

If one is interested in exploring ideas of distance and empathy, and other aspects of skilful style-based criticism, then there are not many places better to turn to than the writing on this film. (See the Appendix for more details.)

Point of view

Not for the first time in this book, discussion of mise-en-scène has lead rapidly into a complex discussion of point of view. In Chapter 1 the discussion of camera position and camera movement was concerned with the ways in which they shape the audience's relationship to action and characters. The discussion of visual 'linkages' between different parts of a film in Chapter 3 indicated ways in which the audience were given perspectives which were not available to the characters. All of the ways of understanding melodramatic mise-en-scène discussed in this chapter have been concerned with point of view, some of them very directly. The discussion in Chapter 6 heads in this direction again.

I shall not attempt to explore point of view here, despite the fact that it is such an important concept to any attempt to articulate the complexity of our response to film. Rather, I want to draw attention to how intimately mise-en-scène and point of view are connected, and then indicate where one can find a proper discussion. Douglas Pye's article 'Movies and Point of View', which was referred to in Chapter 1, is the best place to start. The article distinguishes very helpfully between different 'axes' of point of view. These axes include the 'spatial', which concerns the ways we are physically placed in relation to the action by the camera; the 'cognitive', which refers to the rate of flow of narrative information to characters and to the audience; and the 'evaluative', which is a way of talking about the kinds of judgements we make about characters and their actions whilst watching a film. The article develops its discussion through detailed analyses of sequences from *The Lusty Men* and *Rio Bravo*. George M. Wilson's *Narration in Light*, a passage of which we have just been examining, is sub-titled 'Studies in Cinematic Point of View' and is another of the best pieces of writing on the subject.

6 CASE STUDY: IMITATION OF LIFE

This chapter investigates an example which demonstrates in concrete terms a number of the features of the discussion of earlier chapters. *Imitation of Life* is a domestic melodrama, displaying the richness of visual style characteristic of the genre. It is a popular American film, very popular in fact — it was Universal's highest-ever grossing film until *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975). It was directed by Douglas Sirk, the cinematographer was Russell Metty, who worked with Sirk on a number of films and on other important Universal pictures of the period such as *Touch of Evil*.

This analysis focuses on a particular sequence, but as with previous examples it is not possible to talk about one sequence alone, and the discussion takes in stylistic strategies from across the film. A concluding section draws attention to the relationship of the analysis to approaches encountered earlier in the book.

The sequence we shall concentrate on takes place shortly after Annie (Juanita Moore) has been rejected by her daughter Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner) in Los Angeles. Susie (Sandra Dee) has stayed at home to look after Annie whilst her mother Lora (Lana Turner) and Steve (John Gavin) have gone to the screening of Lora's Italian film, and the ensuing party. From the moment when the scene begins until the moment Susie looks out of the window, the sequence consists of five shots: an establishing shot, two close ups of Annie and two close ups of Susie.

The bedside sequence

When the scene commences, Susie is in full flow, relaying her version of events earlier in the evening to Annie. As the scene progresses Susie proceeds to unburden thoughts of her love for Steve, whilst Annie's responses delicately attempt to steer Susie toward the reality of her situation.

- Susie ... and I know mother didn't understand. Oh, it was so embarrassing. And poor Steve, I mean what could he do? She just swept over him like a tidal wave.
- Annie Now honey, it's only natural he'd like to go out with your mother, he always enjoyed her company. You remember that.
- Susie But it's different now. All summer long it's been Steve and me. (pause) Annie, you know don't you.
- Annie Know what?
- Susie That I'm in love with Steve. I've always been in love with Steve, and always will be.
- Annie Sure Susie, but like a little girl.
- Susie No, I don't think it even started like that. In a funny way I always knew. Every time I thought I liked a boy it was because he reminded me of Steve, and then I'd stop liking him because ... because he wasn't Steve.

The sequence begins with an establishing shot which is bisected vertically by a bedpost at the head of Annie's bed. To the left of this divide we can see Annie propped up by a pillow, her bed running toward the camera and the left hand side of the frame. To the right, in the foreground of the shot and facing the camera (although she turns around from time to time), sits Susie eating supper from a tray.

