

# 4 Mise-en-Scène and Actors



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*Acting is all about honesty. If you can fake that, you've got it made.*

—George Burns (n.d., para. 20)

## Learning Objectives

*After reading this chapter, you should be able to*

- Identify how the details of what we see in a scene tell us about the characters and the story.
- Interpret the dramatic and narrative impact of elements of the mise-en-scène, such as costumes, makeup, props, lighting, and set design, on film.
- Explain how filmmakers use actors within the setting to reinforce the story, whether realistically or artificially stylized, and have a working knowledge of the actor's job.
- Distinguish between an actor and a character.
- Evaluate different types of acting methods and their application in specific roles.
- Examine some of the processes involved in casting a film and how casting shapes the outcome of a film as well as audience expectations for it.
- Describe the collaboration between actors and directors.

## 4.1 What Is Mise-en-Scène?

The first few minutes or so of *Inglourious Basterds*, writer and director Quentin Tarantino's 2009 reimagining of World War II, establish a situation in 1940 Nazi-occupied France by showing scenery, props, actors playing characters in specific costumes using specific body language, and those actors moving through the setting, all with very little dialogue. We get our initial feeling about the characters and what might happen by seeing where they are, what their belongings are, how they are dressed, how they are lit, and how they react. The use of specific colors may also draw our attention to certain objects and people, as well as setting an overall mood—think of the girl in the red jacket from Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. All the things we are looking at in the **scene** (a portion of a film that takes place in a single location over a single continuous period of time) have been carefully chosen and placed there by the filmmakers to help tell the story to the audience in ways that do not require dialogue to explain anything. What we see is called the **mise-en-scène**, a French term borrowed from the theater referring to what is “placed in the scene.”

Put simply, mise-en-scène is *what* the audience sees in a scene, and this includes the actors. For many viewers, the most memorable parts of the mise-en-scène, and indeed what may be the reason they decided to watch a movie, are the actors and their performances. The way characters are dressed, their physical appearance and the way they carry themselves, and the things they use and the spaces they inhabit all tell us something about their personalities and function in the story before the actors even say or do anything. Without a single line of dialogue, or any actions on the part of the actors, the mise-en-scène can convey a great deal of story information about the plot or character that might take pages to describe in a novel. The setting, the basic environment, with all its textures and attributes, patterns of lighting, props that are visible, even the weather—all contribute to what is going on in the plot at that moment, whether it's establishing the general mood, the time of day, the place in the world, the era of history, or a character's current situation in life or state of mind.

See the following *Behind the Scenes* feature box for an overview of mise-en-scène.

### *Behind the Scenes: Mise-en-Scène*

Everything in the mise-en-scène is controlled, chosen, or at least approved by the director. The mise-en-scène is everything visible in the scene used for telling the story, before the camera is even brought onto the set. The mise-en-scène may be natural, semi-realistic, or heavily artificial and stylized. Mise-en-scène includes the following:

- Settings and sets (whether actual locations or custom built in a studio)
- Lighting
- Colors
- Props
- Costumes
- Makeup
- Actors (including their positioning and movements)

We can think of the *mise-en-scène* as telling a story within the story. When we look to analyze a film's *mise-en-scène*, we want to pay attention to how it informs our understanding of the characters, how it is used to add depth to a scene—does it create suspense, conflict, or resolution?—and how that advances the plot.

## 4.2 Telling the Story Through Setting, Props, and Costumes

If we have established that actors are often what bring audiences to a film, we must also ask, what do they do once they have us there? Where does the director put them, and what does he or she ask them to do? Actors are critical in bringing a character to life for the audience by interpreting the intentions of the writer and director. But an actor is also a tool of the director, just one more part of the scene that helps to tell the story to the audience. (A reminder about word choice: We will use the word **actor** to refer to both men and women. This is not gender discrimination. Instead, it has long been the preferred term when talking about the craft for both genders.) A character's relationship to the story's themes, the plot developments, and the other characters can be suggested, emphasized, and intensified for the audience by the use of certain costumes, makeup, **props** (short for "properties"), and even position on the set (the placing of actors is referred to as **blocking**). These are all key elements of the *mise-en-scène*.



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**This scene from *Prometheus* depicts the mysterious surroundings of a new planet and reflects the feelings of the characters as they explore their unknown, likely dangerous environment. *Mise-en-scène* includes all the elements that film has in common with theater, such as setting, costumes, props, and blocking.**

Films from the silent era may use the *mise-en-scène* especially densely, not having recorded dialogue, narration, or sound effects to fall back upon, but the best sound era films use sound to reinforce and supplement what they show, not just as a substitute for showing information to the audience visually. Extended sequences may require close audience attention to the surroundings while actors are doing things without saying anything. The science-fiction thriller *Prometheus* and the original *Alien* films that inspired it are good examples of tension built simply by the viewer following a character through eerie and unfamiliar surroundings with the threat of danger around every corner. These films rely heavily on the *mise-en-scène* to create atmosphere, which, in turn, sets the mood. Even animated features, such as *Finding Nemo*, *Shrek*, *Despicable Me*, *Rango*, *Up*, and *Ratatouille*, make extensive and careful use of their *mise-en-scène* to help viewers understand the characters and the events of the plot, independent of the dialogue and the actions. Though we want to draw a clear distinction between the *mise-en-scène* in live-action and animated features—as the latter is literally “drawn” instead of “placed” into the scene—a great example is the realistic barrier reef in *Finding Nemo*, which moves and breathes much like the actual Australian Great Barrier Reef. It's what we see in each scene that pulls us into it; this should be the case whether a film is animated or not.

## Objects and Action

Many elements of the *mise-en-scène* may be symbolic, whether representing story themes, character attributes, or social metaphors. The set decoration of a character's apartment, for example, can explain a complicated **backstory**—an unwritten, imaginary history of characters' lives—and set up the present situation, as in the opening scene of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. The camera looks out the window of Jeff's apartment and then slowly pulls back to track and pan across various things in the room, from a thermometer showing a very hot temperature and the leg cast that has Jeff currently incapacitated in a wheelchair, to photographs on the wall and magazine covers (including one of his fashion-model girlfriend) that show he's a professional photographer who's been around the world on exciting assignments, to a spectacular racecar crash photo and a broken camera that imply how he got the broken leg. The leisurely lingering over the setting before any dialogue or action begins also reinforces how bored Jeff is at being cooped up and why he spends his time spying on his neighbors through his telephoto lens, trying to find something interesting to see.

See the following *You Try It* feature box to learn about where to look for *mise-en-scène* in your own life.

### *You Try It: Mise-en-Scène in Daily Life*

Think about the first time you go to someone's house—a friend's, a relative's, a boyfriend's, a girlfriend's, even a stranger's. Once inside, you begin to take inventory of this person's things. You might notice how they've arranged their furniture, what books they have, what adorns their walls, whether the space is cluttered, tidy, or minimalist. Do they collect figurines or vinyl records or wacky sunglasses? What we see in this space, or "scene," tells us a story about the person.

