

## Mise-en-Scène as a Cinematic Narrative Device in The Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia, 2019): Visualizing Colonial Tension and Identity

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how mise-en-scène functions as a cinematic narrative device in *The Earth of Mankind* (Bumi Manusia, 2019), directed by Hanung Bramantyo and adapted from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's seminal novel. Set in the Dutch East Indies during the early 20th century, the film visually constructs themes of colonial tension and postcolonial identity through its use of setting, costume, lighting, color, and spatial composition. By analyzing key scenes, this study reveals how mise-en-scène not only reflects the socio-political conditions of the colonial era but also shapes the viewer's understanding of character psychology and resistance, particularly through the protagonist Minke's transformation. The visual contrasts between European and native spaces, as well as symbolic props and body language, contribute to a layered narrative that transcends dialogue. This article argues that mise-en-scène in *Bumi Manusia* is integral to the storytelling process, serving as a visual language for articulating Indonesia's colonial history and national consciousness.

### KEYWORDS

Mise-en-scène, postcolonial identity, Indonesian historical cinema.



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## Introduction

In narrative cinema, mise-en-scène plays a central role in shaping how a story is perceived, beyond the confines of dialogue or plot structure. It comprises the visual organization of a scene, set design, lighting, costume, actor movement, framing, and color palette and is essential to how a film constructs atmosphere, character, and thematic nuance. In the case of *The Earth of Mankind* (Bumi Manusia, 2019), directed by Hanung Bramantyo, mise-en-scène is not merely decorative; it is the foundation upon which the film communicates its historical weight, emotional landscape, and ideological tensions.

Adapted from Pramoedya Ananta Toer's classic novel, the film narrates the life of Minke, a native Javanese youth navigating a world shaped by colonial institutions,

shifting identities, and personal convictions. This study proposes that mise-en-scène in *Bumi Manusia* functions as an expressive and narrative device, guiding the audience's emotional and intellectual experience of the story. The research questions are: (1) How does mise-en-scène in *Bumi Manusia* construct historical and emotional context? (2) What visual strategies are employed to express character dynamics, ideological conflict, and narrative rhythm? (3) In what ways does mise-en-scène mediate the adaptation process from novel to film?

## **Mise-en-Scène as a Cinematic in *The Earth of Mankind***

Mise-en-scène in *Bumi Manusia* operates as a cinematic narrative device, integrating visual elements to construct complex meaning. The film does not merely depict a colonial period; it visualizes its emotional, ideological, and psychological tensions through a carefully orchestrated visual language.

### **Spatial Hierarchies and Set Design**

The film's use of space serves as a cinematic narrative device to reflect power relations and character positioning. Dutch colonial buildings, with symmetrical framing and pale tones, contrast with native or hybrid spaces, visualizing dominance and resistance.

### **Costume and Visual Identity**

Costume functions as a visual storytelling tool and cinematic narrative device. Nyai Ontosoroh's hybrid dress symbolizes authority and cultural hybridity, while Minke's evolving wardrobe narrates his ideological transformation.

### **Lighting and Emotional Atmosphere**

Lighting patterns dramatize oppression versus intimacy. Harsh institutional lighting contrasts with warm, natural light in domestic scenes, structuring emotional tone and guiding narrative pacing.

### **Blocking and Performance Dynamics**

Actor placement reflects invisible tensions. Hierarchical blocking in courtrooms emphasizes colonial authority, while balanced framing in Nyai Ontosoroh's home indicates mutual respect and intellectual alliance.

### **Symbolic Props and Objects**

Props such as typewriters, books, and photographs serve as symbolic cinematic narrative devices, embodying knowledge, agency, and memory. Their placement within frames adds thematic depth.

## Color Palette and Visual Tone

The gradual shift from desaturated institutional colors to warmer tones parallels Minke's journey toward political awakening, visually communicating transformation.

## Visualizing Colonial Tension and Identity

### The Classroom Scene: Power, Assimilation, and Isolation

One of the earliest scenes in *Bumi Manusia* takes place inside an elite European school where Minke, a native student, is positioned among the colonial elite. This setting is crucial to understanding how mise-en-scène constructs the politics of space and visibility in the film. The classroom high windows, pale wooden furniture, and large European maps dominate the room. Minke is placed at the edge of the frame in multiple shots, physically present but visually marginalized. This contrast is not just performative but visual: the blocking communicates Minke's internal discomfort and his external social positioning

### Nyai Ontosoroh's Office: A Woman's Authority in a Masculine Space

The railway station scene, in which Annelies is forcibly taken away from Minke, encapsulates loss and helplessness using spatial composition, color, and movement. The mise-en-scène reinforces the irreversibility of separation and the imposition of colonial bureaucracy on private lives. The environment is dominated by straight lines and metallic grays, starkly different from the warmth of Nyai's house or the romantic exteriors earlier in the film. The color palette here is drained, with blue-gray tones dominating the frame, evoking coldness and emotional barrenness.

### The Final Courtroom Verdict: Framing Justice and Injustice

The courtroom is constructed as a colonial spectacle high ceilings, austere wood paneling, and hierarchical seating. Dutch judges sit on an elevated bench, in dark suits and with minimal movement. Minke and Nyai Ontosoroh are placed at ground level, flanked by armed guards and seated side-by-side but framed in tight, constrained compositions. Lighting isolates individuals, drawing attention to their verbal testimony. The camera alternates between static, symmetrical shots of the colonial bench and slow zooms on Minke and Nyai, whose emotional defiance grows stronger even as the verdict is announced.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how mise-en-scène functions as a vital cinematic narrative device in *Bumi Manusia*, visually encoding colonial tension and identity conflicts. Through spatial design, costume, lighting, and blocking, mise-en-scène enriches narrative depth

and emotional resonance. The film's careful visual construction demonstrates how historical cinema can narrate power, autonomy, and belonging through visual grammar.

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