The right half of the image is colourful and cluttered. Susie is wearing a mauve jump-suit, a green lampshade extrudes from the upper right corner of the frame; in the distance is a bedside lamp. The table and tray are interposed between Susie and the camera, the chair at which she sits breaks



FIGURE 38 *Imitation of Life*: The establishing shot

up the space, the folds and pattern of the curtains form a backdrop. In contrast, the left half of the frame is bare and austere. The whites of the bed linen and the dark brown of the headboard, repeated in the wall and the shadow that falls across it above, are the predominant colours.

Annie, clearly unwell, lies very still, whereas Susie eats and chatters and gesticulates.

The comparative triviality of Susie's problems in relation to those suffered by Annie, apparent to the spectator from the narrative situation, is further evoked by the striking decisions of presentation. The fussiness of the right half of the frame contrasts with the bleakness of the left. The 'busy' decor associated with Susie is evocative of her privileged adolescence as witnessed earlier in the film. Her appearance and her surroundings are entirely in keeping with her world of picnics, yellow sweaters, thoroughbreds, imagined kissing and boys. Annie, on the other hand, is mourning for her lost daughter and the stark setting suggests something of the magnitude of the emotion involved. Indeed, this is Annie's death bed and Annie is increasingly removed from material

considerations. It is to Annie's immense credit that she has time for Susie.

The choices concerning décor and camera position make available to the audience an insight into the relationships between the characters in the house. The schism of the establishing shot conveys a tremendous sense of two adjacent but virtually incompatible worlds, two lives lived contiguous to one another, but in different milieux. The choice of a wide angle lens exaggerates the distance between the actors, and further enforces our sense of the boundary between the two. (At one moment Susie takes a glass of milk from Annie, which is rather startling, because the lens had suggested such a substantial space between them.)

The position of the characters in relation to each other and the camera is significant in another respect. Two-shots where the audience can see both characters but one character has her or his back to the other are the stock-in-trade of melodrama, and the range of inflection that can be achieved through this simple arrangement is extremely variable. The most immediate consequence of such a framing is that the audience can read both characters' faces and so know more than either about how each is feeling. In this way the audience are privileged over the characters, and forms of dramatic irony can be rapidly established.

In this instance, the organisation of the visual field gives the spectator a more informed understanding of the scene than is available to Susie, both as a result of the blocking and the distinctions in décor. Not only can we see Annie and Susie all of the time, but also the division of the space which I have been describing can only be perceived by the audience. Indeed, viewed from another angle, the significance attributable to the décor would be lost (or changed).

The ideas introduced by the establishing shot are consolidated and developed in the images that follow. The other set-ups used in the early part of the scene — a close-up of Annie in bed along a similar axis, a slightly wider shot of Susie at ninety degrees — rigorously maintain the distinction in décor and colour present in the long-shot. Neither does the separation afforded by individual shots collapse our sense of the dislocation between the characters. Moreover, the close-ups of Annie enable us



FIGURE 39 Close up of Annie (Juanita Moore)



FIGURE 40 Susie (Sandra Dee)

to perceive that which Susie does not notice. The first cut happens on the line 'Annie, you know don't you', but we are offered a close up of Annie which shows the degree of her suffering, rather than one of Susie, which would have served to make her declaration more emphatic.

Susie chatters on, paying little regard to Annie's remarks and, more importantly, oblivious to Annie's own situation. On the line, 'Sure Susie, but like a little girl', Annie turns away in obvious discomfort (there is an audible tightening of the breath) but Susie, looking away from Annie, fails to notice. Susie is so engrossed in her own conversation that she does not perceive that Annie has fallen asleep (or passed out?) for several moments. Returning from her reflection, Susie ascertains that Annie is asleep and turns out the light. She is about to leave the room when she hears the car pull up outside. She smiles indulgently as we watch her watching Lora and Steve through the window until, that is, she is dismayed to see them passionately embrace.

