

## **Creating Meaning through Interpretations: A Mise-En-Scene Analysis of the Film ‘The Song of Sparrows’**

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### **Abstract**

Cinema is a mass medium and it stimulates experiences in its pursuit to put across ideas and perceptions (Acker, 1991). Filmmakers adopt different ways to transfer their thoughts and perceptions to the audience. Elements like décor, lighting, space, costumes and acting, which can be collectively referred to as mise-en-scene, play a crucial role in creating mood and meaning to the shots (Barsam and Monahan, 2010). Specific scenes from the Iranian film ‘The Song of Sparrows’ are identified to discuss each of the five elements and their importance in the storyline and its possible effects on the audience are analyzed using content analysis. The paper concludes that meanings can be created through the interpretation of these five mise-en-scene elements. A close observation and analysis of these elements in the film could lead to a much enhanced film-watching experience.

**Keywords:** Film, Mise-en-scene Analysis, Majid Majidi, Content Analysis

## Introduction

In Cinematic terms, *mise-en-scene* can be referred to as all the elements of a film that we see in front of the camera and the way it is arranged (Bordewell and Thompson, 2003). Those elements, which include décor, lighting, space, costumes and acting, have an important role in imparting a mood to the story and delivering a meaning to the visuals, thus playing a crucial role in signifying the director's narrative mastery. It involves visual composition, the movement and position of on-screen actors and the properties set as part of stage design (Barsam and Monahan, 2010). Expressionist films like 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' employed *mise-en-scene* to good effect, both stylistically and ideologically, to convey a certain message to the audience. The sets, lighting, acting, costumes and make up were all done in a particular manner to generate a sense of horror and thrill.

The set and the way it is designed play a crucial role in creating a mood, interpreting the visuals, and providing an aesthetic appeal to the shots. There are several instances where the set designers had control over all the visual aspects of the particular film. An example of this is Victor Fleming's 'Gone with the Wind', where production designer William Cameron Menzies played an important role in the overall look of the film (Ward, 1994). The props, which are a part of the set design, also have a specific role to play in terms of lending meaning to the visuals.

The key aspect of lighting is to focus on imparting moods and meaning to the scenes. The amount of light used to frame a subject or light up a room and the direction of the source from which the light appears can all denote a particular meaning and interpretation to the overall content of the scene. Variations in lighting is used to show change in time during the day or night and even to symbolize the character's mindset at a given juncture. Low-key lighting is often used to create strong contrasts and shadows in horrors and thrillers while high-key lighting would suit musicals and comedies that call for a brighter setting.

The mood of the scene or the characters in it can be explained by analyzing the placement of subject and the amount of space in the frame. The space can be open or closed (Monaco, 2009), negative or positive (Cassidy, 2013), deep or shallow, and offscreen or frontality (Pierson, 2010). The use of costumes also deems extreme importance not just in defining characters but also as indispensable elements in the narrative (Bruzzi, 1997).

The colour, texture and even the detailing of the costumes would be decisive in characterization and narrative style. Discussion of culture, perspectives and ideologies within narratives is also a possibility with a clear and apt marking of costumes.

Another *mise-en-scene* element, acting, is a key aspect in the creative success of a film. The effectiveness of the actor's portrayal of actions and emotions determines the audience connectivity with the mood and feel of the film. (Pierson, 2010). The best scenario is where the audience is able to connect themselves with the characters and thereby easily being able to read their performances better. The act could be a failure if the performance is not convincing or believable (Sanford, 1987).

Majid Majidi is an internationally acclaimed Iranian filmmaker, whose films have enthralled both the Iranian and the Western audience equally. Some of his critically acclaimed works are 'Children of Heaven' (1997), 'The Colour of Paradise' (1999), 'Baran' (2001), and 'The Song of Sparrows' (2008). Almost all his films have a universal theme, thus enabling the international audience to relate themselves to the content better. Majidi's 'Children of

Heaven' was the first Iranian film to receive an Academy Award nomination. With a neo-realistic approach, Majidi most often narrates the life of the middle-class Iranian and their struggles, though mostly as a sub-theme.

Majidi, along with other neo-realistic Iranian directors like Abbas Kiarostami and Jafar Panahi, is often recalled for his imaginative mise-en-scene approaches in his films. Majidi, however, manages to make his visuals more engaging and presents the audience a greater sense of belonging with his close shots and point-of-view narrative styles. Many of the mise-en-scene elements and the way they are effectively used can be clearly identified in most of his films. This approach helps to create perceptions among the audience, thus helping them create their own perspectives about key concepts that are discussed within the film (The Film Sufi, 2010).

