

## Visual Composition/ MISE EN SCENE –

### What is contained within the frame-

Mise en scène focuses on what can be seen in the picture.

Mise-en-scene is the director's control over what appears in the film frame, by controlling what appears he actually stages the event for the camera

So when discussing mise en scene you must look at and refer to

The composition elements: aspects within the scene or frame controlled by the director. Relates to 4 general Areas

**1. Setting:** relates to the importance of the location of where the scene takes place/construction of the set

Production Design: sets, props and costumes: Colour (present in both production design and lighting)

**2 Actors'** performance (including casting and make up) and movement (blocking)

• Framing including position; depth of field; aspect ratio; height and angle (but not movement)

### **3 Lighting**

Remember the different styles of lighting in your previous notes

Frontal lighting and its tendency to eliminate shadows

Sidelight used to sculpt the characters features

Backlighting defines depth by sharply distinguishing an object from its background

Under-lighting suggests that light comes from below the subject. Often distorts features

Top Lighting usually appears along with light coming from other direction

Key Light...primary lighting source of an image, providing the dominant illuminating and casting dominant shadows

Light used to fill in or soften or eliminate shadows

**4. Figure expression and movement/** positioning of objects within the frame...eg photos...positioning and distance created between characters and the meaning this has: movement of characters within the frame-

## The use of mise en scene in Blade Runner



Blade Runner's film-noir miser-en-scene, with its unusual advertisements (and rain), its Los Angeles dominated by an oriental population, its punk female android (Hannah), its high-tech traffic alongside bicycles, its steam and smoke, its shabbiness and glitter, is film's first (and still best) precursor of the movement we now call cyberpunk. Blade Runner is even better, and much more ambitious, than Scott's previous science fiction film, Alien, and is especially interesting in its treatment of the central theme: whether "humanity" is something innate or whether it can be "programmed" in - or, indeed, out.



The audio-visual nature of film offers a different means of presenting ideas and has to be read quite differently to a novel. Make a careful study of different camera angles used in Blade Runner. For instance street scenes are often shot from above while the Tyrell building is generally shot from below. What information is conveyed by these different camera angles?

The film Blade Runner is characterized by its very extravagant and futuristic mise-en-scene. While the film belongs to the science fiction genre which is largely defined by its use of otherworldly settings and characters (E. James) it goes beyond other sci-fi films in its use of mise-en-scene. The setting, costumes and lighting of Blade Runner are deeply intertwined with its plot and themes



Blade Runner however, is crafted around its visual look. Blade Runner revolves around the themes of dehumanization of people resulting from a society based around high technology and the notion of what it means to exist as a human being. The mise-en-scene of Blade Runner is not only appropriate to its overriding themes but it is vital in the establishment and expansion of these themes within the text.

Blade Runner is classified as a tech-noir film (D. Newman). While the film differs greatly from classical noir films its plot as well as visual appearance is directly influenced by noir conventions. The film is set in a dark urban environment. Throughout the course of the film the sun is never visible. It is as if this futuristic rendering of Los Angeles exists in a perpetual state of darkness, a common trope of classic noir films (Telita).

The lighting of the film is very dark and hard shadows are frequently thrown across the face of the characters during moments of important dialogue. Harrison Ford's character is repeatedly shown in dark shadow impressing upon the viewer his sinister and mysterious nature. Blade Runner adopts this obvious noir look in order to create a genre association in the mind of the viewer.

When examining the function of the mise-en-scene of Blade Runner it is important not to over look its function in the establishment of the film text as belonging to the science fiction genre. From the opening titles of the film, which gives a brief overview of the plot, it is clear that the film is to be classified as sci-fi. By nature science fiction films attempt to transport the viewer to a world that is alien from their own.

This is typically done through the use of special effects and elaborate otherworldly sets. Blade Runner does not stray from this convention. The plot of Blade Runner mandates the use of a futuristic setting. The idea of the creation of artificial beings would simply not work were the film to be set in a normal non-futuristic environment. Just as with the noir genre the use of visual cues linked to the science fiction genre prompts the viewer to read the film text under the category of science fiction. Thus the idea of such elements of the text as hovering cars and artificial beings becomes acceptable in the eyes of the viewer.