The pretensions of Susie's behaviour are clear to the audience: partly through our truer sense of the state of affairs between Lora, Steve and her; partly by the reversal of usual mother and daughter roles in this watching of the date returned home safely, and partly by the music which helps to cast the end of the scene in an ironic mode. The perception that Susie is *performing* the role of mother is one that is applicable to her behaviour throughout the sequence, however, and the way in which Sandra Dee performs Susie's romantic reflection and declamation enhances a suggestion of adolescent role play. She is trying out the role of the grown-up — and in doing so joins a whole cast of performers in the film.

Performance

Performance is the central motif of *Imitation of Life*. All of the main characters perform — Lora and Sarah Jane in particular, although Susie and Annie also have their moments. A major change that Sirk made to the initial outline given to him by producer Ross Hunter (and thereby to the novel by Fannie Hurst and the earlier film version of the story, directed by John Stahl) was to make Lora an actress (see Halliday 1997: 148; Mulvey 1996: 34). Yet,

as Richard Dyer has pointed out, we never see her on stage except in audition or receiving a curtain call (1977/78: 49). The logic of these decisions is that they provide the opportunity for examining Lora and the other characters engaging in the 'performance' of social roles.

As Dyer observes, 'Lora/Turner acts, puts on a performance, throughout the film'. Laura Mulvey writes that Lora is 'artificial to the point of self-reflexivity' (1996: 36). Consider the moment, discussed by Dyer, when Lora announces that, if necessary, she will give up Steve for the sake of her relationship with her daughter. As she delivers her lines, Lana Turner straightens, looks away from Susie, and sets her gaze toward the middle distance behind the camera (as if to the tenth row of the stalls). Susie's retort, 'Oh Mama, stop acting!', can be quite startling for the spectator, and Lora/Lana appears to be even more taken aback — the look of surprise in her eyes as she sharply turns her head is telling.

Lora's performance in life, as both Dyer and Mulvey have pointed out, is heavily dependent on Annie's backstage labours (Dyer 1977/8: 52; Mulvey



FIGURE 41 'Oh Mama, stop acting!'

1986: 33). Whilst Lora is walking to every agent on Broadway, Annie takes care of Susie, cleans and cooks, and addresses the letters with which Lora pays the bills. When Lora is on stage, Annie is keeping the home fires burning. Annie is often placed backstage — literally, in Lora's dressing room, and metaphorically in Lora's kitchen.

Additionally, in several scenes in the early part of the film, as Laura Mulvey has noted, Annie performs the role of maid in order to sustain Lora's own performance — most strikingly when Lora is attempting to persuade the agent Allen Loomis (Robert Alda) that she is an established Hollywood star. 'As the story develops, Annie's performance congeals into reality. ... While at first her "per-formance" invisibly supported Lora's visibility, her labour continues to support the household, materially and emotionally' (Mulvey 1996: 33). Sarah Jane is also literally a performer, but in a much less reputable sphere than the one in which Lora moves. It is Sarah Jane who is the clearest example of a character playing a social role: 'passing' as white is itself a form of performance. In the terrible scene of parting which is the prelude to Annie's incapacitation, Sarah Jane pretends to a friend that her mother is the nanny who brought her up. Annie, awfully, accepts this role. Is this the final irony, the blow which breaks Annie's heart: that after trying to dissuade Sarah Jane from passing, her love makes her take this part? Certainly, a hitherto unachieved indignity befalls Annie when she herself has to perform in order to sustain her daughter's deception, an agonising reprise of her earlier role for Lora.

On set and behind the scenes

The sense of the white and black characters living in proximate worlds separated by very real boundaries — as noted in relation to the bedside sequence — is another of the film's most important patterns. Even on the occasion of the first night in the cold-water flat, Sarah Jane complains that she and Annie 'always have to live in the back'. However, it is in Lora's grand house that the film begins to really work in this axis: in the difference between the kitchen, which is associated with Annie and Sarah Jane, and the palatial living area, associated with Lora and her public.

