

'The mystique of *mise en scene* revisited'

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Introduction - A *Mise en Scene* Spectrum

The point is that all the freshness and invention of American films springs from the fact that they make the subject the motive for *mise en scene*.

Jean-Luc Godard (1952) 1

Preminger believes first in *mise en scene*, the creation of a precise complex of sets and characters, a network of relationships, an architecture of connections, an animated complex that seems suspended in space ...

What is cinema, if not the play of the actor and actress, of hero and set, of word and face, of hand and object? *Jacques Rivette* (1954) 2

So I consider *mise en scene* as a means of transforming the world into a spectacle given primarily to oneself - yet what artist does not know instinctively that what is seen is less important than the way of seeing, or a certain way of needing to see or be seen. *Alexandre Astruc* (1959) 3

The mysterious energy which sustains with varying felicities the swirl of shadows and light and their foam of sounds is called *mise en scene*. It is on *mise en scene* that our attention is set, organising a universe covering the screen - *mise en scene* and nothing else. *Michel Mourlet* (1960) 4

Interior meaning is extrapolated from the tension between a director's personality and his material. This conception of interior meaning comes close to what Astruc defines as *mise en scene*, but not quite. It is not quite the vision of the world a director projects nor quite his attitude to life. It is ambiguous in any literary sense, because part of it is embedded in the stuff of cinema and cannot be rendered in non cinematic terms. Truffaut has called it the temperature of the director on the set and that is a close approximation of its professional aspect. Dare I come out and say what I think it to be is an 'elan of the soul'?... as it is all I can do is point at the specific beauties of interior meaning on the screen and later catalogue the moments of recognition. *Andrew Sarris* (1962) 5

The depth and detail of American *mise en scene* puts most European films to shame. Yet it is characteristic that Minnelli referring to his use of mirrors in *Madame Bovary* should have to state that it is a recurring image that nobody noticed. The sophistication of cinema criticism was for too long such that it only noticed symbols when they were ostentatiously

pointed out as such and that it could only recognise as art things that were labelled as such. *David Morse* (1971) 6

Few people nowadays deny the fundamental importance of *mise en scene*. But because our art lacks its *Littre*, words do not always have the same meanings and our vocabulary remains vague. Many critics confuse *mise en scene* with writing (*écriture*). The error comes from literature where the word writing means two different things. When we talk about *mise en scene*, we are indeed thinking of the precision of writing, but a structural not a rhetorical precision: it is not a question of fine writing. That is why phrases like correct *mise en scene* or 'unadorned style' mean nothing at all. *Fereydoun Hoveyda* (1960) 7

In short, if you ask what characterizes an auteur, what makes a filmmaker an auteur, in the strong sense of the term, you fall into a new trap: it's his style, in other words, the *mise en scene*, a notion as dangerously risky, infinitely variable and impossible to pin down as auteur... *Mise en scene* means two things, one obvious - the directing process; the other mysterious - the result of that process... *Jean-Louis Comolli* (1965) 8

The 1970s concern for film as language or film as discourse marks a return to a more rigorous concern with the rhetorical figuration of *mise en scene*, a return which has frequently lacked the ability to account also for film pleasure, and that other developments in film theory have followed (particularly in *Cahiers*) from the need to rationalize the massive contradictions of an untheorised and assumed romantic auteurism. The tendency to reject auteurism because it is 'hopelessly contradictory' loses sight of the extent to which subsequent authorship theories of the production of ideologies in films were at least inflected, if not initiated by these contradictions. *John Caughie* (1981) 9

