Exploring the way mise-en-scène creates meaning in John McTiernan's 'Die Hard'

By

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'Die Hard' hit cinema screens in 1988 and was heralded, still is heralded, as one of the greatest action movies ever made. It has since been frequently referred to as the superlative template for films in the aforementioned genre, as well as being the inspiration for many lesser imitations of itself.

Over the course of the ensuing analysis I will look at how effective the use of mise-en-scène was in 'Die Hard' and how it garnered meaning, instigated spectacle and helped to construct characters that were both appealing and full of substance, thus creating not simply a mere action film, but a character driven one that didn't miss a single beat and instantly set itself apart from those that had come before it. I will focus mainly on the opening eight minutes of the film; the introduction of Hans and the scene leading to Takagi's death; and the penultimate sequence, including the demise of Hans. I will also look at the moment McClane gets in 'costume'; and the moment the FBI inadvertently open the vault to both Hans and Theo's joy.

Firstly, and to establish the meaning of mise-en-scène, Ed Sikov (2010: 6) states: 'Mise-en-scène is the totality of expressive content within the image. Film studies assumes that everything within the image has expressive meanings. By analysing

mise-en-scène, we begin to see what those meanings might be.'

*How does m*ise-en-scène *work in 'Die Hard'?*

Within the first two minutes alone, before the opening credits have even finished rolling, we already know who our protagonist is, though we don't yet know his name; that he's arriving from far afield and that he doesn't like flying; he's married; he's a cop; he's quick witted; and we get the impression that he doesn't suffer fools gladly, when his 'flight buddy' offers him advice pertaining to relieving tension after flying that constitutes making fists with his toes.

All this knowledge is delivered upon us by the effective use of mise-en-scène, for example, having the camera angle on and frame McClane's hand in extreme close-up, with wedding ring in view, tightly gripping the seat rest. A second example might be the way that the police issue revolver is made visible, somewhat innocuously, when he reaches up to retrieve his luggage.

As regards McClane being the protagonist and us, the audience, knowing this, the framing of his character, when compared to his 'flight buddy' immediately suggests this. That is, McClane is predominantly framed in close-up whereas the 'flight buddy' is mainly framed in mid shot.

It could also be argued that in portraying McClane as being scared of flying, an element of vulnerability is added to his character.

The bottom line is that McClane is instantly seen as an everyday man's man – a family man and a loyal cop.

His character develops further when he moves into the baggage lounge. The mise-en-scène at this point, with McClane clutching an oversized teddy bear and smoking a cigarette, whilst a non-diegetic musical jingle plays over the top, further sets his world up as being totally opposite to the one we are about to be introduced to.

Thus, a slick change of setting sees us, quite literally, thrown into an office party of grand proportions, with its own micro orchestra to boot. The converse locale to that of McClane's, at the airport, or in general.

The introduction of Holly at this point is extremely significant. She is clearly well established and successful, judging by the size of her office and the presence of an assistant within it. Given that actors can also be thought of as an element of mise-en-scène, the assistant presents an opportunity to help with characterisation as she refers to Holly as Ms. Gennaro, thus providing us with a surname. Nevertheless, soon after, Holly is on the phone to her children and nanny when the camera pans to reveal a picture of her, the children and our man on the plane, John McClane. Thus, we deduce that she must be using her maiden name, and that McClane doesn't live

with her and that they might be separated, given that Holly asks the nanny to make the spare bed up. Most of the information construed so far is a result of mise-en-scène as effective shot framing.

The next sequence takes us back to the airport, to meet with a mise-en-scène set-up that is of utmost importance in developing McClane's character. A limousine has been sent to pick up McClane, by Holly's boss. Though McClane hasn't been in one before he doesn't feel uncomfortable because the young, fast-talking Argle is also a first-time driver. McClane therefore sits up front, beside Argyle, something he probably wouldn't have done had it been a more experienced chauffeur. This renders Argyle as a perfectly placed character to help develop McClane even further, though such does by no means signify that Argyle is simply window dressing. He has an endearing quality to himself and his presence, particularly here and at the very end, whilst also being accompanied by excellent musical tracks, just about gift wraps the whole movie.