Beyond its most basic function of stimulating genre recognition in the viewer the elaborate visual appearance of Blade Runner must be examined in relation to its importance in building the dominant themes of the film text. Blade Runner can be looked at as having two overarching themes. The film depicts a society in which the proliferation and excess of high technology serves as a dehumanizing force. Within this environment in which human life no longer seems to be of utmost importance the question of what exactly it means to be human is entrenched within the film text.

The dark urban landscape of futuristic Los Angeles is covered in blinking and neon lights. These blinking lights denote the existence of unknown machines or forms of technology that exist in the depths of the city. The city itself is depicted as being almost alive. It is impossible for the human figure to take command in this complex and busy urban landscape. The human characters are literally fighting to stay ahead of this seemingly out of control technology. This visual setup of a world overrun by technology creates the premise for the entire plot of the film.

Both characters live alone in very dark apartments. Deckard's apartment is littered with empty liquor bottles and he is surrounded by the technology that he feels so oppressed by. Sebastian lives in a wet, dilapidated, abandoned building. His door is covered in large locks which are a further indicator of his fear and paranoia of the technology he lives amongst and helps to create. The most telling visual element of Sebastian's environment is his group of "friends" that he has genetically engineered.

He has designed them to keep him company. Unlike the replicants who are physically indistinguishable from humans these "friends" of Sebastian take on an entirely non-human look. They are all very short with exaggerated features. Their visual appearance sets them in an inferior position when regarded next to a human. Thus Sebastian is able to take comfort in their presence rather than feeling threatened by their superiority as he does by the replicants.

The city is full of strange looking costumed characters. It is unclear whether these characters are human or not. There is a strange mix of these brightly coloured, costumed characters with obviously non-human characters and other human looking characters. This confusing visual mix is compounded by the sound of various languages being spoken. This array of different visual styles and sounds creates a very busy and confusing environment through which Deckard moves with a kind of nervous indifference.

In examining the visual look of Blade Runner in terms of one of the film's main themes, the questioning of what it means to be a human being, it is important to specifically examine the use of costumes and dress style of the film's characters.

As previously discussed there is an abundance of humanoid looking characters populating the futuristic Los Angeles environment.

Many of these characters look entirely human aside from their dress. It is the use of costume that makes the viewer question whether a certain character is human or not. In one scene several characters pass across the screen dressed in cat looking costumes and speaking in a strange English dialect intermixed with cat sounds. Due to the outlandish nature of their dress the viewer is led to believe that they are an entirely different type of being than Deckard or the other human characters. This is also true for the replicants.

While they look entirely humanoid their dress differs from the conservative dress of Deckard. One replicant dresses herself in an elaborate highly sexualized costume and airbrushes a mask across her eyes. Her male partner is also distinguished by his dress and bright blond hair. The use of contrasting styles of dress by the characters of the film helps the viewer to delineate between different types of life forms but also address the theme of what it means to be a human.

The highly varying visual depictions of the characters in the film seem to imply that to be a human is to be lost in ambiguity. The human form is no longer simple or clearly defined but convoluted and highly variable. The mise-en-scene of Blade Runner creates the notion that to be a human is to live a life in which your identity and place is constantly in question.

Blade Runner relies on the classic science fiction convention of transporting the viewer into a strange world. Within this world ideas and themes are presented that would be considered foreign and strange in comparison to those of the world inhabited by the viewers of the film. In order for the viewer to accept these concepts they must have a context with which to place them.

### Lighting

Find examples of and explain the purpose of the different uses of light: darkness, light, neon lights, shadows, silhouettes and searchlights.

### Visual symbolism

Consider the symbolic meaning of particular motifs that occur in the film. Examples include:

Eyes

Veiled faces

Rain

Animals

Different kinds of smoke

Neon signs

The blimp

Gaff's origami characters