Mise en scene became very much a buzz word in the context of 1960s film criticism. Although a great deal was attached to it, this attachment was not commensurate with rigorous discussions over its application. It was as much a marker of critical euphoria as a serious entree into the realm of film stylistics. Critics could bounce off *mise en scene* as a resonant term *vis-a-vis* their favourite auteurs with little attempt to scrutinise the concept. It offered a wide channel through which phenomenological criticism could navigate. Certainly *mise en scene* came to function as a key referent for that criticism which sought to capture the cinephile's response to and enthusiasm for the inspired moments and intricate rhythms of preferred film narratives. For the most part *mise en scene* was something to be continually marvelled at, but neither probed nor interrogated. Of course, this tended to push the celebration of *mise en scene* towards a mystical view of cinema. The cinephile of the 1960s was keen to uphold the privileged moments of *mise en scene* as evidence of directorial virtuosity. But this was also given a polemical edge by asserting the richness, vigour and density of numerous popular film narratives, especially those of the Hollywood ilk. The cinephile wanted to endorse sophisticated directorial

architectonics over and above the obvious and basic trademarks of filmic storytelling that normally ensnared the public.

As the 1960s progressed, the excesses of the nexus between auteurism and *mise en scene* criticism became more apparent and the negative reaction to it was enshrined in the advocacy of Brechtian materialist criticism in order to place a progressive political cinema on the agenda. Moreover, film studies was emerging as an academically respectable path to pursue, and auteur criticism needed to be pushed aside to make way for new and more ambitious theoretical concerns. This was quite appropriate given the enclosed and cloying dimensions of the auteur/*mise en scene* ensemble. But, to some extent, it resulted in a reactive critique rather than an exploratory redefinition. This was especially so in regard to the concept of *mise en scene*. It was treated as relatively nebulous in comparison with the hard edged and apparently rigorous analytical tools afforded by semiotics and structuralism.

Yet with the post-modernist and post-structuralist preoccupations of the 1980s, fascination with *mise en scene* in commercial cinema has been reactivated, albeit in a tangential theoretical way, in conjunction with the new practice of cultural criticism, where the latter embraces a sort of critical gliding far removed from the traditional orthodoxy of interpretative decoding.

The development of *mise en scene* criticism can be attributed to the French film magazine *Cahiers du Cinema* which assumed prominence in the post World War II era. In the 1960s its trailblazing was augmented by the role of *Presence du Cinema* in France and the spread of auteurism as a critical orthodoxy in England via the journal *Movie* and in the United States through the writings of Andrew Sarris. From the beginning *mise en scene* criticism became heavily intertwined with the task of upgrading the status of the American cinema, via the celebration of apposite directors, auteurs who were seen as the pinnacles of that cinema's expressivity. *Cahiers* championed Hitchcock and Hawks in particular, whilst *Presence du Cinema* extended the focus to Preminger, Fuller, Walsh, Tourneur, Dwan and De Mille. In 1963 Andrew Sarris systematically constructed an elaborate hierarchy of worth for American directors culminating in an elite pantheon of great auteurs. 10

Throughout the 1960s the critical process of auteur evaluation and thematic explication took precedence over the intricacies of exploring the nature of *mise en scene* in English language criticism, whilst a number of *Cahiers* and *Presence* critics became immersed in using *mise en scene* as a vehicle for abstract philosophising. The whole trajectory of *Cahiers* criticism was to take on prime significance in the 1960s, because of the filmmaking achievements of its core writers (Rohmer, Rivette, Godard, Chabrol and Truffaut) under the *Nouvelle Vague* rubric.

These critics cum filmmakers had revelled in their cinephiliac construction of film history in the previous decade. In the late 1950s and early 1960s their critical mantle was shared with such *confreres* as Jean Douchet, Luc Moullet, Fereydoun Hoveyda and Jean Domarchi, and thence carried on by a new generation of critics - Jean-Louis Comolli,