This is the power and purpose of *mise-en-scène*. It communicates things about characters and situations that deepen the story without our having to be told. It is the story of place and objects.

Take a moment to look at your own space. What story would it tell about you? How, now that you're thinking about it, might you rearrange specific objects to tell the story you want to be told? What do you notice?

In Debra Granik's Oscar-nominated *Winter's Bone* (2010), Jennifer Lawrence gives an intensely powerful performance as Ree Dolly, a teenage girl searching for her missing meth-cooking father so the family home will not be forfeited for the jail bond. But just as intense as her determined character is the rural Ozark environment in which she lives, almost a character in and of itself. The film uses dialogue sparingly, mainly when the audience needs to know critical information, and what dialogue there is has a very low-key, matter-of-fact delivery. The surroundings we see provide at least as many details about the plot and characters as any lines of dialogue do. This independent production was shot on location in rural Missouri using a number of local nonprofessional actors, as well as a hand-built private home that served as Ree's house, actual former meth-lab locations, and numerous small props that give a rich textural detail to the scenes (see Neda Ulaby's 2011 National Public Radio feature "On Location: The Frozen

Ozarks of “Winter’s Bone,” <http://www.npr.org/2011/08/18/139753185/on-location-the-frozen-ozarks-of-winters-bone>). Cool bluish colors and drab earth tones contribute to the mood. We can almost feel the poverty and isolation these characters live with every day in their struggle to survive, and that drives them to act the way they do. Yet we also feel their neighborly compassion in those same surroundings as they share food and music performances together.



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**The cold, desolate Ozark setting in *Winter’s Bone* is so palpable that it almost establishes itself as a character.**

A film like Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* (1989) relies heavily on its dialogue to define its characters and further its plot, yet it uses the *mise-en-scène* just as

intensely to reinforce characters and plot symbolically. The film takes place on the hottest day of the year from morning until night and the next morning. Not only does the lighting reflect the time of day by the position of the shadows, but its warm colors, combined with the choice of bright reds, oranges, and yellows that decorate the setting, emphasize the heat—of both the weather and the characters’ emotions. The positions of characters in the scene also reflect their position of respect in the community. The woman known as “Mother-Sister” is seen up in her apartment window, while the alcoholic old ex-baseball player known as “Da Mayor” is always seen below her, both literally and figuratively, until the end of the film, when they are on the same level for the first time. Characters are necessarily products of the spaces in which they exist; each scene is created to communicate visually those things about the story that are not part of the dialogue—these, nonetheless, are elements of storytelling.

Some films employ extremely understated acting, preferring to favor the *mise-en-scène* over extensive dialogue or action to tell much of the story. Even more reliant upon *mise-en-scène* to convey story information than either *Do the Right Thing* or *Winter’s Bone* is Peter Webber’s *Girl With a Pearl Earring* (2003). The opening shots show a young woman (Scarlett Johansson) slicing vegetables in a room dimly lit by indirect sunlight with unlit candles on the table, establishing for the viewer through the costumes and setting that this is a working-class girl in a past period (17th-century Holland, as it turns out). The pale bluish daylight gives a melancholy mood, contrasting sharply with the warm yellows and oranges and more natural colors seen later in the plot in a richer, happier setting. The girl’s obvious care in arranging the food on the plate suggests both her diligence at her work and her innate artistic sense, foreshadowing what is to come when she leaves her home to work as a servant-girl for the famous painter Vermeer (Colin Firth). The director’s use of the scenery, and staging of her moves through it, again reinforces what is going on in the character’s mind as she is literally and figuratively looking for a new direction in her life (at one point near the beginning she even pauses on a large compass pattern painted on the pavement). In this film, much of the movie’s action is going on inside the characters’ heads rather than happening as a series of obvious events or being explained through dialogue. In this case, the viewer may need to work to infer all that is happening, paying close attention to how the film packs information into careful and significant dramatic use of the *mise-en-scène*, instead of relying on what the actors are saying.

## Realism and Stylization

Each of the films just discussed has a generally realistic *mise-en-scène*, yet each is controlled by the filmmakers to serve the needs of the story. The location where *Winter's Bone* was shot is the most naturalistic of the group. The carefully reconstructed period settings of *Girl With a Pearl Earring* are also very realistic. In *Rear Window*, the apartment and view outside were constructed on a studio soundstage, and while they give the sense of surface realism, they have an underlying, somewhat larger-than-life artificiality. *Do the Right Thing* was shot on an actual city block, again presenting a surface impression of realism, yet the extreme control over the colors, traffic, extras, and cleanliness of the streets presents a stylized portrait of the neighborhood, eliminating certain natural details (e.g., litter, street people, or drug dealers) that might distract from the specific themes of the story. We might call this a curated realism. Even in busy city scenes, the people are most often extras—in the industry, this is called “background”—because they need to appear as if they were going about their business. Just think of all those live news bloopers where someone goofs off behind the reporter on camera. In a film, a goof like this would require a complete reset and cost time and money. Everything must be choreographed exactly to the director's specifications. So, what appears realistic on screen is just the impression of realism.

Other films may take stylization to an extreme, such as the films of Tim Burton, which rely on fantastical set designs and specialized *mise-en-scènes* to transport us out of the mundane and into the world of his vision. Take, for example, the set of *Edward Scissorhands*, which is like a Plasticine 1950s planned community seen in a funhouse mirror. The colors are too saturated, too bright, and the setting too pristine, which creates a very drastic contrast against Johnny Depp's titular character, costumed in black leather and grungy metal, with a ghostly pale face and unkempt jet-black hair. A set piece in Burton's earlier film, *Beetlejuice*, gives us a direct clue to the director's imagination: It's a model town. This isn't surprising, as Burton is famous for working with Claymation modeling in other films, such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. The same can be seen in most digital cartoons, which make no pretense at presenting reality. Still others might reserve extremely stylized settings and acting performances for dreams or flashbacks, helping differentiate them from a more naturalistic main plot.

## Characters and Costumes

In addition to the production design seen in a film's sets and locations, characters must also be “designed” to look their parts. This is where costume design, wardrobe, and hair and makeup are the stars of transforming an actor into a character. A **character** is the person an actor is playing in a film whose traits are created by the writer to help tell the story. Before rehearsals ever begin, the production designer works with a costume designer to create the look of every character who will appear in the film. The costume designer sketches out



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**The decadence of *Marie Antoinette* is conveyed by chock-full frames of elaborate period costumes and set design.**

costumes that fit each role and that will eventually be put together and worn by the actors portraying those roles.

