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

Butler argues that *Mad Men* is a contemporary series that critiques a past era, 1960s America, using elements of visual style including mise-en-scene, cinematography, and editing, which place a focus on how people and objects are represented. Butler noted that while the series represents the 60s, the series does not abide by 1960s TV production standards; they utilize modern production techniques in order to have a greater amount of visual control and style, which further allows the creation of subtext, characterization, and mood. One modern technique utilized is the single-camera set up as it allows for a visual language to be developed by each shot, which the multi-camera set up typically hinders. In demonstrating his argument, Butler analyzes several scenes from the series. For instance, Butler describes the grid like set design of the secretaries' desks as being confining and dehumanizing for female characters, while the men have their own personal spaces which are realms of "authority, power, and privacy" (p.39). He also discusses how the picture-perfect Draper home design is contrasted with the dysfunctional family living there. Butler also examines how TV itself stars as part of the mise-en-scene in one episode, and then transitions to become a source of information, connecting the show to real days in history. Overall, Butler argues that by analyzing the visual style of this series, we can see how the show is critiquing the American power structures in the 1960s.

Key Terms

- **Mise-en-scene:** The "elements arranged in front of the camera", specifically covering "set, lighting, and costume design, as well as the positioning of the actors on the set. (p.38).
- **Cinematography:** "Includes framing, camera angle, choice of film stock, and camera movement" (p. 38).
- **Editing:** "determines what we see on the screen, for how long, and in what context" (p.38).

Key Quotes

- *Mad Men* "provides an implicit commentary upon the [television] medium's increasing social significance in the 1960s and the terrors that it would bring into our living rooms" (p. 46).
- "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" (p. 41).
- *Mad Men* "is a program about consumer products and the imagery attached to them through advertising. Moreover, Mad Men is obsessed… with humans and their representations" (p. 42).

Essential Question

- How does the audience respond to, and understand the various story-telling techniques utilized by creatives/creators?