



The Application of *Mise en Scène* in *Maha Melihat*: Realism and Narrative Dynamics Through Visual Style

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ABSTRACT

Mise en scène, meaning “placing on stage,” encompasses all visual elements within a film frame, including setting, props, costumes, makeup, hairstyles, lighting, and character staging. These elements contribute not only to realism and authenticity but also to the dynamic interaction between narrative and cinematography. This study analyzes the application of *mise en scène* in the film *Maha Melihat*, focusing on how its visual components, particularly the setting, support the narrative and enhance the audience’s experience of realism and authenticity. The analysis employs a qualitative, descriptive-interpretative approach, drawing on film studies theory and close reading of key scenes. Findings reveal that in *Maha Melihat*, *mise en scène* operates as a dynamic narrative force rather than a static backdrop. The setting assumes an active role, shaping the atmosphere, conveying meaning, and reinforcing the emotional tone of the narrative. The interplay between *mise en scène* and cinematography further amplifies the film’s expressive depth and realism. The study confirms that *mise en scène* is a crucial stylistic strategy in contemporary cinema, enabling filmmakers to construct authentic, meaningful, and immersive cinematic worlds. In *Maha Melihat*, it functions not only to support the story but to actively participate in the storytelling process.

Keywords: Cinematography, Film Style, Setting, *Maha Melihat*, *Mise En Scène*, Realism

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Introduction

Cinema is a powerful medium of storytelling that combines narrative and visual aesthetics to create immersive experiences for audiences. One of the most fundamental concepts that shapes the visual language of film is *mise en scène*, a French term meaning “placing on stage,” which refers to all the elements that appear within the frame, including setting, props, costumes, makeup, hairstyles, lighting, and the staging of actors. These elements construct the spatial and temporal dimensions of a story and convey mood, symbolism, and narrative depth.

Previous research has established that *mise en scène* is essential to achieving realism and authenticity in film [1],[2]. By carefully arranging visual components, filmmakers can guide the audience’s attention, reinforce thematic elements, and support the emotional tone of a scene. Setting has been identified as particularly influential among these components because it can actively participate in the narrative, functioning as more than just a backdrop [3]. In contemporary cinema, there is a growing interest in exploring how *mise en scène* plays a critical role in shaping meaning and audience engagement, even in an era dominated by digital effects and editing. Films that deliberately emphasize authentic visual details often succeed in creating a more intimate and compelling narrative experience [4].

This study explores the application of *mise en scène* in the Indonesian film *Maha Melihat*, focusing on the interplay of its visual elements, setting, props, costumes, makeup, hairstyles, lighting, and character staging, and their contribution to narrative construction. The analysis highlights how these elements in *Maha Melihat* function as static visuals and dynamic forces that interact with cinematography to create realism and enrich the storytelling process. In particular, this paper examines the role of setting as an integral component of the narrative, shaping atmosphere, meaning, and story direction. By investigating the *mise en scène* of *Maha Melihat*, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how visual strategies in contemporary cinema enhance aesthetic depth and narrative meaning, reaffirming the importance of *mise en scène* as a stylistic and narrative device in film studies.

Literature Review

The concept of *mise en scène*, derived from French meaning “placing on stage,” refers to all visual elements arranged within the film frame [1]. It encompasses setting, props, costume, makeup, lighting, and actor staging, functioning as a key strategy for creating realism and authenticity in film. Studies by Bordwell & Thompson [5] argue that *mise en*

scène is not merely decorative but actively supports narrative structure and audience engagement by guiding attention and shaping interpretation.

Beyond being a passive backdrop, the setting in cinema can operate as a dynamic narrative agent. According to Thompson [3], settings can express mood, symbolize thematic concerns, and interact with characters to advance the story. In certain films, such as *Citizen Kane* or *The Shining*, the setting becomes almost a character, revealing internal states or foreshadowing events [6].

The interplay between cinematography and *mise en scène* has been explored extensively in film theory. Monaco [2] emphasized that how a camera frames, moves, and lights the scene influences how the *mise en scène* is perceived and how meaning is constructed. This interaction allows filmmakers to manipulate time, space, and emotion beyond the script [7].