How could billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne—played by Michael Keaton or Christian Bale or Ben Affleck—become Batman without donning the cape and cowl and that inconspicuous black eye makeup beneath it? How could Daniel Radcliffe become Harry Potter without his hallmark lightning bolt-shaped scar or wire-rimmed glasses? Both characters have their origins in texts, where one can find descriptions of their notable looks. Other characters, however, are described in the script and interpreted by the design team to create their appearance in a film.

Take, for example, Leonardo DiCaprio in his role as Hugh Glass in Alejandro González Iñárritu's epic *The Revenant* (2015). This character is a fur-trapper who gets mauled by a bear and goes on a quest for vengeance in the frigid wilderness. Besides being costumed in period clothes, DiCaprio also spends most of the film wearing a bearskin cloak, which the costume designer tracked down from the Canadian National Parks Service. Beyond that, each day prior to filming, DiCaprio had to have numerous wounds applied to his body by the makeup artists. And each day, these wounds would appear in various stages of healing. All of this just to make DiCaprio look believable in character.

More fantastical films require a great deal of prosthetics and makeup in order to transform actors into their characters. Idris Elba as Krall in *Star Trek: Beyond* (2016) is a former Starfleet captain who has been mutated by an alien technology. His look is almost more monster than alien, which makes him a compelling villain. This look, however, was created predominantly by makeup and prosthetics applied to his head, face, and hands—those exposed parts of the body—before shooting began each day. Visit the following link to watch a video in which those involved with creating and acting in *Star Trek: Beyond* discuss the nuances of Krall's character: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtQFQaCXtFo>.

When we analyze *mise-en-scène*, we must also consider how costuming is used to create character. We must consider what type of dress best suits the time and place in which the film is set—in a western or period drama, we expect to see the clothing and makeup of the period—and how each character is costumed so as to stand out from others or to blend in. But it's not just the costume that transforms an actor into character; it's also the acting itself.

See the following *You Try It* feature box for further analysis of characters and *mise-en-scène*.

### ***You Try It: Characters as Part of the Mise-en-Scène***

Think of the films you've seen that tell you something about the characters through the use of props, costumes, makeup, or their placement in a setting, *before* the actors start to talk or do anything. Can you remember any elements from the *mise-en-scène* that you feel are symbolic in some way about a certain character? Do any characters' later actions in the plot fulfill or reverse your initial expectations implied by the *mise-en-scène*? Consider, for example, this scene where Renfield meets Dracula. Visit the following link, type "Renfield meets Dracula" in the search bar, and click on the first option: <https://www.youtube.com/user/movieclips>.

## 4.3 The Actor as Part of the Mise-en-Scène

Actors portray characters who live out stories presented for the viewer through the plot. Those characters are created and written by the screenwriter (or, in the case of an adaptation, by the original author). They are placed into the film's sets by the director, who also guides the actors' performances. So what do the actors actually bring to their roles? When we see a character move away from another character and look out a window during a line of dialogue, this action might have been written into the script by the screenwriter. However, the script might just as well have had no action indicated during the dialogue. Remember that the script is something to be interpreted by the people who make the film and those who portray its various roles. The movement might have been the director's decision, whether to help convey character relationships or simply to add some action to the scene. On the other hand, it might easily have been a movement the actor came up with intuitively when interpreting how the character should respond in a given situation. It may even have been improvised during rehearsals, and the director decided that the movement was the best choice for that scene. The director, usually working closely with the actors and following the demands of the script, determines what the actors will be doing, how and when, and where in the scene they will be at any given time. The director (and sometimes the actor) also gives approval for costumes, makeup, and props used by the actor. A strong director has final say on the performance, not only guiding it during shooting but also manipulating it through editing (as will be noted in Chapter 6) or deleting it altogether. So again, what does an actor really do?

On its face, what an actor does is simple: act. That is, he or she pretends to be someone else—the character he or she is playing in the movie. The actor brings a written character to life. In practice, it's much more complex. Perhaps it's easiest to start with what an actor *doesn't* do, or most of them, anyway. The actor neither writes the script nor directs the film (though there are numerous exceptions: *Citizen Kane*, *Rocky*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Gran Torino*). Thus, even though the actor can influence the film, a role we will discuss in more detail later, he or she does not *create* it.

### Acting the Part

Recall the setting in *Inglourious Basterds* that was discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The rest of the 20-minute opening sequence consists mostly of one actor talking to another at a table inside a small farmhouse. The actor doing most of the talking is Christoph Waltz as Col. Hans Landa, a Nazi officer known as “the Jew hunter.” He arrives at a dairy farm in France to talk with its owner, Perrier LaPadite (Denis Ménochet), whom he suspects is hiding a Jewish family. Landa is not physically threatening, despite the obvious, and ominous, symbolism of his Nazi uniform. Instead, he is charming, intelligent, and relentless, wearing the increasingly nervous LaPadite down until he confesses that the family is hiding beneath the floorboards. (Landa immediately has them shot.) He is alternately complimentary and repulsive; his one consistent quality is that he is compulsively interesting. His mannerisms as he speaks, the wry smile, the overwhelming confidence that he has the upper hand here and will get what he wants—he exudes that power. It is chilling, fascinating, scary, brilliant. Yet, he, too, is something placed in the scene to evoke a particular response and advance the plot in a clear way. Though the audience may be horrified by his behavior, they are at the same time engaged, compelled—they simply can't look away. Col. Hans Landa is in no way a sympathetic character, yet we want to see more of him. That is no easy trick, but for a good actor, it is a necessary



skill. Waltz won a well-deserved best supporting actor Oscar for the role. But simply handing him a trophy doesn't really capture the magic going on here. Waltz's performance encapsulates what is in many ways the true magic of movies: He isn't just pretending to be someone else. He *becomes* someone else.

Acting can set the tone of a film and goes a long way toward establishing whether we will like it. Oddly enough, while this may sound contradictory, acting is also the last thing an actor wants to think about in the middle of a performance. The best actors inhabit their roles, as Waltz does in *Inglourious Basterds*. Sir Ben Kingsley, himself an Oscar winner, talked about exaggerating a character while filming *Shutter Island*: "And then you know what creeps in? Acting. I hate acting. It's marvelous to throw all the acting out on a film set and allow the director to film the behavior of the character, not me acting" (Goodykoontz, 2009a, para. 13).



Francois Duhamel/© Weinstein Company/  
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**A still of Christoph Waltz as Nazi officer Col. Hans Landa in *Inglourious Basterds*. Critic Roger Ebert wrote that Waltz and Tarantino created "a character unlike any Nazi—indeed, anyone at all—I've seen in a movie: evil, sardonic, ironic, mannered, absurd" (2009, para. 4).**

Acting is, to be sure, an inexact science. It is as much technique as feeling, Kingsley's protestations notwithstanding. Different actors use different methods, demand different things from directors, get to the emotional core of their characters in different ways. Performances are as unique as the people who give them. The best actors invite us into films, allowing us to accompany them on their journey while, like any good magician, never letting us see how they perform their tricks.