Michel Delahaye, Jean Narboni, Jean-Andre Fieschi, Michel Mardore et al. This was a period of the most exuberant auteur adulation which was further fuelled by the advent of *Presence du Cinema*. Here writers like Michel Mourlet fostered the extremes of *mise en scene* criticism. 11 During the 1950s, Andre Bazin, *Cahiers'* father figure, adopted a partial dissenting voice from the auteurist enthusiasm of his young *Cahiers* colleagues. He suggested there was value in a broader approach to the American cinema via an emphasis on the workings of film genres and the exploration of film language. 12 But his colleagues did not really pursue these avenues. Also, he demonstrated an interest in *mise en scene* aesthetics, through his analysis of depth of field in the films of Wyler and Welles. 13 The ultimate worth of this analysis was qualified by Bazin's elevation of a pure realist ontology, i.e., his desire to find a homology between the image world and a pristine social reality external to the image. There is no doubt that in order to advocate the nexus of auteurism/*mise en scene*/Hollywood cinema, *Cahiers* practised a degree of selective perception in its approach to the American cinema. Not only was generic analysis given limited coverage (although there were still certain fixations here - *film noir*, the musical, the western) but there was also a lack of interest in Hollywood's industrial context and the ideological and social dimensions of its movie making. The 1960s passage of *Cahiers* was marked by a gradual realisation that it had neglected these factors. 14

Moreover, *Cahiers* as the world's premier serious film journal was not singular in its focus but was always engaged in a multiplicity of film fronts throughout the stimulating and increasingly turbulent years of 1960s filmmaking. Inevitably, *Cahiers* was drawn into the high tide of Modernism in European film narrative alongside the prevailing cult of European auteurs (Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, Visconti, Bunuel, Resnais, Pasolini, Jancso et al). Additionally, *Cahiers* acted as a proponent for the possibilities of *cinema direct* and the emerging radical cinemas of Latin America and Africa. The changing landscape of world cinema in the 1960s obliged *Cahiers* to begin re-evaluating its devotion to auteurism and the American cinema in favour of a more critical view of Hollywood's global domination. This sowed the seeds for *Cahiers'* political reversal after the May 1968 revolution and the ascendancy of the New Left. From 1968 *Cahiers* overturned its past allegiances and explicitly dressed up its new stance with Marxist ideological analysis (in conjunction with the currents of structuralism then in vogue). Its new advocacy was one of forging a materialist cinema, with Soviet silent cinema as an exemplar.

The above brief *resume* of the spread of auteurism is meant as an historical referent and reminder of the 1960s' critical trajectory. It is not intended to substitute for any full scale discussion of the details of that critical terrain. However, there has been a tendency to sit in judgement on these past circumstances as perhaps unsophisticated and even simpleminded in their construction of a critical apparatus. To encapsulate this apparatus under the label of auteur idolatry is to distort the variable and ambiguous 'juggling' of a spectrum of critical impulses: the desire to rediscover the traditions and connections of film history by a new generation of cinephiles; the excitement of exploring the domain of film stylistics, something English language criticism had neglected for decades; the recognition that the American cinema was not just a successful entertainment machine

but a bastion of highly refined filmcraft; and an eagerness to expand the horizons of film criticism, by igniting it as a passionate activity, as well as skirting the edges of theoretical investigation.

It is difficult to comprehend today the fascination with *mise en scene* that ruled in the 1960s critical environment. This was not a milieu driven by the theoreticism which so strongly defined 1970s debates about cinema. Moreover, there was a *naivete* and enthusiasm in critical engagement that is impossible to recapture today. In Australia the discovery of *mise en scene* and the rediscovery of Hollywood through it by a small collection of local cinephiles coincided with the immersion of the general public in the TV age and the collapse of the social institution of cinema (i.e., cinema going as social ritual that had prevailed since the 1920s). The retrospective critical interest in the mystique of *mise en scene* served to re-establish the aura of cinema at the very moment it was being dissipated. This was especially relevant when one considers the gearing down of *mise en scene* in TV drama which seemed to highlight the integration of TV into everyday life and its dependence on pedestrian codes of naturalism. One interpretation of Mourlet's writing might be the reclamation of cinema through *mise en scene*. This clearly involved the reassertion of cinema reception as a quasi-mystical experience - cinema as a special creature of otherness that should be clearly demarcated from the quotidian aspect of TV. Not only did the cinema institution itself initially try to combat TV via its resort to widescreen ratios and processes, but TV assimilated movies (and thereby downgraded and fractured them) via its own programming formats, and the intervention of advertising.