At this juncture in the film Argyle's questioning of McClane, as mentioned previously, helps reveal that McClane is from New York; that his wife is here, in LA, and is a successful businesswoman; and that McClane is stubborn. I say stubborn since through his discourse McClane is clearly not interested in making any compromises and doesn't contemplate leaving his work, even if by not doing so it has a detrimental effect on his marriage. The fact that McClane always wears a somewhat cheeky grin/ smirk and questions why Argle asks so many questions, but still

answers them, helps add to the no frills nature of his character.

The framing of the two characters in the windscreen, and the manner in which they talk to each other, offers a much more personal scenario than the extravagant office set-up. Trust can be earned in McClane's world and in his presence, whereas it is merely sold and faked in the business world.

Importantly, during the limousine scene, exterior shots of a giant, lone standing office tower are framed a couple of times, implying that it could be their destination, or at the very least have some part to play in the story.

To round off mise-en-scène as regards this first eight minutes, I'll make a note of the choice of Christmas music used, that is, Run DMC's 'Christmas In Hollis'. It is a moment which highlights McClane as a man of traditional values, given that he queries Argyle about referencing such a song as Christmas music.

In fact, this is a quite brilliant use of music to colour mise-en-scène. And, music can be noted as an aspect of mise-en-scène if we look at what John Gibbs (2002: 5) states: 'Mise-en-scène therefore encompasses both what the audience can see, and the way in which we are invited to see it. It refers to many of the major elements of communication in the cinema, and the combinations through which they operate expressively.'

Thus, as Argyle declares, “this is Christmas music!” and the track is turned up we cut from inside the limousine to a shot of the rear of the car as it winds up the street. The

camera quickly shifts focus to the base of a building and slowly tilts up to frame the imposing Nakatomi Plaza Building. This is followed by a cut to the elaborate turning area/ entrance to the same premises, with a sweeping view over a typical orange glow LA sunset.

I refer to this as brilliant because it offers the absolute in juxtaposition. A style of music that does not ordinarily evoke Christmas playing to images, particularly of the LA sunset, that are hardly representative of the time of year as is traditionally depicted. In addition, this mismatch can be extended to the Nakatomi Plaza Building itself, positioned and framed in the same way a Christmas tree might be, but unlike a Christmas tree is ill-fitting with seasonal representation, and about to become part of something which is far from jolly, therefore symbolising something that is far removed from Christmas. To push it a step even further, it is ironic that McClane does not like this music since it does actually tell of Christmas in New York, which is a city often drawn upon to visualise a Christmas setting, as well as being the one place where McClane would probably prefer to be. Finally, by its use to underline the festive time of year, 'Christmas In Hollis' is probably one of the reasons that 'Die Hard' has become a favourite Christmas movie.

The next sequence I'll look at, in which McClane is cleaning up, is one of the most important as far as costume is concerned, at least in terms of McClane, despite the scene itself actually being quite a normal, domestic moment.

McClane, shirt off and wearing just a white vest, is at the sink whilst Holly sits on side fiddling. Their chatter seems to be fine until McClane reacts to Holly using her maiden name instead of her married name. They beg to disagree, though McClane is clearly riled.

Almost immediately, Holly is sent for, to go and make a speech, whilst McClane is left to condemn his own childish behaviour. For the first time, he has lost his cool and used his sarcasm to ill effect, and it's with the person he loves and wants, and who, as we shall now see, he would die for.