Recent scholarship has highlighted the continued relevance of *mise en scène* in contemporary cinema, even amidst the dominance of digital effects and editing. As Bordwell [8] notes, many filmmakers still rely on carefully designed settings and performances to maintain a sense of realism and immersion. Studies of Asian and European art-house films, for example, underscore the deliberate use of *mise en scène* to evoke cultural and emotional depth [4].

Materials and Methods

A. Material

Maha Melihat focuses on a young married couple, Adam and Indah, who move into a modern housing cluster that appears ideal but conceals a constant, invasive surveillance system. As they notice strange occurrences, such as their neighbor Alam being arrested after a bizarre incident, they uncover unsettling truths about their environment. The film explores the paradoxical human tendency to fear being watched yet enjoy observing others, reflecting the erosion of privacy in the digital era. Set in Jakarta in 2024, the narrative highlights how technology, initially intended to assist, transforms into a tool of social control that threatens personal freedom. The art direction plays a central role in conveying these themes, using *mise en scène* for aesthetic appeal and as a medium of implicit and explicit messaging.

The visual elements, setting, props, lighting, and spatial arrangement are meticulously designed to portray the emotional and psychological tension experienced by the characters. Warm colors and cozy interiors create a sense of safety, but gradually shift to cold tones and unsettling spaces as the narrative progresses. Props like

televisions displaying neighbors' lives and mushroom-shaped lamps symbolize constant surveillance.

The artistic concept aims to resonate with the audience by presenting realistic and relatable visuals that reflect middle-class urban life in Jakarta. Collaboration between the art director, director, producer, and cinematographer ensures that every element of the *mise en scène* supports the narrative and emotional depth. The result is a cinematic experience that is visually compelling and thought-provoking, inviting viewers to reflect on issues of privacy, technology, and human freedom in modern life.

The primary material analyzed in this study is the Indonesian film *Maha Melihat*, the main case study. The analysis focuses on the film's visual components that constitute its *mise en scène*, including setting, props, costumes, makeup, hairstyles, lighting, and character staging. Key scenes that exemplify these elements were selected as units of analysis to illustrate how *mise en scène* contributes to narrative construction and realism. Additional materials include theoretical and critical literature on *mise en scène*, realism, and narrative function in cinema, drawing on works by Bordwell & Thompson [5], Thompson [3], Elsaesser & Hagener [6], and Nagib [4], among others.

B. Methods

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive-interpretative methodology, grounded in film studies and semiotic analysis. The method involves closely reading selected scenes in *Maha Melihat*, examining how visual elements interact with the narrative and cinematography to create meaning and emotional resonance.

The analytical process consists of the following steps:

- (1) Identifying and categorizing the key elements of *mise en scène* present in the film.
- (2) Selecting representative scenes where these elements are prominently employed.
- (3) Analyzing the interplay between *mise en scène*, cinematography, and narrative structure in these scenes.
- (4) Interpreting the findings in the context of cinematic theory and prior research on *mise en scène*.

This approach enables a nuanced understanding of how *mise en scène* operates dynamically, beyond its decorative function, as an integral narrative and aesthetic strategy in the film.

