

VA0525 Technology, Culture and Design

**Semester 1 Assignment: Visual Analysis**

**Due date: 11 December 2009**

Mise-en-scène is a French theatrical term meaning “to put on stage”. This includes all aspects of the production design, for instance: the props, sets, costume and location.

Directed by Roman Polanski, *Oliver Twist* (2006), is an adaptation of the novel by Charles Dickens. The film tells the story of a young orphan boy, Oliver Twist, who is disbanded from the workhouse and sold as an apprentice. Oliver then runs away to London where he becomes involved in a group of thieves.

Throughout the film, the mise-en-scène is used to communicate the central themes and ideas. For example, constant reference is made to the status of the characters through both costume and belongings. In contrast to the rich, who are portrayed as being very intelligent: wearing top hats and carrying canes, the poor are dressed in dirty, ragged and demoralising clothes with minimal belongings. For instance, Oliver Twist is shown to carry just a small bag throughout the film.

In juxtaposing the rich and the poor, the director implies during the start of the film that the rich are insensitive and dominant towards the poor; Polanski exacerbates the misuse of power on their ideology over the ‘weak minded’ and uneducated. This is presented in the opening scenes when the wise old members of the committee, each wearing suits, exemplify their superiority in mocking Oliver Twist’s lack of intelligence, “the boy is a fool, I thought he was”.

Furthermore, the main catalyst to the film is the iconic and pivotal scene whereby a frail Oliver asks, “*please sir can I have some more*”. The instantaneous reaction of the committee is “*that boy will be hanged*” presenting a God-like dominance over the poor in that they can decide between life and death.

The distopia of the workhouse depicts a dehumanising ethos: it is ruled by removing individualism; discouraging inquisition; and determining routine. For example, whilst unpicking the fibres from the old rope (oakum) whilst sat in rows on wooden benches (see image, *workhouses* (2006), above), the



children are all told to do a set thing in a set place. Further evidence for this is that they are all wearing similar rags. Although this conformity gets the work done efficiently, it is perhaps overly rational and this environment quickly becomes sterile to the viewer and the task appears very monotonous. The uniformity of the room explores the anxieties and disregard of a humans need for space, freedom and randomness within Victorian workhouses.

Conversely, the costume designs for the pick-pocketers are more lenient and reflect the character's personalities and lifestyles; this is symbolic of the dignity, compassion and free will that they have in contrast to those in the workhouse. Most significantly, the Artful Dodger differentiates from the other boys, as he is smartly dressed with a top hat and cane. This may be representative of power and respect he holds above the other boys, as the rich hold over the poor.

In addition to this, whilst mocking the rich during the pick pocketing 'game', Fagin wears a long coat and top hat, leaning on a cane presenting the characters perception of the rich through costume change.

The food that the different characters consume is also a common attribute throughout the film. The workhouse children are shown to be malnourished and one character expresses concern that he is so hungry that he could eat the boy next to him. The "*gruel*" put before the workhouse children is directly compared to the "*bountiful*" feast that has been put before the overweight members of the committee when Oliver Twist asks for "*more*". In addition to this, the lighting in the room is notably brighter and it seems more decorative than the bland and structured room in which the workhouse children eat.

Furthering this, later on in the film Oliver Twist is seen to be given the "cold bits put by for the dog", whilst later eating more luxurious items stolen by the Artful Dodger from the market. Figuratively, this is a direct indication to how Oliver is treated by other people at different stages of his journey. As with food, Polanski utilises Oliver's shoes to represent the changes in his life. Having walked over 70 miles to London his shoes are worn and haggard, whilst upon getting his strength back under Fagin's care he is presented with newer shoes.



Within the film, London can be seen as a complex and contested place; the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought with it the industrial revolution and an expansion in urbanisation. An idea put forward by Johnson, M. 2009, is that by being constantly surrounded by sensory stimuli, people often establish

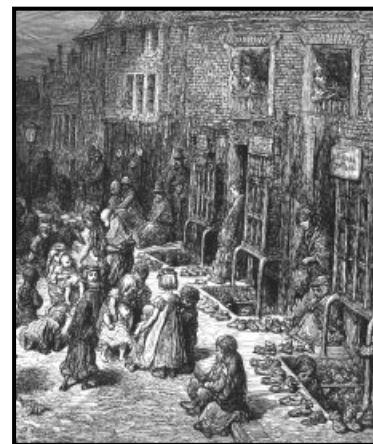
coping mechanisms in order to survive in the chaos. Polanski imitates this attitude with the characters. For example, when the Artful Dodger takes Oliver to meet Fagin, the Artful Dodger seems to be desensitised to what is happening around him and adopts a more blasé attitude whilst quickly moving through the city. Whereas Oliver seems more inquisitive and alert to his busy surroundings, resulting in him seeming rather disorientated. Here Polanski explores how people are able to live so close in the city, but are psychologically so detached in contrast to the country.

The snapshot image (Polanski 2006) above also touches on several of the ten proposed areas of concern within the mise en scene, as suggested by Rudolf Arnheim, cited at Monaco, J. (1981, p.149). For instance: the dark lighting, the expression of the characters, and the dynamic perspective, further suggesting to the viewer that London was a dark, busy and disorientating place to be.

Though often treated transiently, the architecture belonging to the more affluent characters emanates art nouveau with very elaborate and decorative buildings, reflecting the power and dominance of the wealthier end of society. This style was prominent in the 1800's, which is where the film was set.

A lot of inspiration for the design of the set was drawn from the French illustrator Gustave Dore and examples of his work are shown during the opening and closing credits.

Dore was an artist during the 1800's His steel engravings, for example the image to the right, *A Pilgrimage* (1872), demonstrates London and its' population, conveying a hectic picture of the metropolis. In this image, the dark colours seem to be representative of the pollution of that age: the industrial revolution. The sky, though mostly blocked by the chaos of



the city, also presents a smoky and unhealthy atmosphere. Dore's paintings of London each have a brash and dramatic composition in contrast to his much calmer paintings of the country.

To achieve a "*stylistic*" mise en scene, Stam and Miller (2000, p. 6) believe that directors' "orchestrate pre-existing voices, ideologies and discourses, without losing an overall shaping form". Polanski has done this in part through the application of primary evidence. For instance Gustave's steel engravings, alongside the descriptive nature of the novel on which it was based, forms a more historically accurate picture for the film. Monaco (1981, p. 131), also suggests that, "*Because film can give us such a close approximation of reality, it can communicate a precise knowledge...*" Combined, this helps to shape the viewer's perception of the culture, successfully building on the discourse of 19th Century London.

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