### **Mise-En-Scene In Films**

The use of mise-en-scene has a serious effect on the reading of the film. It can be extended to the whole film rather than a selection of scenes in order to create a feel from start to finish (Moura, 2014). For instance, the use of mise-en-scene in 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' was to generate an effect of thrill and horror, whereas mise-en-elements could also be adopted to convey certain ideas or messages. Hodsdon (1992) explains that an inner meaning is generated through the tension between the film and its director's personality. He feels mise-en-scene is neither the director's vision of the world nor his outlook about life.

The way in which the mise-en-scene elements are treated in a movie gains considerable significance. Renowned French film critic Andre Bazin, in his essay 'De Sica: Matteur en Scene', has briefly compared how Vittorio De Sica's mise-en-scene differs from Roberto Rossellini's mise-en-scene through their films 'Bicycle Thieves' and 'Rome, Open City'. Bazin's essay reveals how De Sica's films generate a deeper sense of understanding among the audience through the adaption of techniques like these (Snyder and Curle, 2000).

Mise-en-scene involves a combination of what the audience views on screen as it is and the way they are invited to view it (Gibbs, 2002). It is all about the means of communication in the film and the ways in which they work out an expressive narrative pattern. Gibbs explains this through an example of lighting being used as an effective mise-en-scene technique in Alfred Hitchcock's 1946 film 'Notorious'. With the help of low-key lighting, Cary Grant is shown as silhouette and is made to sit with his back facing the camera. This allows us as audience to think from his perspective and share his viewpoints as Ingrid Bergman interacts with him.

On the contrary, there are many instances where high-key lighting was used in films. In 'American Beauty', it was primarily done to show the glow on Angela's blonde hair and almost naked skin as she appears as the seductress in the dream sequence (Redmond, 2014). The high-key lighting technique involves the use of fill lights at par with key lights to make the scenes bright and devoid of shadows. Three-point lighting is used in films like 'Gentleman Prefer Blondes' (1953) and 'Breakfast at Tiffany's' (1961) to increase the depth of frame and make the people and objects in the background visible in certain scenes (Pierson, 2010).

Pierson (2010) also describes costumes as "the most easily noticeable aspect of mise-en-scene". Costumes reveal a character's personality, social status, or the era he or she belongs too. The role of costumes in biopics is clearly evident while observing Salma Hayek's

character in 'Frida' and Abbie Cornish's character in 'Bright Star'. Costumes can also be employed to emphasize a particular theme. The cheetah-patterned fur coat used by the female character in the opening scene of 'The Graduate' makes Anne Bancroft "look like a predator hunting for her pray" (Moura, 2014).

The set design is considered an effective *mise-en-scene* to give the audience a sense of place, mood and the character's mindset. It can be created inside a studio or filmed in an outdoor location (Pierson, 2010). The set and the props used will have a specific theme to convey and will make the audience indulge in deep thoughts to develop interpretations. In another scene from 'The Graduate', the central character played by Dustin Hoffman will have a fish tank placed behind his bed to symbolize his presence in a world he longer wants to be in. Another scene where he's seen on the bottom of a swimming pool further establishes this concept (Moura, 2014). The use of certain colours is often adopted to display an emotional or symbolic meaning, or even to draw out a character. Red colour, for instance, is a representation of danger or sexuality, or a symbol of loss and trauma like in the 1973 film 'Don't Look Now' (Redmond, 2014).

Acting, as part of *mise-en-scene*, is an essential presence because the characters in it are the face of the film itself. Cast and acting will have a lot to do with the nature of role he or she is supposed to depict and their performance is important in creating the right mood and conveying the right meaning. The modulation in expressions and dialogue deliveries helps the audience to understand the mindset of the character at various parts of the film. An example of this is Kevin Spacey's performance during a couple of office scenes in 'American Beauty'. In an earlier scene, Spacey appears dull and subdued as his boss reminds him of his lack of efficiency at work. Later, when he quits the job, he looks more confident and comfortable as he tells his boss that he doesn't care about the job anymore (Richards, 2014).