One of the most distinguished features of *Imitation of Life* is the way it marries this use of décor with the performance motif. A number of critics have noted how the house is itself rather like a stage set. More precisely, the way the décor is presented, and the ways in which the characters move within it, suggests the difference between the stage and the wings (or between on set and behind the camera). Annie is frequently to be found in the kitchen, preparing food for the guests, while Lora interacts in the vast living room. A crucial moment in this pattern, which illustrates both performance and spatial play, is the occasion when Sarah Jane serves Lora and guests with the tray of 'crawdaddies' carried above her head and a parody of 'coloured' behaviour.

Or consider the first night party for *No Greater Glory* which is held at the house. Steve, after a gap of many years, has just been reintroduced to Annie, Susie and Sarah Jane. This encounter takes place in the kitchen. Allen Loomis, now Lora's agent, summons Lora to rejoin her guests in the public part of the house: 'Well, are we holding the party in here?' Lora leads Susie and Steve out of the kitchen, arm in arm. Sarah Jane, having made to follow, stops abruptly. A reverse field cut shows us the three white characters disappearing together, presenting the image (if not the reality) of a nuclear family, before we cut again to look at Sarah Jane left in the kitchen. It is not a point of view figure, but it gives us a clear sense of her perspective nonetheless.¹

The untold story

There are a number of moments in the film like this, where the camera goes out of its way to reveal Sarah Jane's, or more frequently Annie's, experience of scenes which are ostensibly about Lora or Susie. Another example would be the mute cut to Annie whilst Lora and David Edwards (Dan O'Herlihy) discuss the controversial 'coloured angle' of *No Greater Glory* making, as Dyer points out, no acknowledgement of Annie and waiting for her to serve them drinks.

In a scene parallel to the bedside sequence — this time involving Lora talking to Annie, one of the bedposts again dividing the image in half —

Annie reveals that Susie is in love with Steve. Lora rushes out of the room oblivious to Annie's plaintive 'Wait, Wait!' Annie sits up in bed as she says this, the only time in the scene when she lifts herself from the pillow, and the camera tracks in toward her. Sirk cuts whilst the camera movement is barely completed, which has the effect of drawing further attention to the disregard implied by, and involved in, the sudden exit.²

Annie's experiences happen behind the scenes and even off-camera. Certain moments in the film make it clear that Annie has a vibrant off-screen life. The funeral is the most emphatic, if retrospective, moment in this pattern. Lora's astonished and astonishing surprise that Annie should have a wealth of friends is another example, and one which illustrates the severe limits to Lora's understanding of Annie's experience.

Structural film-making

As film-maker, and champion of Sirk's films, Rainer Werner Fassbinder has observed, '*Imitation of Life* starts as a film about the Lana Turner character and turns quite imperceptibly into a film about Annie' (1972: 106). The film is constructed as a slow cross-fade from being more obviously a story about Lora and the hardships of her pursuit of stardom, to a story about the trials of Annie and Sarah Jane. At the same time, the two stories interlock — and the movement between the two sets of mothers and daughters is complex and crucial. *Imitation of Life* is not just a story about passing, and not just a story about a single mother's rise to stardom against adversity but rather it is both and, importantly, it is about the relationship between the two.

The film provides a central metaphor for this relationship in the stairways and landings that cross and re-cross Lora's home. The stairways are a physical representation of the two stories. There are the back stairs which lead diagonally up from the kitchen. Sarah Jane passes more freely through the house than her mother, but this is the stairway with which she is most clearly associated, using it to make her way to and from her secret rendezvous with her boyfriend. Then there is the route from the front door, the stairs that Lora uses, connected to the walkways that run above the public space of the front rooms. The most significant point, however, is the



FIGURE 42 The parallel scene



FIGURE 43 'Wait, Wait!'

junction where staircases and stories intersect. It is on this crossroads that Lora quizzes Sarah Jane about her date, the banisters placing Sarah Jane as if in a witness box, or even the dock. It is through the junction that Susie runs as she hurries back from Annie's bedroom to her own, on discovering Lora and Steve's relationship. It is here that Sarah Jane collapses after being attacked, and is attended to by both families.

The set helps the film solve its structural problem. In the design of Lora's house, Sirk has found a form for balancing the stories of both families. The very architecture of the house illustrates the way in which these characters' lives are interlinked but inequitably so.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion I want to underline the relationship between the analysis in this chapter and the ideas around mise-en-scène that we have encountered in Chapters 4 and 5.