Although this essay is an attempt to sort out the concept of *mise en scene*, there is no doubt that part of the critical appeal of the term in the 1950s and 1960s was its elusiveness. Its critical invocation left it open to continual mystery and speculation. It was resplendent in suggesting a fullness of meaning and implication whilst simultaneously possessing a phantom analytic potential. *Mise en scene* could be used to conjure up the boundless vitality of the American cinema, the inspiration and majesty of chosen auteurs, the power of the star persona or the pure exaltation of the musical genre. Today it seems a little churlish to try and strip the term of its critical rapture since the 1960s cinephiles cum critics, whether French, American, English or Australian, wanted to reassert the attraction and intensity of cinema as a rich cultural repository. *Mise en scene* heightened the cinephile's *entree* into a tumultuous and often mysterious cavern, alluring in its mix ofnowness and otherness. If this sounds a little like Michel Mourlet, it is not often pointed out that his ruminations were precursors to Metz's investigations of the film apparatus some years later. Both men were approaching analogous issues from very different angles; the latter demonstrating all the aplomb of the professional academic sent to shore up the new discipline of film theory, whilst the former was simply lost in a merry-go-round of phenomenological excess.

In the heyday of 1960s film criticism, *mise en scene* was a term with reverberations. Once it was sidelined on the critical agenda it became neutralised, almost *passee*. In the surge of 1970s film theory, with its grand array of intellectual referents from Marxism to Semiotics and Psychoanalysis, *mise en scene* as a potential conceptual tool found itself in

the wilderness. It was swallowed up by the new interest in narratology (with its base in structuralism and formalist literary theory) as a valuable explanatory key for film narrative. One could hardly contest the need for 1960s film studies to break out of the crystal palace, which necessitated a concerted assault on the *mise en scene*/auteurist conjuncture at the beginning of the 1970s. Once a theory of authorship emerged to supplant auteurism, the critical edge of *mise en scene* vanished into a limbo world. In the commentary that follows I shall begin a reconsideration of the conceptual legacy of *mise en scene*.

Definitional Difficulties

A basic definition of *mise en scene* might be the staging of action before the camera in a fictive context. The question of fictive context is crucial since *mise en scene* criticism revolved around a primary interest in narrative cinema. Because the term *mise en scene* was borrowed from the theatre, there was a danger that its theatrical invocation might confine its application. Yet the main aim of *Cahiers'* mobilisation of *mise en scene*, as a fundamental aesthetic reference point, was to emphasize its cinematic specificities and peculiarities. A more elaborate working definition of *mise en scene* is the precise placement of actors and objects before the camera in various spatial, pictorial and rhythmic combinations. Despite retaining its generality, the definition does suggest that cinema far surpasses the theatre in its potential for the rigorous organisation of on-screen space, by virtue of deploying the film frame as a centering device. Whereas theatrical space is so often dead space, filmic space can be dynamised as a plenitude, subject to the look of the camera. In traditional narrative cinema, filmic space is normally active space where actors not only perform their roles but offer performance for the merciless scrutiny of the camera. Performing is almost melded to the camera because it only exists for it, while the mode of narrative address pretends it does not. The camera constantly charts and redraws filmic space as fictive space and the actors submit themselves to the ceaseless recharging of on-screen space. By contrast *mise en scene* in the quasi-void of theatrical space can never transcend its basic materiality (i.e., it retains its theatrical framing, usually the proscenium arch).

