its analytic potential for contemporary film theorists. Putting the question to the reader at the beginning, Martin notes that ‘any attempt to arrive at a workable definition needs to go down several different, discursive paths’ (2). The monograph indeed approaches its subject through a heterogeneous set of critical territories including histories of the term within twentieth-century film criticism, close readings of twentieth-century films and interjections within theoretical arguments regarding twenty-first century media and art.

Mise en Scène and Film Style has been issued as part of the Palgrave Close Readings series, which in its mission explains that

the series is based in the belief that, while a scrupulous attention to the texture of film and television programmes requires the focus of concept and theory, the discoveries that such attention produces become vital in questioning and re-formulating theory and concept. Each monograph will be committed to the appreciation of new areas and topics in the field, but also to strengthening and developing the conceptual basis and the methodologies of critical analysis itself.

Refocusing theory from the basis of rigorous textual analysis is a promising prospect if it can move past some of the exhausted arguments and stale hermeneutic readings that make up so much of the critical work within

contemporary film studies. As Martin claims in his introduction, *mise en scène* designates both a 'history of forms', of the various ways in which filmmakers have organised their audiovisual material, and the history of the concept as it has been thought and written by critics (xvii). Accordingly, each chapter moves between theory and film texts, alternating between brief conceptual accounts of *mise en scène* and close readings which seek to exemplify, illuminate or sometimes challenge these theoretical positions. In his own words, Martin states that 'in this book, my overall aim is not to play favourites, choose sides or stage some imaginary Oedipal war of the generations; my goal is to synthesise diverse tools and approaches, wherever and however I can' (47). This synthetic approach, which seeks to avoid readings of films explicitly couched in broader philosophical or political frameworks, affords the book's numerous ways to read film anew. The book provides many brilliant close readings and it is, among many things, a showcase for Martin's formidable talents as a writer and critic. However, the synthetic method also highlights the necessity of addressing greater questions, particularly when brought into discussion with existing theoretical arguments regarding television and new media.

The first chapter, titled 'A Term That Means Everything, and Nothing Very Specific', introduces a synoptic history of the usage of *mise en scène* by critics across a long range of periods, languages and philosophical schools. The account plumbs from both familiar figures (V. F. Perkins, Bordwell and Thomson) and those lesser known within anglophone criticism (Gérard Legrand). One of the book's greatest virtues is in highlighting these instances of neglected, marginalised film writing, providing an 'expanded' field of criticism beyond familiar territory and offering readers many future avenues for rethinking the critical term. As the chapter's title suggests, the range of understandings of *mise en scène* on display gives the impression that the concept is 'everything and nothing specific', a meaning which is invented each time it is mentioned. Although no single line of definition or set of parameters for the concept is laid out at the beginning, the cumulative examples and close readings throughout the book generally focus on minute observations of figuration, orchestration, gestures—the movement of bodies and objects within the moving frame(s). The second chapter argues for an understanding of *mise en scène* beyond an attachment to the long takes of classical realist cinema. Under the categories of expressive (classical) and excessive (broadly post-structural, encompassing both modernist and postmodernist forms) aesthetic economies, Martin contends that an understanding of *mise en scène* can and should traverse major historical and formal shifts—a reading of film style as a consistent formal feature we can deploy transhistorically. The next chapters support this with a series of sustained readings of *mise en scène* across classical Hollywood and post-war experimental (or 'excessive') films, including scenes from varied auteurs including Fassbinder, Visconti, Minnelli, Preminger and Godard.

A later, stand-out, chapter on sound as *mise-en-scène*, or 'sound spaces', is particularly effective. Eschewing the philosophical bent of much of the writing on film sound, Martin argues for the inseparability of sound and image as *mise en scène*. At the centrepiece of this is a bravura close-reading of Welles' *The Lady from Shanghai* focusing entirely on the interrelation between various sounds, movements, framings and figuration. It stands as one of the book's finest examples of how a close formal reading of a film's audio-visual organisation can yield complex analytical insight. Another chapter introduces the idea of 'social *mise en scène*', a thematic reading of film which focuses on an analytics of figuration and micro-gesture which reveal traces of social codes and rituals. The example of the readings of Ozu by Shigehiko Hasumi, describing the motifs embodied and expressed through the small domestic gestures of Ozu's women, and the staging of gendered relations in the setting of a table in Ford's *How Green Was My Valley?* are observant and impressively described. The exacting detail and nuance applied to these minute scenes do not always amount to forceful conclusions. Relying on concepts as broad as the 'social' here yield valuable insights that await more detailed historical context. This chapter reveals, too, the degree to which almost all of the film scenes analysed in the book revolve around a small bourgeois group, or individual, within their heavily ritualised spaces like dinner tables, restaurants and bedrooms. It raises the question as to whether *mise en scène* as an analytic tool is particularly amenable to specific cinematic subjects and social formations.