Results and Discussion

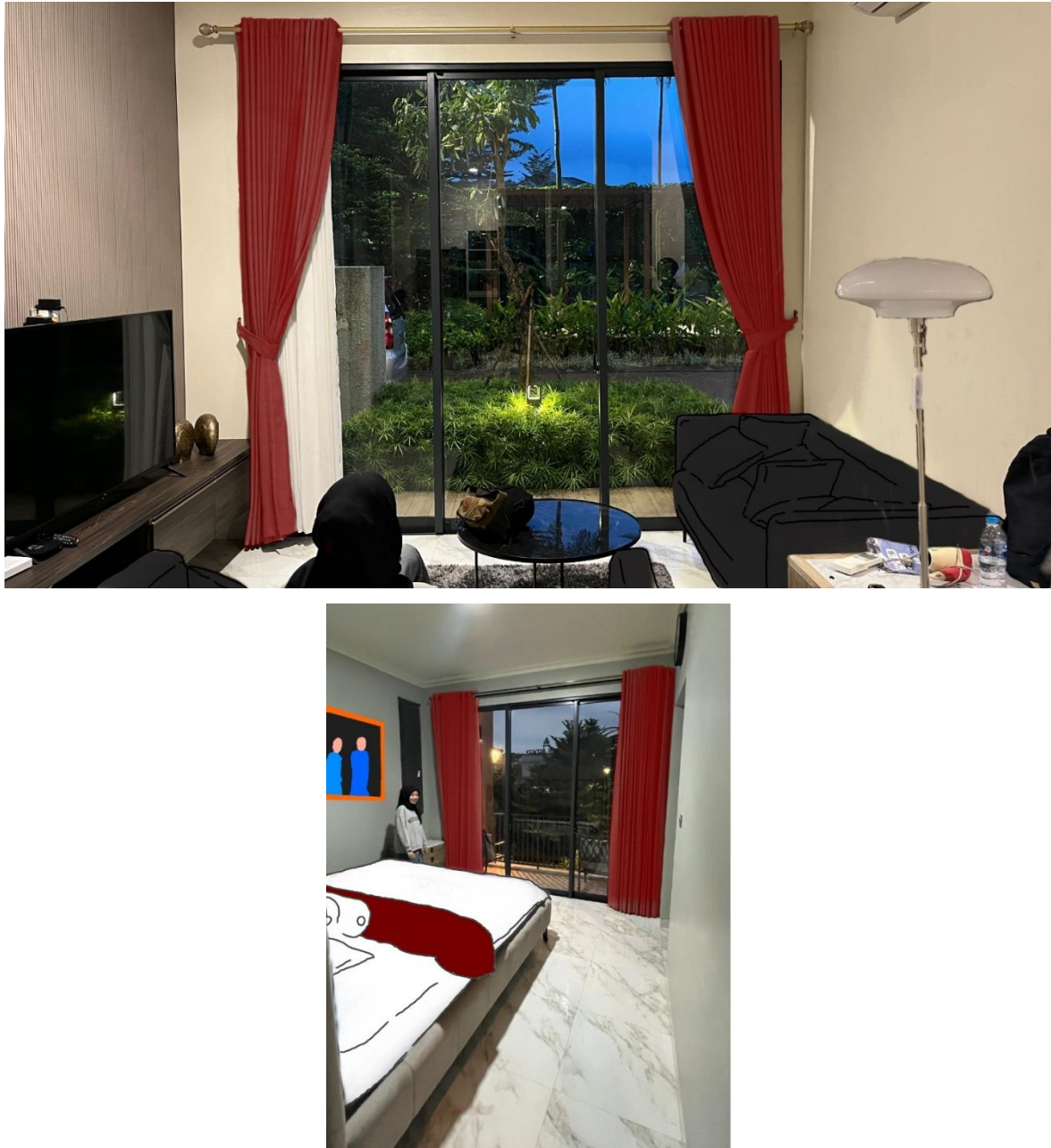
The analysis of *Maha Melihat* reveals that *mise en scène* plays an active and dynamic role in constructing the narrative and enhancing the film's realism. The findings can be summarized into several key aspects.

A. Dynamic Function of Mise en Scène

In *Maha Melihat*, the *mise en scène* operates as far more than a mere decorative or static background; it emerges as an active narrative force that meaningfully engages with both the characters and cinematography. Each visual component, ranging from the meticulously designed settings and carefully chosen props to the symbolic use of costumes, makeup, lighting, and staging, works in harmony to construct a coherent visual language that communicates emotion, theme, and subtext. Rather than passively supporting the action, these elements actively shape the audience's understanding of the characters' inner worlds and the narrative's progression. This analysis aligns with previous theoretical frameworks [3], [5], which argue that *mise en scène* can function as a narrative agent in its own right. In the case of **Maha Melihat**, the film's visual composition reflects shifts in mood, tension, and psychological conflict, often without the need for verbal exposition. Such a dynamic use of *mise en scène* highlights the potential of visual storytelling to convey thematic depth, encouraging filmmakers to explore richer, more layered cinematic expressions beyond dialogue-driven narratives.