Cinema's *mise en scene* criticism was always enraptured by the sophisticated, nuanced rhythmic organisation of on-screen space. At times this verged on proposing a metaphysics of on-screen space, e.g. the oft cited "morality is a question of tracking shots". This concern with the metaphysical substitutes of *mise en scene* explains why the *Cahiers* critics were devoted to such filmmakers as Mizoguchi, Dreyer, Hitchcock, Ophuls and Rossellini. These filmmakers were presented as exemplars of precision and rectitude in the application of *mise en scene*. A recurring theme of *Cahiers* criticism was the fusion of ethics and formalism. Certain auteurs' procedural and aesthetic decisions elevated narrative patterning far beyond mere camera functionalism. *Cahiers* critics recognised the possibility of the camera deliberately adopting a precise vantage point to scan the fictive world over and above its mere storytelling function (i.e., the simple recording of fictive constituents). The control of *mise en scene* was correlated with the exercise of an authorial systemic at various levels of filmic articulation.

The Strictures of Authorship

As mentioned previously, auteurism and *mise en scene* criticism were closely aligned throughout the 1950s and 1960s. By the late 1960s auteurist decoding was very much the dominant component in the partnership. Instead of using *mise en scene* criticism as an instrument to open up a number of questions on film stylistics, critics found it convenient to rely on the protocols of auteur analysis. A particular feature of 1960s English language film criticism was the reliance upon thematic elaboration of authorial world views at the expense of investigating more abstract stylistic questions. For a while structuralism was enlisted to the auteurist project through efforts to reduce the authorial code to a set of binary oppositions. This procedure actually diminished the possibilities for nuanced interpretation in film criticism.

Often auteur scholarship collapsed *mise en scene* strategies into a collection of authorial trademarks (recurrent motifs, iconic markers, inspirational camera movements, etc) in the service of an essentialist reading of the text. At other times, auteur criticism revelled in the sublime moment as an indicator of poetic insight. Certainly these tendencies imposed limits on the use of authorship as a critical device. The fixation on authorship encouraged the regular conflation of the auteur as textual construct with the personage of the director as a visionary. Although it was not asserted as such, the combination of *mise en scene* recognition and auteur decipherment did highlight a particular viewing pleasure of the spectator's willing complicity with the controlling agency of narrative.

Moreover, the critical pursuit of authorial meaning was tied to a desire to impose a second order unity upon the text - a simultaneous task of prising open textual meaning and then confining it by authorial enclosure. The reign of auteur analysis in the 1960s clearly restricted the attribution of meaning in a film text as well as overstating textual coherence in the name of the auteur. It continually repressed or deflected the ideological underpinnings of film texts and their roles as social mediators.

Too often the auteur was assumed to be a fully controlling consciousness, with *mise en scene* a textual marker appropriated to it. The idea of the text possessing a variety of unconscious leakages (real disparities and contradictions) was itself inhibited by the task of explicating the unified vision. Thus *mise en scene* was harnessed to critically enhance this aim, in stark contrast to the latterday post-structuralist interest in textual disparities and tangents. For a long time, auteurist criticism inadequately defined itself as a textual bracketing operation. Consequently stylistic analysis suffered accordingly.

The aporia between auteurism and the emerging domain of narrative theory in the 1970s was never really bridged because the former extracted itself from the dynamics of narrative and dramaturgy in pursuit of second order readings. This situation placed the aesthetic analysis of *mise en scene* between the devil and the deep blue sea. Indeed one could even argue that the excesses arising from the mystical celebration of *mise en scene* were a partial reflection of the prevailing critical impasse. Instead of opening up such notions as the 'felt presence' of the auteur or the '*regard*' of the auteur as complex variations on narrating and looking, auteurism too often retreated into the task of

elevating the director as the equivalent of novelist visionary. Romantic excess and closed interpretation were easier paths to pursue. John Caughie has correctly suggested that the 1970s attempts to take some distance from these excesses by postulating a theory of authorship did not do enough to renegotiate the issues of stylistic analysis in accordance with the 'vocabulary' of *mise en scene*. 15

***Mise en scene* versus Narratology**

One approach that came to prominence in the surge of 1970s film theory was the application of narratology to feature films. The conceptual basis of this application was formalist and structuralist literary theory (Propp, Greimas, Todorov, Barthes and Bremond). This theory was invoked to dissect the fundamentals of filmic storytelling. Certainly, it offered a valuable insight into the structural constants at play, but it did not avoid the taint of over-schematisation.

