



accademia
di belle
arti
catania

A.A. 2024-2025

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“INGLESE”

READING LIST C

MODULO D

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF SET DESIGN

Understanding Different Mediums: Theatre, Movie, TV, and Video Sets

Theatre Set Design: actors and audience are separated by a distance ranging from a few feet in a small black box to hundreds of feet in a large auditorium. Everyone in the audience needs to see the action and hear the dialogue on stage, so theatre actors must exaggerate their movements and speak loudly to bridge the gap.

Movie (Film) Set Design: Films offer a broader canvas for designers. They can range from creating futuristic cities to historical reproductions. Attention to detail is crucial, as big screens are less forgiving, and viewers can spot discrepancies easily. Each set needs to be meticulously planned, taking into consideration the storyline, characters, and the director's vision.

TV Set Design: TV shows, especially series, require durable and versatile sets. Considering that most TV series might run for multiple episodes or seasons, the design must endure the test of time. Simultaneously, these sets must often accommodate different scenes or episodes, making modularity a key feature.

Video Set Design: Music videos or short video productions often have tighter budgets and timelines. This medium allows for more abstract and experimental designs, depending on the video's theme or message. Quick adaptability and creativity are paramount here.

A Brief History: Setting the Stage

Before the advent of cinema, theatre was the primary form of entertainment, and set design was already an integral part of the experience.

Dating back to ancient Greece and China, even the simplest of backdrops were crucial in helping the audience engage with the storyline. Today, this art form has evolved to fit movies, TV shows, and music videos, adapting to each medium's unique requirements and audiences.

A creative mind that works to picture scenes or bring somebody else's ideology to life and implement them as well is known as a set or scenic designer. Set design is known using various terminology like scenic design, theatre design, stage design.

Often set designers are misinterpreted as 'production designers.'

Production designers are the ones that act as the eye of the director to bring every vision to reality. They are responsible for various activities like costumes, sets, makeup, and lighting.

The set designer's job is to create an environment for the artist to work by understanding the script and scene.

History of Set Design

The history starts from the Greek period. The planning and architecture helped the audience from the last row to have clear visuals and audible. Complex Cone shapes were the planning preferred for that.

The initial period had only the main character to a maximum of 3 people playing their roles. As the art of acting reached a wider crowd, the crew grew large, and to have the audience engaged and make them feel that they are travelling to different

scenes along with the actors' needed backdrops that suit the scenario, that's when the set design was born.

17th century

Initially, people used scenic painted pictures as backdrops hung on the rear wall of the stage and were of lesser importance, and at times, they were announced by word of mouth at the start of different scenes. The 17th century was the Italian renaissance period, which is said to have brought life to set design. Perspective painting originated in the era to give some sort of depth in the paintings and different elevations.

Artists who contributed to set design from this century are Vincenzo Scamozzi, for his solid drop background and one-point perspective by enlarging the central arch; Giovanni Battista, for his flats, the painted canvas stretched over wooden frames; Nicolo Sabbattini, for his lighting techniques and Ferdinando Galli Bibiena for his multiple perspectives.

18th century

This is the time when set designers started thinking about aspects like how the backgrounds speak of the purpose it was created and how they can act as a tool to unify everything and blend with the scene.

The thought on the importance of light and shadow struck designers from this era. This is a period when classicism was revived. It is only in this period when the curtain was lowered to change scenes. Chandeliers became fashionable.

19th century

It was when the 2D backdrops of scenes started becoming 3D. This period is known for its romanticism. The stages were made of wood. Elevators, slots, and traps made the play more interesting. This not only benefited the audience but the actors, as well as they, were able to interact with the set thus performing better.

The gift of electricity gave better control of lights which was a great challenge imposed in the previous period. Apart from 3D sets, historical accuracy and realistic sets were the trends.

21st century Set Design

People become bored of seeing the same old sets again and again. So now, a revolution of creating interesting spaces for both audience and actors became the focus of the century.

Along with sets, the theatres also evolved to accommodate a larger crowd and also for experiencing the play from a different seating position. This is a century where set designers started working on small-scale models before executing setups, as this started involving a lot of money.

a. Computer-generated imagery (CGI)

Computer graphics are ruling the current generation of the world as it has proved to be more advantageous and helps to create an imaginary world at a much faster pace. It makes it more fun to work with, but it has the disadvantage of making it feel robotic and rubbery. Making a movie or whatever entertainment, for that matter, if it is done with complete CGI, doesn't feel good for the audience's visuals as it makes its artificial nature obvious.

b. Green Screens

Apart from the conventional way of model making and setting up structures by building them from scratch, this century has shifted focus towards technology to help set design less time-consuming and easy to work. This is where green screens intervened.

But this made it tough for actors as they couldn't sense the environment as it was in the traditional method. This is considered the difference between Marvel Entertainment and DC Entertainment. DC relies more on CGI and green screens, which makes it fall behind Marvel. Marvel uses both live-built and green screens, making it easier for artists to perform knowing their immediate surroundings.

c. LED Walls

Compared with the previously discussed green screen and CGI, LED walls are beneficial as giant LED screens would be the backdrops on which the scene is projected, so the actor finds it comfortable to work and excel in their performance. LED Screens enable filmmakers to create realistic, dynamic environments that respond to camera movements and lighting changes, blurring the line between practical and digital sets.

Set design involves diverse work as it plays around with fashion, trend, research, capturing the essence, knowing history, replicating or recreating spaces and objects from the past when needed, sketching, graphical illustration, and involves product designing. Set designers work with every medium possible.

