

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 argued that *Mad Men* is a contemporary series that critiques the 1960s, a time period whose power structures subordinated a variety of minority groups. He argued that this critique is rendered through visual style, including mise-en-scene, cinematography, and editing. He demonstrated how the sets, an element of mise-en-scene, contained props that explicitly and implicitly revealed the time period while also giving context to specific historical events that affected the plot of the show. He noted that the series critiques the idyllic façade of the 1960s by contrasting the perfect suburban home with the familial turmoil that occurred inside of it. Butler described *Mad Men's* use of a single-camera mode of production which allowed for more visual control than the multiple-camera mode of production used in 1960s television. Low camera angles were frequently utilized in *Mad Men* to emphasize the feeling of being trapped by the ideal facade and social norms of the time. This single-camera mode of production opened up opportunities for editing, such as building emotional tension through a scene that depended solely on eye-contact and glances between characters. Butler mentioned how the editors of *Mad Men* put together individual shots of characters, making their eye lines level with one another in a meaningful way to show how the seemingly normal morning for a typical family had unspoken but deeply turbulent emotional undercurrents, reflecting the hidden unrest of the 1960s.

Key Concepts

- **Editing:** “what we see on screen, for how long, and in what context” (p. 38)
- **Mise-en-scene:** “how the elements are arranged in front of the camera...covers set, lighting, and costume design, as well as the positioning of the actors on the set” (p. 38).
- **Cinematography:** “the elements associated with the camera itself... includes framing, camera angle, choice of film stock, and camera movement” (p. 38).

Key Quotes

- “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” (p. 41).
- “It (*Mad Men*) is a program about consumer products and the imagery attached to them through advertising. It is obsessed with objects and their representation, and- by extension- with humans and their representations” (p. 42).
- “Built around looks at television sets, the episode provides an implicit commentary upon the medium’s increasing social significance in the 1960’s and the terrors that it would bring into our living rooms” (p. 46).

Essential Question

- How does *Mad Men* differ in content from television programs made during the 1960s?