## Learning Lines and Improvisation

The most basic skill an actor must possess is a good memory. He or she must learn a character's lines and remember who says what and when—all while making the words they're reciting sound like natural conversation. Stories abound of shortcuts—George Clooney writing out his lines on scraps of paper and taping them to sheets and pillows when working on *E.R.* and the like. But for the most part, actors do indeed memorize their lines, so that they might deliver them as genuinely as possible. This may mean taking a few liberties with the script, not delivering the lines word for word but interpreting them in their own words while still getting the main point across. Again, the script is written to be interpreted. Occasionally, an actor will have a different sense of a character's language once he or she is inhabiting that role. This extends to the way in which an actor engages with the space she or he inhabits in a scene. In this sense, the mise-en-scène is rarely static; it's a living space populated by real people—or, in the case of animated features, animated characters.

However, most directors insist upon a fairly close reading of the script. That is, unless the director is open to **improvisation**, which involves actors coming up with their own lines that capture the spirit of what the writer and director are trying to accomplish in a scene. Even

though this can lead to creative performances (especially in films featuring talented stand-up comedians accustomed to ad-libbing before live audiences, from Bill Murray to Eddie Murphy to Kevin Hart to Kristen Wiig), the director must strike a difficult balance between allowing actors to improvise and maintaining control of the set and the scene. Improvisation during the actual shooting can also complicate the editing process later on. Because of this, some directors encourage improvisation only during rehearsals so that an agreed-upon version of a scene is finally “locked down” before shooting.

Certain directors are famous for their use of improvisation. Robert Altman, who directed such classic films as *M\*A\*S\*H*, *Nashville*, *The Player*, and *Short Cuts*, allowed his actors to improvise freely, explaining in general terms what he wanted to achieve in a scene and allowing them to find the means to do so. His confidence in his actors and in his ability to piece the story together resulted in some of the finest dramas ever made—dramas that feel natural and realistic, like genuine conversations between people instead of dialogue recited by characters, because at some level that’s what they are. Christopher Guest does much the same thing in the films he directs (and often stars in), including *Best in Show*, *Waiting for Guffman*, and *A Mighty Wind*. By employing brilliant improvisational comic actors, such as Fred Willard, John Michael Higgins, and Jane Lynch, he is able to let scenes unfold as the characters play off one another and then choose the best (and funniest) bits to construct his films.

A recent film that won critical acclaim for its portrayal of a young boy growing up with his single mother is Richard Linklater’s *Boyhood* (2014), which was filmed over the course of 12 years with the same actors. We literally see them age onscreen. The film’s plot evolves along with the characters in it. As Linklater said,

At the end of the day the point of view is his [Mason’s]. You notice slowly that the older sister and parents start to take a backseat. I’d say to Ethan [Hawke]: “No, we don’t really need you to shoot. You’re gonna be on a Skype call.” It’s like parenting. “Drop me off at the party.” They slowly leave you. Mason would emerge into his own story. (Shoard, 2014, para. 20)



Courtesy Everett Collection

**John Cassavetes is the father of independent American filmmaking. His ensemble films, such as *Shadows* and *Opening Night*, were created in an atmosphere that depended on improvisation to create and sustain an impression of reality caught on the fly.**



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**Richard Linklater’s films also rely a great deal on the improvised interaction between characters. This creates a more real-life sensibility.**

This experiment in filmmaking required a particular commitment from its cast, especially its young star, Ellar Coltrane, who was cast for the role at 6 years old and completed the film at 18. Such a commitment required that Coltrane rely on his own feelings and experience—this is the real beauty of the film—to inform the way he portrays Mason as he develops from a young boy to a young man.

See the following *You Try It* feature box to analyze a film scene without dialogue.

### *You Try It: Mise-en-Scène and Acting in a Scene Without Dialogue*

Recall scenes or significant sections in any film that use no dialogue, that rely instead upon a combination of the actors' movements and various other elements of the mise-en-scène to tell the viewer what is going on. How did the mise-en-scène help you understand what was occurring in the scene? Perhaps no example of this is more famous than the shower scene in *Psycho*. Visit the following link, type "Psycho Movie the Shower" in the search bar, and click on the first option: <https://www.youtube.com/user/movieclips>.

## 4.4 Types of Acting

Memorizing lines and repeating them in a believable fashion is the essence of acting; however, actors use different approaches in their performances. Which approach they use often depends upon an actor's training, the film, or the role itself. A serious drama lends itself to one type of acting, a raunchy comedy another, and a highly stylized, symbolic film yet another. Some actors stick with one approach, for the most part. Others move easily from one to another. In the same film, two or more actors might take different approaches. There is not any one necessarily "right" way to act. Instead, it's just whatever the role and the story call for.

When we think of mise-en-scène with the intent to analyze its effectiveness in a film, we must also think of the performances of the actors in that film. Actors must exist in and interact with the settings and props of each scene, and their performance must be convincing if the film is to succeed. Analyzing an actor's performance means we must take into account how effectively that actor interacts with her or his surroundings and how this interaction advances the film's plot. The approach an actor brings to her or his role reflects the requirements of that character in that particular story. What follows are some of the types of acting we see in films.

### Stylized Acting

**Stylized acting** is used when actors and directors want to call attention to the fact that the actor is, indeed, acting. While this conspicuous style is very particular to specific films and roles, it isn't always desirable. Though stylized acting was the convention in many classic

films—think *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *The Maltese Falcon*—it fell out of favor with the new wave of directors in the 1960s and 1970s. However, it fits perfectly in absurdist comedies, such as the Coen brothers' 1987 movie *Raising Arizona*. In this film, Nicholas Cage plays a former criminal who marries a former policewoman (Holly Hunter). They can't have children, so they hit upon a novel notion: They kidnap a baby from a family that's just had quintuplets. The dialogue, the actions, the performances are all highly stylized—that is, they draw attention to themselves by being intentionally unrealistic. Consider this exchange between Ed (Hunter) and Gale and Evelle, played by John Goodman and William Forsythe, respectively, who have shown up at Ed's trailer-park home:

Ed: You mean you busted out of jail.

Evelle: No ma'am. We released ourselves on our own recognizance.

Gale: What Evelle here is trying to say is that we felt that the institution no longer had anything to offer us. (Coen & Coen, 1987)

Now, it's unlikely that a couple of convicts on the run through rural Arizona would actually talk that way; only Ed's dialogue sounds genuine. But the stylized dialogue serves two purposes. It tells us that the Coen brothers' facility with language, the tricks they can play with words, are serving to make larger points. Plus, it's hilarious when delivered by actors who get the point. But not everyone thought so. In his review, Roger Ebert wrote, "I have a problem with movies where everybody talks as if they were reading out of an old novel about a bunch of would-be colorful characters. They usually end up sounding silly" (Ebert, 1987, para. 1).