The mission to avoid the recurring theoretical arguments and impasses from the major schools of film criticism and theory is most productive when applied to twentieth century film. The question about whether the book's synthetic and closely textual approach remains effective beyond strictly film criticism is relevant to the book's last chapters, which move from films to television, visual arts and new media. In the penultimate chapter focusing on the relationship between cinema and television, Martin looks to find continuities between the two media, as a means of disrupting a nostalgic critical practice which separates artistic images (*cinematic mise en scène*) from mass media (commercial audio-visibility). Claiming that theories of remediation, which account for the formal effects produced by the incorporation of one medium within another, are largely conservative in practice, Martin argues that we need a more 'supple and reciprocal concept when it comes to showing the multiple forms of *mise en scène* in audiovisual media' (167). Taking an example which seeks to collapse a commonly perceived divide in the cultural capital between cinema and television, he contends that 'many of cinema's styles, genres, narrative modes and *mise en scène* effects have found themselves effortlessly—sometimes spontaneously—recreated on Reality TV' (167). The argument reaches a limitation in the scheme of the book, which has proved how a rigorous attention to *mise en scène* and style can reveal critical insight that grander theories would miss. Casual viewers and

serious scholars alike wouldn't hesitate to note that Pasolini's *Salò* and the reality television series *Ladette to Lady* are only superficially similar. If 'many motifs (teenagers gathered in an isolated manor, 're-education' often involving brutal humiliation, stark class differences) were virtually identical from one to the other', it would suggest, in this instance, that the critical tool of *mise en scène*, on its own, is too broad to contribute to a meaningful account of the politics of these works, let alone valuable aesthetic judgements between them (167). It suggests that in an age of image saturation the cinephilic philosophy underpinning decades of film criticism needs to be either rethought or reoriented. The contemporary ethos of constant streaming and binge-viewing disabuses any notion of pleasure in itself as a critical value. Now, the cinephile, as much as the 'tv addict' or gamer, is an identity constituted by sheer consumption as its own end. The incessant flow of images now includes everything from unfiltered pornography and war atrocity to Studio Ghibli productions. A wider critical focus will allow for the making of valuable aesthetic claims alongside political and ethical judgements. Sophisticated close reading of contemporary audio-visual regimes will require, at least, equally considered philosophical and historical framing.

The final chapter accounts for another key theoretical idea for Martin's revitalisation of *mise en scène*, the 'dispositif'. The concept incites a generous serve of questions and possibilities to the reader, providing an analytic framework which could yield many other volumes thinking through its implications and potential applications to a wide range of multimedia. Sketching out a simple definition, 'a *dispositif* is basically this: the arrangement of diverse elements in such a way as to trigger, guide and organise a set of actions' (179). In practice, it's also likened to a 'game with rules, where the execution of the game's moves—the following of the rules—*generates* outcomes, results and sometimes surprises' (179). If, like *mise en scène*, this definition is so broad as to almost disappear into 'everything and nothing at once', its value is justified by the interpretations it inspires. Martin provides an explanation of the intricate textual permutations within films by the likes of Akerman and Kiarostami, as well as the dynamic heterogeneity in the films of Miguel Gomes and the art displays of Weerasethakul. While broader theoretical questions are inevitably raised by the obvious ontological distinctions to be drawn between films and art installations, the chapter succeeds by showing how these questions are best explored with a nuanced understanding of any audiovisual text's own internal organisation. The monograph's greatest value lies in the call to greater sophistication in our viewing, analysis and interpretation of film textuality. Any theorist, critic or cinephile accounting for contemporary audio-visual forms would benefit from reading the exemplary readings on show in this volume.

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