B. Setting as an Integral Narrative Component

The setting in *Maha Melihat* emerges as a central element of the narrative. It provides spatial and temporal context and conveys symbolic meaning and emotional tone. For example, specific locations are deliberately designed and framed to reflect the protagonist's internal conflict, social environment, and cultural identity [9]. The setting dynamically shifts alongside the narrative progression, emphasizing key turning points in the story [8], [10]. The primary setting in *Maha Melihat* is a modern housing cluster, a residential complex characterized by uniform shapes and styles, commonly seen in contemporary urban environments. This orderly and cohesive atmosphere results from the aligned architectural design, creating a sense of harmony [11]. Typically, such housing clusters feature minimalist interior and exterior designs, emphasizing functionality to meet daily living needs [6], [12]. However, beneath this surface uniformity lies a subtle tension, as the structured environment also reflects the protagonist's sense of emotional confinement and social pressure. As the story unfolds, the once-stable setting becomes a mirror to the character's evolving psychological state, reinforcing the narrative's underlying themes of identity and dissonance.



Source: Foto Clara DR

Fig. 1. The living room and bedroom in *Maha Melihat*.

C. Realism and Authenticity Through Visual Elements

Using realistic props, culturally-appropriate costumes, naturalistic makeup, and authentic locations contributes to a heightened sense of realism [8], [11]. These elements ground the story in a believable world, allowing audiences to engage more deeply with the characters and events [6], [12]. The natural lighting and restrained colour palette further enhance the authenticity of the depicted environment [13], [14]. In *Maha Melihat*, the setting functions not merely as a backdrop but as a narrative instrument that intensifies the central conflict [9]. The setting is carefully designed to create a

psychological atmosphere aligned with the film's overarching theme of social surveillance and the loss of privacy [7], [15]. The house's design embodies an illusion of comfort and security that gradually transforms into a threatening space. Props such as a television displaying neighbors' lives and decorative elements like mushroom-shaped lamps symbolize the blurred boundary between private and public spaces [16]. This home transformation from a place of refuge into a site of surveillance triggers internal and external conflicts within the main character. Elements of *mise en scène*, including room layout, lighting, and property placement, consistently convey escalating tension parallel with the narrative progression [9],[17].



Source: Foto Clara DR

Fig. 2. The costume and props in *Maha Melihat*

The meticulous attention to realistic props, authentic costumes, and culturally grounded settings in *Maha Melihat* aligns with Nagib's [4] observation that realism in cinema often involves ethical and cultural considerations. The film immerses the audience in a believable world that resonates with Indonesian cultural identity, enhancing engagement and emotional impact.

D. Interaction Between *Mise en Scène* and Cinematography

The study also finds that the *mise en scène* interacts closely with cinematography to shape meaning and guide audience attention [8], [12], [17]. Camera movements and framing often highlight specific elements within the *mise en scène*, drawing focus to symbolic details or emotional cues [7], [16]. This interplay creates a dynamic visual rhythm supporting narrative clarity and emotional resonance [6], [11].

Colour in *Maha Melihat* serves as an expressive element to convey the characters' emotional dynamics and the shifting mood of the narrative [13], [14]. The film employs an analogous color palette of reds and blues, which enhances the visual aesthetics and functions as a non-verbal medium of communication between the film and its audience [11]. Warm colours like red and orange dominate the film's beginning, evoking a sense of comfort and intimacy reflective of a stable domestic life. As tension escalates, these hues gradually give way to cooler tones such as blue and grey, signalling uncertainty, suspicion, and emotional strain [9],[13].

This deliberate colour transition guides the audience's emotional journey from comfort to anxiety, reinforcing the film's narrative experience [6]. This approach aligns with Gibbs' theory, which posits that colour carries symbolic and psychological functions in establishing atmosphere and character [9]. This theory's influence is evident in how it is concretely translated into the set design and props throughout the film [15], [17]. Overall, the findings demonstrate that the *mise en scène* in *Maha Melihat* operates as a deliberate and multifaceted strategy that supports and actively enriches the narrative, contributing to the film's aesthetic depth and cultural authenticity [8], [11].

