Handout on *Mise-en-Scene*
Dr. Robert C. Thomas

Sources:
Film Art: An Introduction (Seventh Edition) by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson
(Chapter 6: The Shot: Mise-en-Scene)

Mise-en-scene is a French term that means, literally, "putting in the scene." It was adapted from the theater. It refers, in film, generally, to "all of the elements the director places before the viewer in order to effect the viewer emotionally" (Bordwell and Thompson). Mise-en-scene, in this sense, is also about how film affects us emotionally, which means that it refers to the subjective experience of watching films (i.e. to what *happens* to us when we watch a film: to how we are being affected by the elements the director places in the film frame). It also refers to how the director controls these effects when making a film. Mise-en-scene is one of the most powerful aspects of the visual language of film.

Some of the general aspects of mise-en-scene include:

1. Setting (this includes location, design, background, objects such as screens, walls, mirrors, windows, wall paper, buildings, cars, leaves, nature, trees, props, all of the objects that constitute the setting within the frame)
2. Costume and Make-Up (clothes, make-up, colors of clothes, design, etc.)
3. Lighting (this can include specific colors, as well as the use of shadows and light to affect mood or express emotion or feeling)
4. Staging: Movement and Acting (movement of the actors, figures, animals, or objects placed in front of the viewer (includes the movement of inanimate or non-human objects), blocking, gestures, eyes, facial expressions, movements, performance).

Again, we are talking about the visual elements in the film frame. It's important to note that these are all *external* (as opposed to interior) aspects, the combination of which, when placed within the film frame, affect us emotionally. Mise-en-scene refers to the artifice of film: to how it creates meaning and affects us through the creation of an artificial world. This use of artifice creates very real emotions in the viewer. Perhaps "imitation of life" is a good description of film and mise-en-scene. The point, of course, is for the artifice to be so fully developed that it becomes "real" to the viewer (either emotionally, or otherwise: this has nothing to do with notions of whether a film is "realistic" or not). With mise-en-scene we see how the "fake" (artifice, the image, abstraction) *creates or makes the real*.