

From: Grant Thompson & Mitchell,
"How to Watch Television"

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Mad Men Visual Style

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Abstract: Through a detailed examination of how the visual look of *Mad Men* conveys the show's meanings and emotional affect, Jeremy G. Butler provides a model for how to perform a close analysis of television style for a landmark contemporary series. See our companion website, howtowatchtelevision.com for more images and a video clip to supplement this piece.

Much has been written about the look of *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–present)—and not surprisingly, as the program has vividly evoked mid-century American life—the hairstyles and clothing, the offices and homes, and, of course, the chain-smoking and four-martini lunches of a particular, privileged segment of American society. However, *Mad Men* is more than a slavish reproduction of a bygone era. It sees that era through a contemporary filter that recognizes the despair and alienation that lay just beneath the surface. And it implicitly critiques the power structures of that time, which both casually and brutally subordinated working-class people, women, gays, and ethnic and racial minorities.

To understand how *Mad Men* accomplishes this critique, we need to look closely at its visual style. By "style," I don't mean just its fashion sense, although costume design is definitely a key stylistic component. Rather, I examine the program's style in terms of its *mise-en-scene*, or elements arranged in front of the camera, and its *cinematography*, or elements associated with the camera itself. *Mise-en-scene* covers set, lighting, and costume design, as well as the positioning of the actors on the set. *Cinematography* includes framing, camera angle, choice of film stock, and camera movement. In addition, it is also critical to attend to the program's editing design since editing determines what we see on the screen, for how long, and in what context. Together, then, *mise-en-scene*, cinematography, and editing are aspects of television style that showrunner Matthew Weiner, his crew, and his actors use to construct their twenty-first-century critique of 1960s American values.

To start an analysis of *Mad Men*'s mise-en-scene, we should look first at its set design, which serves the crucial function of establishing the program's time period. This is achieved both subtly—by the interior design of the rooms that characters inhabit—and not so subtly—by objects such as a March 1960 calendar that appears in close-up in the very first episode. Period authenticity is clearly important to showrunner Weiner, and the program contains remarkably few anachronistic objects, considering its relatively limited budget (when compared to feature films) and the grind of producing a weekly television program. However, period verisimilitude is not the only significant aspect of the set design. Equally important is the use of recurring sets to express the rigidity and repressiveness of early-1960s American society—as can be seen in the office of ad agency Sterling Cooper and the suburban home of Don and Betty Draper (both of which locales are replaced after season three).

The office set clearly reflects the power structure at the agency (figure 4.1). Secretaries are clustered together in a "pool," with their desks arrayed on an inflexible grid that mirrors the florescent lighting pattern above them. In this public space, they are at the mercy of the higher-ranking men of the office who make degrading, condescending comments about them, take their work for granted, and shamelessly ogle new hires, such as Peggy Olson in the first season. Except for the powerful and physically imposing office manager, Joan Harris, the women, including Peggy, have little control over their own space—unlike the men who move through it imperiously. The desk and lighting grids of the set design position them as if they were rats in an executive maze. Thus, the set design and the blocking of the actors' positions within it serve to dehumanize and contain the female characters.

The "mad men" are masters of their own spaces—afforded personal offices that physically separate them from the women. The higher up the corporate ladder, the more personalized these offices are, with agency head Bert Cooper's as the most distinctive. All who enter it are required, as per Asian custom, to remove their shoes, and then, once inside, they are confronted with Japanese erotic art and an abstract expressionist painting that is so mysterious and so massively expensive that employees sneak into Bert's office after-hours to stare at it in awe and incomprehension, while submissively holding their shoes in their hands.¹ Individual offices like Cooper's serve as spaces of authority, power, and privacy in contrast to the collective space of the secretarial pool.

Of course, Bert and the other men can move through the secretaries' space with impunity, as Pete Campbell does in figure 4.1. The social status and power attached to the private offices are made clear in Peggy's ascent from secretary to copywriter and full-fledged member of "Creative." Initially in the second season, she is forced to share space in what becomes the photocopy room, but eventually

FIGURE 4.1.
The rigid power structure of the ad agency is visually manifested in the office spaces of *Mad Men*.



she gets her own office, and in the layout of the new Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce (SCDP) agency, she scores a prestigious one next to Don Draper's. However, the SCDP offices are not nearly as commodious as Sterling Cooper's. Contrasted with the wide-open space of Sterling Cooper's office, SCDP's diminished space visually echoes the diminished fortunes of the ad men as they struggle to start a new agency.