Alongside descriptive semiotics, narratology sought to specify key structural parameters (actants, plot repertoires, narrational methods, syntagms and so on). Because of its literary orientation, such stripping down of film narrative was carried out with no reference to *mise en scene* even though the latter had dominated film criticism for several decades. By implication narratology viewed *mise en scene* as an ornamental overlay and not as an intricate part of narrative dynamics in film. By definition *mise en scene* could not be readily reconciled with purely literary constructs. This disparity was always implicit in the 1960s critical valorisation of *mise en scene*, by emphasizing its transformative powers over even the most mediocre screenplays. Such a transformation was indeed a complex one given the *a priori* literary processing of a film through various phases (from storyline to script treatment, from screenplay to shooting script), and the director's control over *decoupage*, let alone the options for narrative organisation at the post-production stage. The *Cahiers* critic's desire to privilege *mise en scene* was a challenge to the notion of the screenplay as the launching pad of a feature film. For them the real moment of film activation was the shoot itself; all the rest were mere preliminaries. The instant of shooting offers a myriad of possibilities for the act of filmic synthesis, i.e., the bringing together of the actors' presence with performance, decor and costume, the dynamics of filmic space, camera rhythms and angles, the gradations of lighting and sound/image relations. Thus the *Cahiers* critics were correct in asserting that the script was a springboard, albeit an essential one, for the 'magical' task of realization. But they did much more than simply point to the rich constituents of *mise en scene*. Their critical approval, even adulation of preferred auteurs (from Hitchcock to Lang, from Murnau to Mizoguchi), proposed a cluster of directors steeped in the nuances of *mise en scene*, as well as proposing a mastery over the *plasticity* of filmic space. Preferred directors were not simply cultish auteurs but more importantly trailblazers and paradigm cases in marking out the autonomy of the film medium, where imagemaking could approach the realms of musical rhythm and poetic intonation whilst still maintaining the outward impression of solid characterisation based on plot orientated narrative. These auteurs were never simply script enhancers for their command over *mise en scene* made all the difference.

In the 1960s it was logical that much of the debate about the status of *mise en scene* should centre on Hollywood cinema because of its reliance on script formulae and lowly rated genres relative to the usual prejudices over the requisites of high art. Hollywood crystallised the whole issue of the transformative power of *mise en scene*. For its output frequently posed the question of *a priori* control over film material under the studio power structures. Where control of all phases of production was more or less automatic for esteemed European auteurs (Renoir, Cocteau, Dreyer, Rossellini et al), such a situation was not the norm in the carnivorous commercial jungle of Hollywood. Here directors had to fight for and constantly negotiate and renegotiate their autonomy amidst quite rigid hierarchical, professional and business parameters.