What this sequence does set-up, thanks to subtle, yet highly elaborate, mise-en-scène, is McClane's 'phone-booth' moment, as his hero's 'costume' takes shape. The vest. The police issue revolver, which he grabs instinctively as soon as the 'Terrorists' announce themselves. And, last but by no means least, the absence of shoes and socks. Whether it's to relieve the stress from flying or the stress from arguing with Holly, McClane does as his 'flight buddy' suggested and makes fists with his toes. The close-up framing of his feet seems to be for no other purpose than to highlight the fact that he has taken the advice and is surprised to see that it works. However, not having anything on his feet plays quite a significant role in the pain that McClane will endure over the course of the film. Thus, mise-en-scène in these few scenes alone is also extremely effective in setting up additional stumbling blocks that McClane will face, as if the 'Terrorists' were not enough.

Moving on to analyse the entrance of Hans Gruber. As soon as he steps into frame, given that the camera waits for him before dropping to a somewhat low angle and maintaining a medium shot whilst tracking back, we know our principal antagonist has entered the building.

Refined in appearance, well-groomed and wearing a suit, he is as business-like as those who he is about to torment.

Instantly, we can see that Hans is not the archetypal criminal for films of this era. This is visualised brilliantly when he and his men have taken control of Takagi's office party, as he stands before the office workers, taking on the authoritative presence of Takagi himself.

Hans is clearly an intellectual and we find ourselves almost immediately drawn into his scheming. His framing, as he stands before his hostages for the first time with an open book in his hands, is perfect – akin to a preacher.

His commanding intellectual presence is marvellously further defined in a scene that follows soon after this one, after he has identified Takagi and led him away.

Hans and his men take Takagi to Takagi's own office/ boardroom, which is extremely effective in its design, as regards mise-en-scène. Scale models of various projects

developed, or being developed, by Takagi are displayed around the room. Hans walks past them admiringly until he reaches a scale model of the Nakatomi Plaza.

The framing here is again genius, as Hans is almost framed in a medium two shot beside the model of the Plaza, where he lingers, delivering a quote from Plutarch's (AD46-126) Life of Alexander:

“When Alexander saw the breadth of his domain, he wept for there were no more worlds to conquer.”

And follows it with, “Benefits of a classical education”.

I refer to the mise-en-scène as being extremely effective simply because of the symbolism that can be construed. That is, to Hans there is something to conquer and that something is in a reduced form directly in front of him. Furthermore, he believes his educated, expertly orchestrated plan with see him achieve his goal, though, in fact, it will be McClane who conquers it from within, flying by the seat of his pants and with no plan at all.

Nevertheless, as this very sequence continues, and reaches its climax, another side to Hans is delivered upon us, that is, his clinical brutality, as he shoots Takagi in the head.

However, even this is almost done in an educated manner, with him sitting down at the time, opposite Mr. Takagi. Whereas McClane, watching on, is lying on the ground behind a table – a ghost in the machine, Hans' machine.

As regards the scenes and sequences covered so far, mise-en-scène has been very effective in developing McClane and Hans as two distinct opposites in person yet with the same growing wants, to conquer the building to get what they desire – Holly and wealth respectively. They are also clearly distinguished by their outfits – barefoot and vest versus tailor made suit – raw vs refined.

One scene that must be noted simply for the musical aspect of mise-en-scène is the moment the FBI have the electricity shut down, triggering the time-lock on the vault. As the vault opens an instrumental version of the 'Turkish March' variation of the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony plays.
This is one of the most delightful moments in the film and is encapsulated by Robynn J. Stilwell's observation (Oxford – Music & Letters – November 1997):

'this is easily the musical highlight of the film and largely because of the music – perhaps its single most memorable moment, and yet the 'hero' McClane is stuck in a dark bathroom, completely out of the action. Taken out of context, one would think that this scene must belong to the hero of the film. The full orchestra swells with the loudest musical sequence in the body of the film, and through the music, the lighting,

the camera angles and even the expression on Hans's and Theo's faces, the audience is invited to share in the exhilaration of their success. This scene clearly constructs Hans Gruber as a sympathetic, heroic figure as aural and visual cinematic cues and narrative drive come together.'