The only difference between architecture and set design is that set design is a temporary setup. Technology has lowered the cost of producing things, and it has

reduced the amount of waste produced by the temporarily built sets as most of these cannot be reused.

Qualities needed in a set designer are creativity, experimenting, researching, the urge to break free from mundane routines, and knowledge on how things work.

Film Set Design Origins and Evolution

Set design's roots trace back to theater, but its transition into film during the silent era marked a significant evolution. Early films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) demonstrated the power of set design in enhancing narrative and mood.

The **Golden Age of Hollywood** (1930s-1950s) saw set design flourish. Technicolor introduced vibrant color schemes, transforming films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Iconic designers such as Cedric Gibbons and William Cameron Menzies left an indelible mark, influencing the visual aesthetics of numerous legendary films.

The modern era brought further changes. From the 1960s onwards, a move towards realism saw sets reflecting socio-political contexts, as seen in *The Graduate* (1967). Technological advancements, particularly CGI, revolutionized set design, allowing for creations previously unimaginable, such as the fantastical worlds in *Avatar* (2009).

The Process of Set Design

The process of set design is a complex, multi-faceted one that requires creativity, technical knowledge, and collaboration. Here are the key stages:

Conceptualization

This is the initial stage where ideas are born. The production designer reads the script to understand the story, characters, and settings. They then brainstorm ideas and create rough sketches or mood boards.

Design Development

In this phase, the rough ideas are developed into detailed plans. This might involve creating more precise drawings, 3D models, or even digital renderings. For example, in *Inception* production designer Guy Hendrix Dyas and his team used both traditional and digital techniques to design the film's impressive dreamscapes.

Pre-production Meetings

The production designer presents their designs to the director and other key film crew members. They discuss the feasibility of the designs, make necessary changes, and finalize the look of each set. In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, production designer Colin Gibson had to work closely with director George Miller to ensure the dystopian sets fit the narrative.

Construction

Once the designs are approved, they move into the construction phase. This involves carpentry, painting, decorating, and sometimes even location scouting for exteriors.

The construction of the **Grand Budapest Hotel** set was a meticulous process led by production designer Adam Stockhausen, who transformed a vacant warehouse in Germany into the fictional hotel, incorporating intricate stairways, elevators, and atriums of a 1913 Jugendstil building, while also using miniature models to represent the hotel exteriors.

Dressing the Set

The final step is dressing the set, which involves placing furniture, props, and other details that make the environment feel lived-in and real. For *American Beauty*, production designer Naomi Shohan used specific colors and objects to reflect the characters' emotional states.

Throughout all these stages, the production designer collaborates closely with the director, cinematographer, location scout, producer and others to ensure the set complements the film's visual style, narrative, and character development.

The process of set design is a testament to the collaborative nature of filmmaking, and its importance cannot be overstated.

Importance of Set Design in Storytelling

Set design is a crucial component in filmmaking that significantly contributes to the narrative and mood, providing visual context and enhancing audience engagement. The importance of set design ties into the impact of production design as a whole on storytelling.

For example, in *The Shining* the Overlook Hotel's eerie design builds tension and foreshadows the main character's descent into madness. Effective set design is essential here because it provides subtle visual cues that can intensify the unfolding drama.

Reflecting Mood

Blade Runner 2049 uses its dystopian fiction cityscape to mirror its themes of dehumanization and moral ambiguity. The importance of set design lies in its ability to create an atmosphere that complements the film's mood, making the narrative more immersive and emotionally resonant.

Characterizing Environment

The vibrant sets in *Amélie* reflect the film's tone and the protagonist's personality. Set design is key in this aspect as it can transform the environment into a character itself, adding depth to the story and enriching the viewer's experience.

The Future of Set Design

The future of set design is being shaped by technological advancements that are revolutionizing how filmmakers approach this aspect of storytelling. As we look forward, it's clear that technology will continue to play a significant role in shaping the aesthetics, practicalities, and creative possibilities of set design.

One key development is the use of virtual reality (**VR**) and augmented reality (**AR**) in pre-visualization. These technologies allow designers to create and modify sets in a digital space before physical construction begins, saving time, reducing costs, and offering unparalleled flexibility in realizing creative visions.

In terms of future trends, we can expect further integration of digital technologies into set design.

The use of AI and machine learning could automate certain aspects of design, while advancements in holography might enable the creation of interactive, three-dimensional sets. Sustainability is also likely to become a priority, with eco-friendly materials and practices becoming more prevalent in set construction.

GLOSSARY

- **Backdrop**= sfondo, scenario.
- **Black box**=A black box theater is a simple performance space, (it. *palchetto, piccolo teatro*). Typically a square room with black walls and a flat floor.
- **Cityscape**= paesaggio urbano.
- **Curtain**= tenda, tendone.
- **Dreamscape**= paesaggio onirico.
- **Eery**= inquietante.
- **Feasability**= fattibilità.
- **Live-built**= costruiti dal vivo.
- **Multifaceted**= multifaccettato.
- **Paramount**= importante, fondamentale.
- **Props**= oggetti di scena.
- **Rear**= posteriore.
- **Rubbery**= gommoso, elastico.
- **Setup**= allestimento.
- **Slot**= fessura, feritoia.
- **Storyline**= trama, storia.
- **Tight**= stretto.
- **To enhance**= migliorare.
- **To overstate**= esagerare.
- **Trap**= trappola, botola.