Open Image Stylistics

In the period of ascendancy for *mise en scene* criticism the major aesthetic debate was over open image stylistics, i.e image continuum versus montage. In a literal sense this was a false debate since theories of montage were based on views of expressivity that predated the advent of sound cinema. However, this debate should not be encapsulated in terms of rigid polarities, but rather should focus on stylistic choices and tendencies. The *Cahiers* critics and their followers indicated a preference for stylistic strategies that privileged the frame/screen as a vehicle for narrative continuum, spatial freedom and multiple planes of diegetic action. In contrast to Bazin's attempt to match depth of field with a realist ontology, the young *Cahiers* critics were interested in the realm of *mise en scene* as a style option on its own account. They were excited by the possibilities of maintaining and using the immediacy of spatial contiguity in the frame instead of the crude excerpting of fragments of diegetic space. Within the tradition of mainstream narrative cinema this issue did not so much refer to frenetic editing as to the obligatory use of cross cutting conventions, and especially the close up as a regular spatial insertion. For the closeup, if used in a mechanical fashion, could undoubtedly disrupt the nuances of internal image relations. Open image stylistics not only pushed the representational axis towards screen time as a proxy for real time, but also placed characters in continual interaction with themselves and their milieux, in preference to isolating and abstracting them. Spectator freedom to select from the image became equated with the apparent spatial freedom of the characters in their on-screen representations. The image should not simply be thrust at the spectator in the classical montage tradition, by juxtaposing a series of shots as arbitrary image signs. Rather, the open image director places the onus of reading upon a continuously unfolding fictive world. So-called open image strategies creep up on the spectator via the gradual process of meaning accumulation, since the configurations of on-screen space are converted into signification in a relatively unbroken time duration. Moreover, the symbolisation process with open image stylistics functions via an accrual method. Since the fundamental dialectic of cinema is the battle between on- and off-screen space (usually suppressed via mainstream narrative conventions), open image stylistics can suggest a more subtle interplay between these two variables by using the visual field as a means of continual expansion and contraction.

The danger of postulating style polarities in this debate was that the conventions of Hollywood narrative did not arise out of stylistic extremes. The norms of narrative

exposition always balanced stylistic extremes (rapid cutting, long takes, off-centre *mise en scene* etc) against popular storytelling protocols. Yet even within those protocols some Hollywood directors could display their preference for camera fluidity, depth of field and the long take, e.g Hawks, Minnelli, Preminger, Fuller, Ophuls, Ford, Cukor, Stahl. If these filmmakers operated within implicit narrative constraints, they were also able to transgress them in surreptitious ways. Although bound by the centralisation of character and drama, these directors demonstrated a great facility in marking out, complicating and refining scenic space so that the spectator was afforded subtly shifting perspective on the diegetic action.

Open image stylistics inferred *degrees of reading subtlety* that acknowledged the ambiguity of image event, alongside a directorial desire not to overtly impose symbolic coding on the spectator. The spectator was required to enter the film text, scan it and not just surrender to narrative whim.

Narration and Directorial Vantage Point

Despite having indicated past difficulties in reconciling narratology and *mise en scene* criticism, I am certainly not asserting that there is no need to develop an adequate explanation of the narrational process in classical cinema and its bearing on the execution of *mise en scene*. I am arguing, however, that literary theory is not the golden key, even if it has raised some quite pertinent issues.

Much of the debate over classical *mise en scene* was linked to the question of the diegetic world seeming to speak for itself. Before this issue became politicised into a critique of narrative transparency, critics like *Movie's* Victor Perkins placed a positive worth on transparency as the ultimate in refined *mise en scene*. Perkins took Otto Preminger as a paradigm case because his directorial method allowed events to unfold via his "commitment to an exact and lucid presentation". He argued that Preminger fostered an impression of narrational neutrality at the expense of expressive excess or the inscription of a moral vision *a la* Hitchcock or Ford. To Perkins, Preminger seemed exemplary in his ability to weigh the evidence in tackling the big subjects (*Anatomy of a Murder*, *Exodus*, *Advise and Consent* and *The Cardinal*). Preminger's low key approach to presentational form allowed him to work with scenic inflection in a quiet and subtle way. Perkins valued the case of Preminger as an exponent of stable transparent classicism because it marked the perfection of an unobtrusive *mise en scene*.

In the 1970s the issue of classical transparency became a target for radical film theory. Such theory posited a binary opposition between Hollywood fiction as self-effacing, transparent narrative and a modernist reflexivity. This opposition, by promoting a new formalist critique of Hollywood, was primarily intent on reducing its narrative system to a few bare essentials instead of exploring its manifold characteristics. The passive versus active spectator duality emerged as the new theoretical dictum. David Bordwell's