Mad Men's offices are not the only sets that repress and contain their characters. The homes and apartments of several characters serve important narrative functions as well. Central among these is the Draper home, the picture-perfect representation of affluent suburban existence, in which, however, the Draper family lives a less-than-perfect life. Indeed, with a disaffected daughter, a restless, adulterous mother, and a similarly adulterous father whose entire identity is also a fraudulent fabrication, the house is filled with melancholy and depression. In short, the idealized mise-en-scene of the Draper's home is frequently at odds with the despair of its inhabitants.

The pressures within their home finally result in divorce in the episode titled "The Grown-Ups" (November 1, 2009), which was the next-to-last episode of season 3 and included events that coincided with President John F. Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963. The episode contains a breakfast scene with a set design that exemplifies *Mad Men's* style of decor in that it could have been lifted from a 1950s sitcom or a *Good Housekeeping* article. Pine-paneled walls, avocado-green appliances, and an oh-so-modern (electric!) stovetop with a skillet of scrambled eggs are part of the mise-en-scene, as are 1963-appropriate props such as a glass milk bottle, a loaf of Pleasantville(!) white bread, and various knickknacks. Into this mise-en-scene are inserted the conventional suburban "housewife" in her housecoat, the conventional urban "businessman" in his suit, and a pair of conventional children in their pajamas. But the previous scene has

been anything but conventional, as Betty angrily tells Don, "I want to scream at you, for ruining all of this [the suburban life and home]" (figure 4.2), and, saying that she doesn't love him anymore, demands a divorce. The next morning, as Don exits the house through the kitchen for what will be the last time, he and the children speak, but the "grown-ups" of the episode's title exchange no dialogue. The bitter contrast between the scene's pessimistic emotional tone and its optimistic morning-time *mise-en-scene* characterizes *Mad Men*'s critique of mid-century America's superficial normalcy and repression of the messier aspects of human behavior in the name of conformity to the dominant social order. The mess still exists, but it's been pushed below the surface. As the 1960s progressed, however, that repression became less and less tenable. *Mad Men* feeds on our understanding of what is to come in the latter part of the rebellious 1960s, looking backwards and forwards simultaneously.

The dressing of *Mad Men*'s sets with time-appropriate objects creates the viewing pleasure of picking out period details, like the rotary-dial phones and IBM Selectric typewriters shown in figure 4.1. Details from the 1960s are necessary to construct the program's general time frame, but the program also uses objects in nuanced ways to anchor episodes to particular days in American history. "The Grown-Ups," for example, opens on an unspecified day in 1963. The year has been established earlier in the third season, and the characters complain about the lack of heat in the office, so we know it must be fall or winter. Then, in the background of a shot of Duck Phillips in a hotel room, we see the first of two televisions that are turned on and tuned to a live broadcast of *As the World Turns* (CBS, 1956–2010). The sound is off and the television has less visual impact than the ostentatious glass lamps in the foreground of the room—although the shot has been carefully framed to include the TV screen. The very next scene shows us Pete and Harry Crane, the head of Sterling Cooper's media-buying department, in Harry's cluttered office. A television is on in the background here, too, its presence emphasized when Pete asks Harry, "Can you turn that off?" Harry replies, "Not really," though he does turn the volume down. As Pete and Harry talk, a CBS News bulletin comes on in the background, but they are oblivious to it. In his hotel room, Duck turns off the same bulletin when Peggy arrives for a lunchtime assignation. It's not until the Sterling Cooper employees crowd into Harry's office—one of the few with a television—that Harry and Pete realize what has happened and that we viewers begin to see the impact of the event on *Mad Men*'s fictional world.

For the rest of the episode, televisions provide crucial narrative information and prompt characters to take, at times, extreme actions. Betty is particularly affected, with her confrontation of Don taking place beside a television tuned to funeral preparations (figure 4.2). Later, after seeing Lee Harvey Oswald killed on

FIGURE 4.2.
Mad Men's detailed
 mise-en-scene just
 barely contains the
 emotional upheaval
 below the surface of
 mid-century Ameri-
 can "normalcy."



live television, she screams and exclaims, "What is going on?!" Motivated by the television violence she has witnessed and the collapse of her privileged world, she eventually leaves the house to meet Henry Francis, and he proposes to her. Thus, the television, an element of mise-en-scene, evolves in this episode from seemingly insignificant set dressing to major narrative catalyst, blending the personal crises of the characters with larger moments in American history.

