

Butler, J. G. (2013). *Mad men: Visual style*. In E. Thompson, & J. Mittell (Eds.), *How to watch television*, (pp. 38-46). New York, NY: NYU Press.

Synopsis

Within this article, Butler presents a template for how to analyze the visual style exhibited in *Mad Men*. The series is set in the 1960's and "sees that era through a contemporary filter" as it "implicitly critiques" the managerial hierarchy and class structures of that time (p. 38). In order to achieve this close analysis, Butler argues that viewers first need to look at its visual style, which can be examined through elements such as mise-en-scene, cinematography, and editing. These three components are "aspects of television style" that the production crew uses to construct their "twenty-first-century critique of 1960s American values" (p. 38). When examining mise-en-scene, Butler states that the set design in the show is able to establish the time period that is being represented, the inequality within the power structure, and also the irony with what is being portrayed versus the reality (the Draper home). Butler goes on to say that unlike the show's mise-en-scene elements, "its cinematography and editing do not mimic 1960s television," because it uses an approach of production linked with "contemporary high-budget, primetime dramas" (p. 43). Within the series, most specifically used in "The Grown Ups" (used for Butler's analysis), cinematography is used "to build a mood and develop characterization" through different types of camera angles and what they signify (ex: POV shots, low angles, reverse angles, etc.) (p. 44). With this close examination of specific elements, Butler adds that editing is able to elucidate significance to the characters and overall story since it "determines what we see on the screen, for how long, and in what context" (p. 38). Butler finishes off his article by stating that visual style mounts a "critique of American consumer culture" (p. 46).

Key Concepts

- **Visual Style:** Used to define "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" (p. 38).
- **Mise-en-scene:** This element in filmmaking "covers set, lighting, and costume design, as well as the positioning of the actors on the set" also known as blocking (p. 38).
- **Cinematography:** Another element in filmmaking which "includes framing, camera angle, choice of film stock, and camera movement" (p. 38).

Key Quotes

- "The set design and the blocking of the actors' positions within it serve to dehumanize and contain the female characters" (p. 39).
- "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" (p. 42).
- *Mad Men* is obsessed with objects and their representation, and- by extension- with humans and their representations" (p. 42).

Essential Question

- How can understanding and acknowledging the elements of visual styles help viewers understand the context of different types of television programs?