That's one of the dangers of stylized acting: If you go too far over the top with it, it doesn't just draw attention to itself; it can pull the audience out of the movie. Yet for a film like *Sin City*, not just based on a graphic novel but made to look as if you've wandered into one, it's impossible to think of any other method. With a heavily stylized mise-en-scène that looks like comic books, and characters who bend, twist, and strangle reality to the breaking point, no other type of acting would be right. The story and the sets demand that the actors' performances go over the top; otherwise, they would be lost among the clutter. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films provide a good example of how a movie can blend extreme stylization with a surface realism, a technique we will discuss next. While Keira Knightley and Orlando Bloom give reasonably naturalistic performances as the romantic leads (as do many of the supporting and background players), Johnny Depp and the actors playing the various other pirate characters deliver stylized, over-the-top performances that exaggerate their outlandish personalities and situations to the extreme. Of course, this stylized acting is part of the fun in such a fantasy adventure.



© Columbia/Courtesy Everett Collection

**In *Anger Management*, Jack Nicholson gives an over-the-top performance based on his irascible reputation. Compare the self-parody in *Anger Management* with his more nuanced performance in *Chinatown*, for example.**

## Realistic Acting

**Realism**, as opposed to stylized acting, can also be thought of as naturalistic acting. This is acting that doesn't draw attention to itself but instead gives the impression of genuine human action and reaction. What is considered realistic and natural, however, can change over the years and in particular situations. Performances considered powerfully realistic on stage often appear contrived and exaggerated on film, and filmmakers may need to coach actors into giving performances suitable for the intimate close-ups that appear gigantic on a movie screen. Yet viewers accustomed to live theater may still feel that somewhat "theatrical" acting is more realistic, and that performers intentionally tailoring their performances for the camera may be "underacting." It depends partly upon the appropriateness of a performance to a specific character, but general styles of screen acting vary from one generation to the next. One generation's realistic performance may appear highly mannered, stylized, or heavily overacted to later generations, while one generation's underacting may be praised as naturalistic by another. (Note that what we think of as the more stylized convention in classic films of the early to mid-1900s was considered the realism of the period but reads to contemporary audiences as hyperdramatic.) "Method" acting, discussed later, was once considered extremely realistic, compared with classical acting. Today, it may appear to have an artificial intensity.

Evaluation of acting realism may be tied closely to the plot, the staging of the actors, and how the actors deliver the dialogue. Films with a great deal of improvisation often are considered *realistic*. Robert Altman is a director whose films play out almost like slices of life the audience drops in on. Conversations start, stop, start again—just as a real conversation might. Obviously, this technique wouldn't work in an action film or a horror movie, but in a character study in which we are invited to observe realistic behavior (albeit somewhat heightened; if *something* interesting doesn't happen, there wouldn't be much of a movie), it's quite appropriate, and it adds to the enjoyment of the movie. That said, it takes a talented actor to make realism interesting. The casting in Altman's films tends to be spot-on, with actors who gained his trust so that he could let them develop the story as they went along.

However, taking improvisation and realism to an extreme in film can backfire. The films of John Cassavetes, with their intense improvised character interactions, have as many detractors as fans. Jonathan Demme's *Rachel Getting Married* (2008) is designed to look almost like a home movie recording an actual family and its relationship problems, but even though some critics praised its performances for their raw realism and true-to-life emotion, others disliked the film because it was as embarrassingly self-indulgent, uncontrolled, and uncomfortable to watch as a home movie. Some had like reactions to Robert Altman's similarly themed *A Wedding*.



© Sony Pictures Classics/Courtesy Everett Collection

***Rachel Getting Married* gives Anne Hathaway room to depart from her previous roles and play a wounded, vulnerable, and real character.**

## Method Acting

**Method acting** (often known as “the Method”) is, perhaps, the most recognizable approach to acting. Based on the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavsky and popularized by renowned acting teacher Lee Strasberg, the Method requires that actors draw on their own memories and experiences to reach the heart of a character, so that they more genuinely feel the emotions they’re portraying instead of just pretending to. The technique started in theater and was adopted by film actors. Peter Flint, in his 1992 *New York Times* obituary of Stella Adler, another Method proponent, described it like this: “The Method revolutionized American theater. Classical acting instruction had focused on developing external talents, while Method acting was the first systematized training that also developed internal abilities, sensory, psychological, emotional” (Flint, 1992, para. 8). Strasberg, who headed the Actors Studio until his death in 1982, rooted his view of the Method on what Stanislavsky had stressed in his early career, that the actor should perform extensive “affective memory” exercises, improvising and conjuring up “the conscious past” to convey emotion: for example, dwelling on a personal tragedy to show anguish.

Many famous actors have employed the Method technique, including Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, Daniel Day-Lewis, Dustin Hoffman, Ellen Burstyn, Paul Newman, Marilyn Monroe, and James Dean. Often, actors who employ the Method are criticized for taking their roles too seriously; some proponents of the technique, for instance, don’t “break character” on set, meaning they continue to behave—to the extent that they want to be called by the character’s name—as if they were still acting. (This is not part of the teaching of the Method; it is just an example of how far some actors are willing to take it.)

Although some of the criticism is justified—it’s easy to take such things to ridiculous extremes—many Method actors have given some of the greatest performances ever captured on film. It’s not a requirement, by any means, but when done well, it can lead to astonishing results.

Much was made about Leonardo DiCaprio’s Oscar-winning performance in *The Revenant*, in which DiCaprio ate raw bison liver, waded into freezing rivers, and slept outdoors under a real bearskin. The actor was both lauded and maligned for his extreme dedication to the role of animal trapper. Whatever we might think of DiCaprio’s preparation and commitment to the role, there’s no denying that it was a compelling, believable performance.



*Courtesy Everett Collection*

**In his brief career, James Dean personified the struggle to come of age. A student of Lee Strasberg, Dean is best remembered for his roles in *East of Eden* and *Rebel Without a Cause* (pictured).**

## Stage Versus Film Acting

Acting is central to both film and theater, but it is a different discipline in each art form because the forms themselves are so different. Even though we tend to think of theater as the more intimate form, that is not necessarily the case. In fact, the opposite may be true. Yes, when we see a play, we are in the same room as the actors, watching them perform right in front of us. And we might see a film in a giant multiplex completely lacking in personality and charm, watching the story unfold on a screen. But the actors' jobs are quite different, and not entirely interchangeable.

In the theater, we are at a distance from the actors and from the action. There are no close-ups, no changing points of view. It is left up to the actors to provide the different perspectives that we are used to seeing. Also, because they're playing to a large room, the actors' mannerisms and expressions tend to be broad and big, the acting being much less subtle. They must emote more, or express their feelings in a more showy "theatrical" way, so that the emotions and feelings they are trying to impart aren't overlooked by audiences at various distances from the stage.