The episode ends with one final comment on an object and its implicit reference to the assassination. After exiting the kitchen of his house in the scene discussed above, Don arrives at the empty and dark office, which is closed for a national day of mourning, and finds Peggy, who has come to escape her grieving roommate and relatives. The harsh, punishing florescent lights are off, and she is working by the natural light of a window, augmented by a desk lamp. Don examines the Aqua Net hairspray storyboards on her desk, one of which contains a high-angle view of four individuals in an open convertible (figure 4.3). Before he can offer an opinion, she anticipates his criticism: "It doesn't shoot until after Thanksgiving. We'll be okay." But Don authoritatively dismisses this delusion by shaking his head. The scene is rather elliptical unless the viewer is able to place this storyboard image within the iconography of 1963 and recognize how much it resembles widely circulated high-angle photos of the presidential convertible limousine in which Kennedy was shot (figure 4.4). Since none of those photos is shown in the episode, only viewers who associate the storyboard imagery with the visual vocabulary of 1963 will understand Don and Peggy's motivation for considering redoing the storyboard.

This short scene also illuminates *Mad Men's* central preoccupation. It is a program about consumer products and the imagery attached to them through advertising. Moreover, *Mad Men* is obsessed with objects and their representation, and—by extension—with humans and their representations. Just as Don, who



FIGURE 4.3.
Don nixes the plan for a hairspray commercial after seeing a storyboard that evokes widely circulated photos of the convertible in which President Kennedy was shot.



FIGURE 4.4.
Mad Men relies on the viewer's associations with this photograph of the Kennedy motorcade.

was born Richard "Dick" Whitman, has styled himself as "Don Draper," so has Don mastered the ability to style products in a way that satisfies his clients and increases their revenue. One could even say that Don is a designer of his own *mise-en-scene* (his clothing, hair style, walk, the spaces in which he chooses to live and work, and so on), but, of course, Weiner and his crew and cast have actually constructed the *mise-en-scene* for both Draper and *Mad Men*.

The way that *Mad Men* is filmed and cut is distinctive, but unlike the show's *mise-en-scene*, its cinematography and editing do not mimic 1960s television. "The Grown-Ups" calls attention to this difference by giving glimpses of live, black-and-white television from 1963: *Mad Men* clearly does not look anything like *As the World Turns*. Rather, it uses a mode of production associated with contemporary high-budget, primetime dramas (e.g., *Lost*, *The Sopranos*, and the *CSI* programs) and with theatrical films. This single-camera mode of production allows for more precise visual control than is possible in the multiple-camera

mode of production that was used by *As the World Turns* throughout its long run. That precision is evident in the final shot of "The Grown-Ups," where cinematography is used both to build a mood and develop characterization. After saying goodnight to Peggy in the main Sterling Cooper office, Don enters his own private office and hangs up his hat while the camera shoots him through the doorway. The camera then arcs slightly to the left to reveal a liquor cabinet as Don walks into the room. Not bothering to remove his coat, Don reaches for a bottle and begins mixing a drink (figure 4.5). The scene then cuts to black and the end credits roll while Skeeter Davis is heard singing "The End of the World": "Don't they know it's the end of the world 'cause you don't love me anymore?"

Episode director Barbet Schroeder and episode director of photography Christopher Manley use framing and camera angle to signify Don's isolation. Keeping the camera outside the room and surrounding Don with the frosted-window walls of the doorway frame have the effect of both emphasizing his remoteness and distancing us from him. As shown above in figures 4.1 and 4.2, *Mad Men* often shoots from a low camera angle that incorporates the ceiling in the frame. This shot is just below Don's eye-level, looking slightly up at him, which brings the ceiling into the top of the frame, blocking it off. The low-key lighting of the office—an aspect of mise-en-scene—works with the framing to blend Don into the darkness. In many TV programs and films, low angles emphasize the size and bulk and even heroic nature of a person or object, but in *Mad Men* the low angles more often make the ceiling close in on the characters, accentuating the repressiveness of their work and home spaces. In short, this scene's cinematography and mise-en-scene collaborate to generate an atmosphere of entrapment, despair, and alienation.

Mad Men's implementation of the single-camera mode of production allows for editing patterns that would be difficult or impossible in the multiple-camera mode used by soap operas. A breakdown of the kitchen scene previously described in which Don and Betty exchange no words (posted on this book's companion website) illustrates this point, and illuminates the narrative significance of characters looking at other characters.