Finally, the last sequence I will look at is the penultimate sequence and demise of Hans.

Once again, McClane becomes a heroic western figure, though quite the opposite of the character, Roy Rodgers, whom he chose to characterise himself as to Hans. He's bloodied, battered and only has two bullets. The western feel is encapsulated at this juncture primarily as a result of the smouldering amber glow lighting, caused, in part, by the fires now burning after the roof was blown.

McClane having but two bullets left bares similarities to Billy's predicament at the end of 'Beverly Hills Cop', whilst tying in with the reference he makes to 'Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid'. One last blaze of glory for McClane. As he ponders what to do, his and the camera's focus is taken by some Christmas parcel tape, which is then framed in close up as a Christmas tune kicks in. We can assume McClane has snatched a plan of action out of mid-air.

As McClane makes his final entrance he arrives in a virtual silhouette.

His battered form shocks Holly and is in stark contrast to Hans who has remained neat and tidy throughout.

With Holly held at gunpoint and McClane is forced to drop his machine gun, and we are once again at a loss as to what he is going to do. And, in-case we hadn't thought of McClane as a western hero, Hans tells us just that by stating that Americans are all cowboys. However, his reference to John Wayne walking off into the sunset with Grace Kelly is all wrong, as McClane corrects him and informs him that it was actually Gary Cooper. McClane even suggests that Hans would have made a good cowboy himself. Contrary to McClane's humour, Hans has none. Though he does offer a slight attempt at such by using McClane's very own one-liner back at him:

“Yippie ki yay motherfucker”.

At this point McClane starts to laugh. It seems astonishing that he is still able to laugh. Hans joins in as the framing tightens around McClane and switches to angle on the gun strapped to his back with Christmas tape, before continuing to fix him in a medium close cup.

McClane then draws with lightning speed, first shooting Hans, then his compatriot, right between the eyes.

Mise-en-scène can be said to have played on western imagery throughout this sequence, as well as having set-up such throughout the entire film.

To play on the western imagery McClane raises his gun and blows across the top of the barrel, delivering the line, “happy trails Hans”. McClane is truly the cowboy he and many children dream of becoming. Again, the framing and lighting play a big part in making this imagery effective. In fact, Hans' reference to walking off into the sunset can be turned on its head if we suggest that McClane looks as if he has done the converse, in effect walking out from the sunset.

McClane's posturing is a little premature since as Hans falls back and smashes through the window, he grabs Holly and starts to take her with him.

This is the second time someone is nearly dragged out of a broken window, McClane himself being the first one earlier on. That time he had to undo a fire hose from his waist. This time he battles to free Holly's hand from Hans' grip, finally doing so by releasing the clasp on her watch and therefore letting the watch go. This bookends the story and symbolism attached to the watch. The watch having been a symbol of success in the beginning, but is now, in being released, a symbol of freedom, and therefore life. Rolex means little to McClane, but his wife actually means everything to him.

In terms of Hans, as the watch is snapped free in close up, we cut to angle on him as

he falls downward.

His expression and the framing of such are priceless – his face contorts with disbelief – quite possibly not only because he is falling to his death but also at the shock that such a 'cowboy' has out witted him.

The fact that we never get to see Hans' dead body, though clearly know he is dead, maintains his stature as an astute and memorable villain.

The final image from this sequence sees Holly and John embrace. Die Hard as a love story is now complete.

Before drawing upon a conclusion, music and mise-en-scène has one final coup de grace as 'Let It Snow' by Vaughn Monroe soundtracks the last few moments before the credits begin to roll, with John and Holly McClane leaving the smouldering disaster zone in Argyle's limo. Christmas goes on.

To conclude, despite being a reasonably extensive analysis, 'Die Hard' is so well crafted that there are many other examples of brilliant use of mise-en-scène that I have had to leave out. For an action film in the 80s to embody such a character driven picture highlights the fact that, in terms of the subject of this essay, mise-en-scène was used to tremendous effect.

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