In films, on the other hand, cameras can capture even the smallest gesture, a nod, the raising of an eyebrow, so that the acting doesn't have to be as broad. An effective screen actor must know how to adjust a performance for extreme close-ups, for medium and long shots, and for extreme long shots with the camera farther away than any theater audience would be from the stage.

When we think of what we see on screen as a foundation for our analysis of film, we look not only at what's there, who's doing what, and why; we also want to think of how these elements of *mise-en-scène* are treated by the camera. We'll get to this in greater depth in a later chapter, but it's something to start thinking about now. All of these elements are part of storytelling, and each individual element works in a specific way to convey that story. So, when we see an actor in close-up, we must interrogate the purpose of that frame and scene in the larger arc of the film. Our approach to film analysis should be to deconstruct the whole, to look to these elements individually, identify the choices that are made and conclude why they are made, and then apply those smaller analyses to the film as a whole.

See the following *You Try It* feature box for questions prompting analysis of acting.



© Miramax/Courtesy Everett Collection

**John Patrick Shanley adapted his own prize-winning play *Doubt* into a film whose four major stars (Meryl Streep, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Adams, and Viola Davis) would all be nominated for Oscars. Yet some critics felt their performances were often too "theatrical," except perhaps that of Davis.**

### *You Try It: Actors*

Who is your favorite actor? Now think more about *why* this is so. Is it because the performance is believable? Funny? Sad? What does the actor do to make it that way? In how many of the actor's films do you remember him or her primarily as an *actor*, and in how many ways do you remember primarily the *character* he or she played? Does your favorite actor play the same or similar characters from film to film?

## 4.5 Casting

Once a film is slated for production, the director and producers will begin looking for the actors who will bring the story to life. Most directors will have an idea of who they want in the lead roles before a casting director—the person responsible for identifying and testing potential actors—ever gets a list of characters. This, however, can change based on a number of factors. Maybe the first pick isn't available or is too costly for the film's budget. Can you imagine Tom Cruise playing Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings*? Not likely. An ensemble cast like that film will often rely on a series of auditions, readings, and screen tests—these give the director and producers a clear idea of how an actor inhabits a character. With few exceptions, most directors will rely on this practice in casting the lead and supporting roles in a film.

### Auditions

An **audition** occurs when an actor is invited to try out for a part, in front of casting directors, producers, and perhaps the director of the film as well. It's no different from trying out for a high school play, really, though the stakes are usually somewhat higher. Sometimes, a director or casting director will also do a screen test, in which an actor is filmed doing a scene from the script, often with another actor who has already been cast.

Some actors, after achieving a certain level of success, no longer wish to audition for a role; some flat out refuse to. Instead, they want to be cast on the basis of their previous work, their reputation, and their talent. But it takes a while to get to this point, and it's typically reserved only for the biggest stars or distinguished character actors (some of whom will submit to an audition anyway). No one but Clark Gable was seriously considered to play Rhett Butler in *Gone With the Wind*, but numerous famous stars tested for the role of Scarlett O'Hara, and the part finally went to Vivien Leigh, who was virtually unknown outside of England at the time.

A process called **open casting** is when a public invitation is issued for people to try out for roles, rather than casting directors contacting actors' agents about available roles. The young actors who were ultimately cast in their roles in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* all went to an open casting. Now, could we imagine anyone else in these roles? Often, this is the process through which new talent is discovered.



A number of DVDs, *Juno*, for example, include bonus features showing some of the audition tapes or screen tests, letting the public see other actors who were not cast, as well as early, sometimes different interpretations by the actors who were cast.

## Typecasting

Sometimes, a relatively unknown actor will achieve success in an early role—and then be doomed to repeat the same type of role again and again over the course of a career. Some famous examples of this tendency, called **typecasting**, are Vin Diesel as the brooding, blunt instrument in an action film; Samuel L. Jackson as the talkative, devil-may-care bad dude; Jennifer Aniston as the quirky love interest in a romantic comedy; or Helena Bonham Carter as a slightly unhinged British iconoclast. Often, a comedic actor, such as Jim Carrey or Adam Sandler, becomes so well known for humorous roles that it is difficult for audiences to accept them in dramas, even when they are outstanding in the other roles (both have been). Sandler specializes in broad, crude slapstick comedy, yet he impressed critics with his dramatic range in *Punch Drunk Love* and *Reign Over Me*. Neither film did well at the box office.

Carrey's serious turn in *The Majestic* received mixed critical response and bombed theatrically, but his role in Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* helped the film become a cult hit. Funnyman Will Ferrell had a seriocomic role in the offbeat *Stranger Than Fiction*, which found modest box-office success but grossed only a tiny fraction of his *Anchorman* films and other wacky parodies he is noted for. Robin Williams, who grew to fame as a stand-up comic and television star and then went on to a successful career in comedies, was able to break the mold, winning an Oscar for a dramatic role in the film *Good Will Hunting*. Leslie Nielsen went the opposite route, starting as a serious character actor, supporting player, and leading man and later switching to comedy, spoofing the very types of roles he'd previously played straight. Now viewers may find it difficult to take his earlier characters seriously. Like popular stars, character actors also (much to their frustration) may become typecast if they are particularly successful in one type of role.



© Sony Pictures/Courtesy Everett Collection

**Comedians typically have a hard time branching out from typecast roles. Will Ferrell's comedic charm actually lends itself to his role in *Stranger Than Fiction* (pictured), where he plays the straight man placed in an absurd situation in which he is able to hear a voice narrating his life.**

## Miscasting and Lucky Breaks

Like any creative endeavor, casting is prone to mistakes and happy accidents. Sometimes, despite the best instincts of the people making the film, as well as tools such as marketing research, an actor will still be miscast in a role. One example is the casting of George Clooney as Bruce Wayne and Batman in *Batman and Robin*. Clooney is a well-loved major star but an underrated actor (though he once won an Oscar). Yet many viewers concluded he was the

absolute wrong choice for this film, feeling his innate charm came off more as arrogance. On the other hand, Michael Keaton, at the time noted as a comic actor, seemed like a terrible choice for the role in *Batman* and *Batman Returns*. Despite the doubts of many, Keaton proved to be a very capable Batman, satisfying most fans and critics alike, and he went on to more dramatic roles. Harrison Ford was a bit actor who got a lucky break with *Star Wars*, going on to become a major action star and later a respected character actor.

## The Star System

In old Hollywood—that is, in the first half of the 20th century—films were the products of studios that owned all their own production resources, including vast stages and prop warehouses, film labs, equipment, and the services of in-house production crews, writers, directors, and actors. Stars were their major assets because producers knew their appearance in a film would sell tickets, and the popularity of stars with the public meant prosperity for the studio. Studios relied on stars, signing them to long-term contracts and casting them in one movie after another.