The use of space is a very important element of *mise-en-scene* as it influences the way a film is read. The depth of field, distance from one character to the other, size of the people, places and props within a frame are all factors that determines space. Majidi's use of space, especially in films like 'Children of Heaven' and 'Colour of Paradise', is particularly noteworthy. A slightly different aspect of space is emphasized in the 1937 film 'Grand Illusion'. In a particular scene, there is a slow pan of the camera on many faces to capture the expression of each one of them separately. This allowed the audience to perceive the impact of the action performed to bring out the expressions. A wider frame showing all the faces together wouldn't have created the same effect (Kolker, 1999).

This paper is relevant because of the limited academic research done in this area. Even though *mise-en-scene* appears as a chapter in most books on film studies, the possibility of its application in an entire film has rarely been explored before. There are numerous articles on the web, which gives a sample or two of the *mise-en-scene* elements using various films. However, a detailed analysis of all the *mise-en-scene* elements in a single film has hardly been attempted before. Considering the impact of *mise-en-scene* and the effect it could have on the audience in terms of their understanding makes it a very relevant topic for discussion.

### **Methodology**

In this study, content analysis is used to analyze the five *mise-en-scene* elements in Iran's Academy Award nominee 'The Song of Sparrows'. Specific scenes are identified and elements like décor, lighting, space, costumes and acting are analyzed in detail. This would

help to explain the extent to which these elements combine to provide mood, meaning and value to the visuals.

### **Findings and Discussions**

All the findings in the analysis part are interpretations of the researcher, which is intended to help the audience to have a better understanding of the film and add to the existing knowledge. Every scene that is possible for a mise-en-scene analysis is identified and analyzed in detail.

### **Décor**

Décor plays a major role in bringing out certain key aspects in the film ‘The Song of Sparrows’. Karim’s house is clearly shown as the abode of a struggling man with random things scattered here and there and unpainted doors and walls. It also signifies that he has more things to worry about than maintain his house in the best possible manner. Many of the things in the house are too old and rusty and are a clear indication of his financial status too.

A clever use of décor is witnessed in the scene where Karim is accounted for the loss of the ostrich and loses his job. As Karim reaches his workplace the following day, a close shot of his shoes and belongings placed out of the door is shown. He meets his co-worker friend but he doesn’t utter a word about Karim being sacked. The tight shot of Karim’s belongings outside the workplace is an aesthetic representation of getting fired from his job.

The difference in décor of the two clinics, where Karim visits to repair his daughter’s hearing aid, depicts how advanced healthcare can be in cities when compared to villages. This is important in the storyline because it shows Karim making a visit to the city clinic to find a better opinion about the hearing aid. It is that particular visit to the city that brings a twist to his life and hence the story. The clinic in the village displayed old files, scattered pens and dull walls (figure 1) while the city clinic (figure 2) was neatly arranged with modern equipments and polished furniture.



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*

### **Lighting**

The most interesting aspect about the lighting in this film is that all the scenes that follow a depressing or unexpected twist are shot at dim light, also giving a feel that they were purposely taken at night. The scene where Karim returns home after losing his job, the scene where his wife cries after Karim insults her cousin, the scenes which show his struggle at home nursing an injured body are all shot in relatively low light.

Another instance of a variation in lighting is seen in the clinic scenes. The village clinic is dimly lighted while the city clinic is brightly lighted, giving emphasis to all the props in the scene and enhancing the overall look of the city clinic.

### Space

The opening scene of the film shows the close-up shot of a group of ostriches in a farm. The space is shallow with no depth of field and makes the audience think from the ostriches' perspective and shows its importance in the whole storyline (figure 3).



*Figure 3*

As the film moves further ahead, one of the ostriches escapes from the farm. Karim, who is the central character of the film, makes an attempt to find it. He takes his bike to ride deep into the outskirts of the village and several places nearby. The filmmaker has displayed his craft in using deep space to signify how far he has travelled to reach his goal. High-angled shots of Karim driving the bike through a deserted land are shown to explain the difficulty of the task he has undertaken and his resolve to find it. There are similar shots of Karim walking through an isolated mountain, which can be interpreted as the extent to which he stretches himself and the helplessness of the situation he is in.

After Karim accidentally takes up the job of a motorcycle taxi driver, there is a significant change in his attitude towards life. It is here that the director shows several scenes of Karim driving his bike with discarded items randomly picked up from the places he visited. Frontality staging is employed to show Karim riding the bike so that it cuts the space between him and the viewer and thereby gives a feel that he communicates with them. This sort of framing and use of space enables the audience to think from his perspective.

