

More on *mise en scene* (see chapter one of *Introduction to Film*)

Mise en scene refers to what can be seen *in the picture*. Clearly what can be seen (unless we are dealing with computer generated imagery) must exist before it can be filmed, this is the pro-filmic event. Usually this event will consist of actors performing in a setting; the point of view from which audiences *see* this is wholly determined by the position of the camera. The film's director usually determines where the camera is positioned. The director is also responsible for decisions regarding camera movement and the length of shot. The purpose of the *mise en scene* and editing is to create a narrative world (*all* films have narrative worlds whether they are fiction or non-fiction) – this is the diegesis.

One of the most celebrated film theorists, Andre Bazin, emphasised the medium's ability to show what is going on in front of the camera, hence his preference for the long take, or shot, over editing:

'Around 1938 films were edited... according to the same principle. The story was unfolded in a series of set-ups numbering as a rule about 600. The characteristic procedure was by shot-reverse-shot... Thanks to the depth of field, whole scenes are covered in one take... dramatic effects... were created out of the movements of the actors...' (Bazin, 1967, p. 33)¹

Bazin celebrated directors, such as Jean Renoir and Orson Welles, who favoured the long take and depth of field over the use of editing as he believed that 'direction in depth' allowed the spectator to relate to film in a similar way he or she relates to reality.

The average length of shot in mainstream films, apart from 'action' movies, is approximately eight seconds. Editing tends to be functional and the shot, or take, is long enough for audiences to understand what is going on without 'over-staying its welcome'. Long takes tend to be associated with 'realist' films, such as 'fly on the wall' documentaries, or virtuoso set pieces, such as the first 15 minutes of *Snake Eyes* (1998).

In analysing a sequence of a film, apart from editing, we need to consider a number of points:

- Why the camera is placed in its position?
- Does any camera movement add to our understanding of the narrative?
- What are the reasons for the positions of characters in relation to one another (or blocking)?
- Are all the significant events happening at the 'front' of the scene, or is it 'composed in depth', so the 'back' of the scene also contains important elements?
- Who are the most important characters and how is this signified (eg, use of stars, costume or how they are framed by the camera).

For example, in *The Stranger* (Orson Welles, 1946) Franz Kindler's Nazi colleague 'forces' his way past Mary – Kindler's 'naïve' fiancée – into the 'small town' American home. The 75-second take allows the space between the door and the rest of the house to represent the intrusion of Kindler's past into his respectable life.

The use of the long take in *Code Unknown* (Michael Haneke, 1999, France) is far more stylised; the only edits in the film (except for a sequence from a film within the film) are fade ins and outs at the end of each scene. The first scene, after the prologue, features an 8½-minute 'hand held tracking' shot that creates a clear sense of the relative position of the characters in the narrative space. This placement, the film's main locations are Paris, the French countryside and Kosovo, is integral to the film's investigation into migration, displacement and racism.

¹ Andre Bazin (1967) *What is Cinema?* Volume 1 (University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles and London)