While this star system offered steady employment for the biggest stars, it also created a system in which studios would invent images and personalities for their actors. Rock Hudson, for instance, was a closeted gay man, but his studio went so far as to arrange a marriage to a woman to prevent his fans from knowing the truth about his sexual orientation. The studio-based star system was largely abandoned by the 1960s, though some of its trappings remain, as stars and their publicists carefully cultivate public images to give the public information—just enough, not too much—that will be beneficial to an actor’s career.



Courtesy Everett Collection

**Humphrey Bogart (shown here with Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*) was an American icon—hard-boiled, with a soft spot for “dames.”**

## How Stars Affect Films

It’s sort of like the all-squares-are-rectangles-but-not-all-rectangles-are-squares principle: All stars are actors. But not all actors are stars. The differences may be subtle, or they may be pronounced. But they’re there, and they affect the way audiences perceive movies—and whether they show up to them in the first place.

Casting a star in a movie guarantees certain things, one of them being attention. If Brad Pitt is even considering making a movie, it’s news. Some believe that any publicity is good publicity; however, immense star power has a downside—it can overwhelm the film itself. Weak directors can also use star power to make up for a weak script (think of any of the later *Rocky*

movies, for instance, which coasted on the image and fame of Sylvester Stallone). To enjoy a movie, an audience must employ suspension of disbelief, or the ability to convince ourselves that something our rational mind knows isn't true—for instance, that Robert De Niro is an unbalanced cabbie in *Taxi Driver*—is really happening. The moment we begin to think of the actor on screen *as an actor*, the magic is lost, and so is the movie. Yet, paradoxically, many viewers will avoid movies that feature actors they've never heard of, gauging their probable enjoyment more by star familiarity than by story content.

Some actors, once they become stars, gain the power to choose more challenging roles that can demonstrate their acting ability—star power in service of acting power. Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt began as attractive but generic and typecast romantic leads. Bruce Willis is often considered an action hero. But now that they are successful stars, they are unafraid to play characters fans might not expect from them, occasionally even supporting or unadvertised bit roles. Johnny Depp started as a disposable hero in the original *A Nightmare on Elm Street* but now thrives on quirky performances of quirky characters in quirky scripts for quirky directors. Viola Davis gained fame by playing a variety of characters, often with a hard edge, on television series and in small film roles. Her roles in *Doubt* and *The Help* put her on the map as a star and landed her a couple of nominations during awards seasons. Davis is such a good actor that we are able to believe that she is by turns a genius law professor (*How to Get Away with Murder*) and a woman struggling to hold her family together in *Fences*, for which she won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress.



David Lee/© Paramount Pictures/  
Courtesy Everett Collection

**Viola Davis has become a star actor whom audiences want to see time and time again. Her performances are believable, realistic, and further proof that no role is too challenging for her.**

## Box-Office Clout

The economic impact of stardom is sometimes lost in the *People* magazine style of coverage. There is a reason that stars with the stature of Will Smith or George Clooney are paid tens of millions of dollars to make a movie: They can “open” a film, or bring a large audience to it for the all-important first weekend and guarantee future video sales.

But a star's reach extends beyond the box office. Richard Kind, a character actor—that is, an actor who typically does not play starring roles, but instead plays smaller-though-crucial characters—is friends with Clooney. He compared his lot in life with that of his pal's:

If [George] fails, his next project is affected . . . If I fail, some seats are not going to be filled. But it's in the thousands. If he fails, the loss is in . . . millions of dollars. (Goodykoontz, 2009b, para. 17)

## Non-Actors in Films

Certain directors, especially for independent productions dealing with slice-of-life situations, prefer to avoid casting not only familiar stars, but also any professional actors. They may still hold auditions, but they will search for people who naturally look and act like the characters they have in their scripts, people without the trained polish of an actor performing a role. They cast people who can essentially be themselves within the context of the story, delivering a performance, often partly or entirely improvised, that looks like real people in those situations rather than actors pretending.

This practice gained some popularity in Italy during and immediately after World War II with a filmmaking movement known as Italian Neorealism, and it continued to some extent with the French New Wave during the 1950s and 1960s and the growth of the American independent filmmaking movement from the 1950s through the present. It is rarely used on major Hollywood movies except sometimes for bit roles, but it is not uncommon in independent films like *Winter's Bone* or *Mud*, which cast unknowns and nonprofessional actors for major supporting roles but professionals as the leading characters.

## 4.6 The Actor's Role in Shaping a Film

Despite their visibility, actors do not, as we have discussed, have as powerful a role in telling the story as the audience might believe. The actor's role is still crucial, obviously. If the actor doesn't create the story, he or she does interpret it—and some successful actors have power beyond that, as well, choosing their own scripts and directors, or even writing or directing their films themselves.

An actor's performance, however unique and individual it may be, can be strongly shaped by the director through choices of camera angles, and even more drastically through editing, which will be discussed in Chapter 6. A performance that literally never existed on the set can be built in the editing room because a scene is shot (or "taken") more than once from the same and different angles. By using bits and pieces from various **takes** (the portions of scenes recorded from the time the camera is turned on until it is turned off), inserting reactions by other characters, lengthening or shortening pauses between lines, and cross-cutting between other scenes, the director can get exactly the line readings he or she wants, change the pacing of line delivery, rearrange or delete lines of dialogue, and more. New dialogue may even be recorded to dub over the picture. This can change the audience's perception of the performance to something entirely different from what may have been filmed, and it may be especially necessary in "indie" films using nonprofessional actors. Some film actors may come to rely upon editing



*Courtesy Everett Collection*

**Bibi Andersson and Liv Ullmann in a scene from the film *Persona*. Director Ingmar Bergman had a reputation for extracting emotionally devastating performances from actors in his films.**

for their performances, as it means they need memorize only a few lines of dialogue at a time, at most a few pages of script, unless they're working for a director who prefers long, uninterrupted takes. Stage actors, on the other hand, have much more control over their performances, but they must memorize an entire 2-hour play and perform it before a live audience without the benefit of "retakes." The stage actor has an advantage over the screen actor in playing a character's experience chronologically, from beginning to end. Stage actors thus may be intimidated by filmmaking's segmented process. A film actor may not have to remember the entire script at once but does need the special skill to act small moments numerous times (for different camera setups) and out of sequence (to accommodate production schedules), all the while giving the impression of a consistently developing character in continuous time after it's all edited together.

## Collaboration

Films are a collaborative process among writers, directors, and actors. Sometimes, as with Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*, Spike Lee in *Do the Right Thing*, or the films of Charlie Chaplin and Woody Allen, the same person takes on all three roles. But in most cases, three people must work together to create the finished film.