Another scene where space is effectively used to convey a particular message is the little girl's entry with a smoking aspad while Karim was stuck in a traffic block. The girl's expression is captured in a tight frame, which shows her innocence and the glimmer of hope and expectations on her face. A wide shot wouldn't have conveyed the right mood and meaning of the scenario. A similar approach can be noticed in the scene where Karim takes home the blue door from Abbas' house, where a random selection of close shots of his face and top-angled shots of the blue door on his head is a reflection of the greedy man he has turned into.

The expression on the faces of the children in the final stages of the film is yet another instance of adopting space in a very effective manner. As the fish barrel breaks, the expression on each of their faces is shown by panning them one by one rather than a single wide shot, giving the audience a greater sense of their loss and misery.

### **Costumes**

Karim wears just one pair of t-shirt and shirt in all the scenes in the film and that is important to show his financial condition. There is no change of shirt until there is a slight improvement in his economic status. Such an approach also helps in maintaining continuity as well. The pattern of Karim's make-up also provides necessary inputs on his circumstances and inner conflicts. The uncombed hair, tanned skin and overgrown stubbles enables the viewer to get deep into the character and relate to his feelings. It gives the audience a realistic image of a man who is not bothered about maintaining his looks or as somebody who has bigger things to worry than being concerned about what he wears or how he looks.



*Figure 4*

The costumes of people in the city play a vital role in narrating how different they are from the villagers. The director shows that the differences are not just in their attire but also in their behavioral patterns, which is detectable from his experiences with most of his customers. Every person Karim meets on the busy Tehran streets are wrapped in suits and blazers, which also throw light on the over-the-top city life and the extravagant nature of the people living there (figure 4).

### **Acting**

Karim's facial expression and dialogue to the ostriches while feeding them in the opening scene indicates the lack of concern he showed towards them at the beginning of the film. This can also be compared to his smiling gesture at the climax scene as he gazes at the ostriches and can be interpreted as the director's highly symbolic and philosophical way of telling the audience about an underlying message in the film.

A very significant aspect of this film is the change in Karim's behavior and mentality as the story progresses. This is evident from his behavior towards his children at various points in the film. The children's reaction on just seeing him when they are caught searching for his daughter's hearing aid implies Karim's character and mindset. The fear on their faces is a reflection of his short-tempered nature and how he generally behaves with the kids.

The shocking twist of Karim falling down from the top of the junk items and injuring himself is a decisive element in the film. Karim's reactions to his family and neighbors while lying on the bed is an example of how method acting helps not only in taking the story forward but conveying meanings that are even beyond the filmmaker's imagination. The look on Karim's face in a tight frame portrays regret, disappointment, love, concern and helplessness in one single expression (figure 5).



*Figure 5*

Karim's expression of shock and disappointment on hearing the ostrich's return in the penultimate scene is a symbolic representation of his feelings towards them. This could generate a conflict in the viewer's mind especially when one considers Karim's nature in the earlier part of the film. Here, Karim's acting helps to reveal the change in his attitude towards life and a sense of freedom that was installed in his mind, especially after his accident and the sparrow incident.

### **Conclusion**

This paper emphasizes the role of mise-en-elements like décor, lighting, space, costumes and acting, in understanding the mood and meaning of the film. The researcher discusses how these five elements were used in the Iranian film 'The Song of Sparrows' to analyze the role of interpretation in effectively narrating a film. A study of how these elements were adopted in some of the other films from different eras is also done to denote the various contexts in which they can be employed.

For a well-rounded approach, the researcher looked into all the scenes of the film and identified the ones that can be interpreted for mise-en-scene analysis. Specific scenes are taken to discuss each of the five elements and their importance in the storyline and possible effects on the audience are analyzed. The paper concludes that meanings can be created through the interpretation of these five mise-en-scene elements. A close observation and analysis of these elements in the film could lead to a much enriched film-watching experience.

The main focus of the current study was to look into the role of mise-en-scene in understanding the mood and meaning of the visuals in the film. The importance of interpreting the five elements in mise-en-scene and how they help in creating an enhanced level of viewing experience was explored in the study. However, the study was limited to the researcher's interpretation and analysis of the scenes. For future study, it would be interesting to also form a focus group, which has the technical expertise to interpret and analyse the





scenes of a film, and hold a discussion with them on how they interpret particular scenes. Personal interviews can also be conducted to see the extent to which they feel these scenes could impact the audience.



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