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of *mise en scène* as both a stylistic and narrative strategy in *Maha Melihat*. The analysis demonstrates that the film's visual elements are carefully orchestrated to construct meaning, enhance realism, and support the emotional and cultural dimensions of the story. The close interplay between *mise en scène* and cinematography observed in the film reflects what Monaco [2] describes as the co-dependence of visual components in meaning-making. Camera movements, framing, and lighting do not merely record the *mise en scène* but actively shape how audiences perceive it. This synergy amplifies key scenes' narrative and

emotional resonance, demonstrating the filmmaker's deliberate control over visual storytelling.

E. Implications for Contemporary Cinema

The results also contribute to ongoing discussions about the relevance of *mise en scène* in contemporary, digitally mediated cinema [6], [15]. Despite the availability of advanced digital tools, *Maha Melihat* exemplifies how traditional cinematic techniques remain effective in creating depth, meaning, and authenticity [8], [11], [17]. This reaffirms the enduring importance of *mise en scène* in maintaining films' aesthetic and narrative quality [9]. In sum, the discussion underscores the role of *mise en scène* not simply as a technical aspect of production but as a vital component of cinematic expression that can articulate psychological, cultural, and thematic layers within the narrative [9], [13].

Direct observation during the production process, including set design development and matching property colours to the story's mood, revealed that these artistic theories are not rigid [7], [16]. Instead, they can be further adapted through creative approaches that align with artistic intentions and on-site production realities [11], [17]. Thus, the creation of *Maha Melihat* served not only as a platform for applying theoretical concepts but also generated new knowledge that can inform future works seeking to explore social issues through strong and relevant visual approaches [6], [8], [14].

Conclusion

This study concludes that *mise en scène* in *Maha Melihat* serves as a decorative background and an integral and dynamic narrative device. Carefully orchestrating setting, props, costumes, makeup, lighting, and character staging enhances realism, cultural authenticity, and emotional depth. The findings reaffirm that *mise en scène* remains a vital strategy in contemporary cinema, enabling filmmakers to construct meaningful, authentic, and immersive cinematic worlds.

The creative process of *Maha Melihat* revealed key insights on applying artistic theories to film production, particularly in using setting to support conflict and color as an expressive element, enhancing the story's atmosphere. The application of *mise en scene*, both in spatial arrangement and colour schemes, successfully conveyed the protagonist's emotional tension and internal conflict. The house setting functioned as a backdrop and shaped the narrative, emotional pressure, and character development. At the same time, the color palette communicated symbolic and emotional cues to the audience.

One significant finding is that the concept of setting as a space of conflict extends beyond visuals to blocking and camera movement. The cramped space was effectively

utilized to evoke surveillance and entrapment, intensifying Adam's paranoia and illustrating how limited space can actively contribute to dramatic conflict.

Another finding concerns the flexibility of colour theory. Using an analogous scheme derived from reds and blues, created layered emotional transitions without disrupting visual harmony or requiring extreme contrasts. Deep red, purple, and bluish grey colours achieved effective mood shifts while maintaining aesthetic cohesion. This demonstrates that a consistent and planned analogous scheme can be a powerful, dramatic tool without imposing technical burdens on production.

The production process also highlighted how technical constraints such as location changes, limited props, and design adjustments led to creative and practical solutions. For example, the team innovated through lighting and spatial composition when wallpaper installation proved impractical. These experiences underscored that artistic processes are not always ideal but can foster inventive approaches that bridge theory and practice.

Limitations and Suggestions

One limitation of this study is its focus on a single film, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the qualitative and interpretative analysis could benefit from complementary quantitative audience reception studies. Future research could explore comparative analyses across multiple films or genres, examine audience perceptions of *mise en scène*, or investigate the impact of digital technology on the function of *mise en scène* in contemporary filmmaking.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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