While the notion for a character's behavior originates with whoever creates the story and is brought to life by the director, who must bring the behavior to the screen in a believable way (if believable is what the story calls for), it falls to the actor to bring the behavior to life. A good actor may get to know her or his character better than the director or even the writer and can come up with important actions, props, additional dialogue, and line interpretations that never occurred to the writer or director. A good actor literally becomes another person on the screen. But audiences must always keep in mind that *actors* are playing *characters* created by the writer and staged by the director.

Unless the actor is also directing the film, he or she rarely has much say in choosing which performance a director will use. (Note that as with anything else in entertainment or in life, this doesn't apply to the biggest stars, who sometimes have as much or more power than their directors.) This doesn't mean that the actor doesn't have strong opinions about the material or how it should be performed. There are stories of disagreements between actors and directors—supposedly, Dustin Hoffman clashed often with director Sydney Pollack on the set of *Tootsie*, for instance, and that's hardly the only example—but the best performances come from a collaboration between actors and directors.

## How Actors Affect Films

Without the benefit of extensive media coverage, studio hype, and star power, smaller films are more dependent upon telling a good story than blockbusters are. If a movie is well made and well acted, it may still find an audience. Some actors make their name playing choice roles in small films; some actors never leave that world. Actors such as Daniel Day-Lewis and character actors mentioned previously try to submerge themselves in their roles. The characters they play are more important than any star persona associated with them. Sometimes, as with Peter Sellers (*Dr. Strangelove*) and Alec Guinness (*Kind Hearts and Coronets*), they may flex their acting muscles by playing multiple and very different parts within the same film.

## Summary and Resources

Less famous character actors and supporting actors may even base entire careers on their ability *not* to stand out to audiences, blending in effortlessly to the story, period, and character in which they are cast. They carefully avoid cultivating a star persona.

Some actors get their start in smaller roles, gradually gain prominence and move up to supporting roles, and then become stars able to carry a film to success. As they get older, they may shift to character roles and smaller parts, but their fame continues to add prestige and increased box-office potential to their films. A few actors have enough charisma and star power to continue to handle leading roles far beyond the norm for people their age (such as Harrison Ford, Meryl Streep, Cary Grant, and Katharine Hepburn).



*Courtesy Everett Collection*

**Daniel Day-Lewis is well known for his hard work to stay in character. For *My Left Foot*, playing Christy Brown, who was born with cerebral palsy, Lewis insisted that the crew spoon-feed him on the set. He learned to paint holding a knife with his foot. As a result of the weeks he spent bent over in a wheelchair, he broke two ribs. He won an Oscar for this portrayal.**

## Summary and Resources

### Chapter Summary

In a well-made film, the things we see on the screen are not merely random and are more than just actors playing characters doing things. The *mise-en-scène*—what the audience sees on the screen—is the most visible part of a film, the things and people we see in the scenes. The sets, costumes, makeup, props, colors, lighting, and placement of the actors can tell much of the story even without dialogue, conveying mood, key plot information, and often symbolic thematic content. *Mise-en-scène* and acting styles may strive for naturalism or may be intentionally artificial and unrealistic, or “stylized.” The actors are a major element of the *mise-en-scène*, and for many viewers they are the most memorable thing about a movie, bringing the characters to life. Yet their job is more than just memorizing lines and reciting them in front of a camera. It is a collaborative process between actors and directors that requires several takes of the same scene, as well as a tremendous amount of preparation and the ability to appear consistent in scenes shot out of sequence.

There are many methods an actor can use in his or her performance; some actors use more than one, depending on the film. There are also different kinds of actors, who may be cast in their roles for different reasons, be it star power, screen persona, ability to disappear into different characters, or untrained naturalism. A technique used by certain actors and directors is improvisation. While the actor does not typically have the final say in which performance a director will include in the final film, he or she does have the option of providing many different versions and discussing how best to approach each scene. When the actor and director work well together, the performance can be the most magical part of a movie.

## Questions to Ask Yourself About Mise-en-Scène and Acting When Viewing a Film

- How is mise-en-scène used to convey parts of the story that you are not getting from the performances of the actors?
- How important is the mise-en-scène to creating the world in which the film is set?
- What role does costuming and makeup play in creating a character?
- What do actors bring to their roles that is so necessary to a film's success?
- How do the ways the actors are placed and move around in the settings contribute to your understanding of their characters and of the story?
- What type of acting is present (stylized, realistic, method acting, stage acting versus film acting, untrained natural acting)? Also, how realistic or stylized is the mise-en-scène, and how does it complement or contrast with the performances?
- How do the actors convey the story's meaning by the way they interpret their characters? How much of their performances might be attributed to the director, camera-work, or editing?

### Key Terms

**actor** A person who plays a character in a film or play, interpreting a character that a writer has created, under the guidance of a director.

**audition** The process of an actor “trying out” for a role, performing short scenes to let a director or casting director see how well he or she can do; an audition can be accomplished either by submitting tapes or by trying out in person.

**backstory** Elements of a film's story that do not appear in the plot. Actors often try to imagine what happened to their characters before the plot began, creating an elaborate backstory (which may or may not be based on the writer's original ideas), and may research similar real-life people to help them understand a character's motivations.

**blocking** The placement and planned movements of the actors through the sets, usually determined by the director.

**character** A (usually fictional) person whose traits and actions are fashioned by a writer to help tell a story to the audience through the course of a plot.

**improvisation** A process used by actors in which they make up dialogue and actions “in character,” after discussing the characters and plot motivations with the director. Some directors allow actors to improvise in rehearsals or even while the camera is running to develop scenes that will appear more natural for each actor than what may have originally been written.

**method acting (the Method)** An approach to acting that originated with Konstantin Stanislavsky. Teaches actors to draw upon their own experiences to portray what a character experiences, even to the point of going out and experiencing something just for the role or remaining “in character” on and off the set.

**mise-en-scène** The physical things seen in a scene, including setting, props, costumes, actors, makeup, lighting, colors—anything that would be on the set before the camera is even brought in.

**open casting** An audition that is open to anyone interested, rather than requiring a special invitation or solicitation by an agent.

## Summary and Resources

**props** Short for “properties”; the things in a scene that are used by the characters or that decorate the set, indicating the sort of location in which a scene is taking place.

**realism** A style of acting that appears to viewers to be “realistic” rather than artificial. Conceptions of what is realistic often vary from generation to generation and from medium to medium (stage to television to film).

**scene** A portion of a film that takes place in a single location over a single continuous period of time, usually numbered in the order it appears in the script.

**stylized acting** Acting done in a style that is intentionally unrealistic for dramatic or symbolic purposes.

**take** The portion of a scene recorded from the time the camera is turned on until it is turned off. Each camera setup in each scene will have one or more takes until the director and actors are satisfied with the performances.

**typecasting** Casting actors based on their physical appearance or on the types of characters they’ve most often played in the past, rather than on an audition that might reveal an unexpected acting range. Casting against type gives actors the chance to demonstrate whether they can successfully play more than one type of character.