We have examined the décor as being indicative of the characters' predicaments and emotions. A wealth of decisions about décor and framing in the bedside sequence, and in the rest of the film, can be understood in these terms. *Imitation of Life* also provides good examples of the stylistic excess of melodrama being inflected in order to create distancing. We have already touched on the reflexive elements around Lora's performance, and we might extend this kind of observation to the décor, particularly the play between on-stage/set and off. A further example of this strategy is provided by the moment where Annie sets off to pack for her journey to Los Angeles. The camera tracks with her past an upright as she leaves the part of the room in which Lora and Steve are sitting, and when we look back with her, not only is the demarcation of space very apparent, but Lora and Steve are framed within a frame, almost suggesting that they are left in the world of the film while Annie has stepped out to reality.

If in these moments, however, the mise-en-scène performs a role rather like a distancing effect, this is not to say that we lose sight of our emotional relationship to the characters. (In this particular example the moment may even increase our involvement with Annie, if not with Lora).



FIGURE 44 Annie steps out to reality

In the bedside scene, Susie's soliloquy is being delicately undermined but this does not entirely preclude the audience's sympathy for her. Rather, the mise-en-scène reminds us that there are questions of priority and perspective — and this scene offers us a perspective that she seems unable to adopt. In this sense the choices made in the realisation of the bedroom sequence furnish us with a very good example of mise-en-scène 'offering a wordless commentary on the action' and 'creating a central point of orientation for the spectator' (Mulvey 1977/78: 55). The sequence could also be accurately described, by Elsaesser, as possessing ...

... a 'liberal' mise-en-scène which balances points of view, so that the spectator is in a position of seeing and evaluating contrasting attitudes within a given thematic framework — a framework which is the result of the total configuration and therefore inaccessible to the protagonists themselves. (1972: 15)

That the perspectives we have considered are available to us and not the characters (at least not Susie) also returns us to the question of defining mise-en-scène, and the discussion at the end of Chapter 3. In the bedside sequence the camera's position is decisive in producing the perspective on the action: it is not possible to talk meaningfully about the mise-en-scène without (implicitly) referring to framing and composition.

Finally, being alive to the importance of the design of *Imitation of Life* is crucial: so much of the interrelationship between the two pairs of mothers and daughters is expressed visually. Without thinking about the film's structural analysis of the situation, one would miss the interaction of the two stories, and it is the interaction that gives the film complexity and its analysis strength. Without engaging with mise-en-scène, one would be hard pressed to perceive and discuss the meanings of a film in which the significant elements are not spoken but shown and felt. Looking back to the history discussed in Chapter 4, we might well reflect on the appropriateness of the idea that 'human relationships can be expressed in spatial terms' (Cameron, Perkins & Shivas 1960: 561).

CONCLUSION

It is appropriate to begin this conclusion by reflecting on a further distinction between the ways in which writers encountered in earlier chapters have conceptualised mise-en-scène. For the critics of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, *Movie*, and related publications, mise-en-scène was unambiguously concerned with the activities of the director. Indeed, I suggested in Chapter 4 that 'mise-en-scène' is almost synonymous with 'direction' in the definition provided by Robin Wood. Although mise-en-scène had a range of different implications for the criticism of this period, there was no question but that the director was responsible.

In Chapter 5 we examined some of the ways that mise-en-scène has been associated with a particular genre, or mode of expression. Thomas Elsaesser's 'Tales of Sound and Fury' has a foot in both camps in that it argues that domestic melodrama has particularly rich mise-en-scène, but the article also wants to identify the films directed by certain individuals as superior to the run of the mill. The article frequently refers to 'the best melodramas' or distinguishes the films of Nicholas Ray, Douglas Sirk and Vincente Minnelli from those directed by others. There is not necessarily a contradiction here — and on the evidence of the number of writers quoted who have celebrated the mise-en-scène of films from these directors, it does indeed seem that their work is particularly well achieved in these terms.

In writing from the years following the publication of 'Tales of Sound and Fury', the link between mise-en-scène and the director is often less