As edited by Tom Wilson, the scene begins in the hallway as Don comes downstairs and walks through the dining room to the kitchen door. There, he pauses, unseen by his family. We see a point-of-view shot, over his shoulder into the kitchen. The next shot is a reverse angle from inside the kitchen, but not from anyone's point of view as he is still unobserved. We return to Don's point-of-view shot as he enters the kitchen and announces his presence: "Good morning." The children respond, but Betty pointedly does not. We cut to *her* point of view of Don even though she is looking down at the stove and not at him. The camera stays behind her, panning and tracking with Don as he crosses the room. During

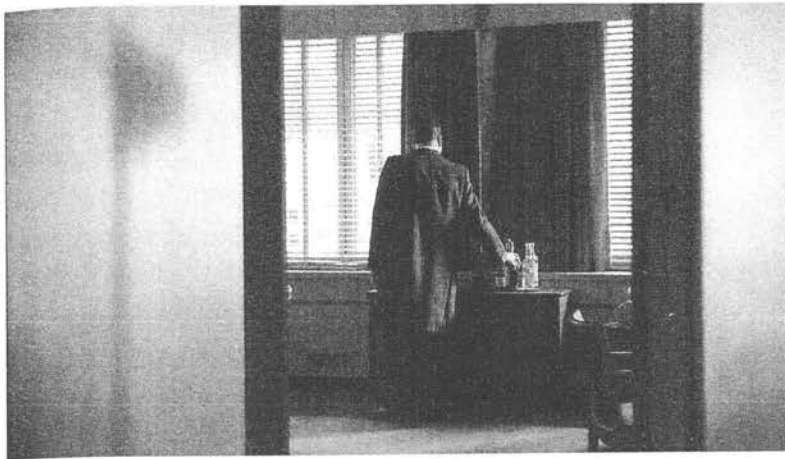


FIGURE 4.5.
Cinematography
is used throughout
Mad Men to build
mood and add to
characterization
rather than to mimic
the visual style of
the multicamera
dramas of the day.

this short walk, he looks directly at her, but she does not return his gaze. The camera movement comes to a rest from nobody's point of view, showing Betty, Don, and the kids; she looks straight ahead, and he and the children look at each other. The camera stays objective for four medium shots, with the fourth shot offering a subtle bit of camera work. Bobby looks at Sally, and when she turns around to look at Betty, the camera pulls focus from him to her—a distance of just a few feet. In terms of narrative motivation and the emotional rhythm of the scene, Sally needs to be sharply in focus as it is her look that motivates the next cut to Betty in a low-angle subjective shot where she looks back toward Sally and the camera. The scene concludes with a camera angle very close to the earlier one from Don's point of view, showing the entire kitchen as he sends one more unreturned look in Betty's direction before leaving.

This close examination of the ordering and framing of shots in the kitchen scene shows how important characters' looks—that is, whom they look at rather than how they look to others—are to this episode, the program, and television drama in general. And this dance of looks is achieved largely through editing, as in the eye-line match cut from Sally to Betty. Multiple-camera programs can also be fundamentally about looks, but this single-camera scene contains shots that would be too time-consuming or troublesome to capture during a multiple-camera shoot. Specifically, the camera has been moved to several positions well inside a four-walled set, showing us the Draper kitchen from virtually every angle. Multiple-camera shows, with their three-walled sets, cannot bring the camera as close to the characters' perspectives as *Mad Men* does. A seemingly simple shot such as the low-angle, medium close-up of Betty with a camera positioned deep inside the set would be nearly impossible to achieve in a multiple-camera production, whether that production be *As the World Turns* in 1963 or a twenty-first-century multiple-camera program such as *Two and a Half Men* (CBS, 2003–present).

Much like Douglas Sirk's melodramas in the 1950s, *Mad Men* makes sophisticated use of visual style—mise-en-scene, cinematography, and editing—to mount a critique of American consumer culture. The mise-en-scene of "The Grown-Ups," in particular, is about the significance of objects and about characters gazing at them and at each other. Built around looks at television sets, the episode provides an implicit commentary upon the medium's increasing social significance in the 1960s and the terrors that it would bring into our living rooms. Betty's horrified gaze as she watches the killing of Oswald from her suburban couch can be extrapolated to the viewing of televised violence of the Vietnam War and the assassinations to come in the later 1960s. On a personal level, the emotional and narrative power of looks—both returned and unreturned—is featured repeatedly in *Mad Men*. And its mode of production allows the program's crew to maximize that power through creative cinematography and editing. The sleek look of *Mad Men* and its reproduction of 1960s modernity might initially draw us to the program, but it is the characters' looks at one another that weave the emotional fabric of its stories. By dissecting the program's style, we can better understand *Mad Men*'s affective impact and its astute visual critique of mid-century America.

NOTES

1. The Japanese woodcut is Hokusai's *The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife*, and the abstract painting is an untitled one by Mark Rothko.

FURTHER READING

- Bordwell, David, and Kristin Thompson. *Film Art: An Introduction*, 10th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013.
- Butler, Jeremy G. *Television Style*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Edgerton, Gary R. *Mad Men: Dream Come True TV*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010.