

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

In this chapter, Butler examined the television series *Mad Men*, and specifically how the analysis of certain cinematic elements of the show can provide a greater understanding of its deeper meaning and emotional effect on audiences. Butler used three filmic elements in order to explore the visual style of the series – mise-en-scene, cinematography and editing. Butler argued that the mise-en-scene, which is meant to be representative of 1960s America, acts to both ground the show in time and space, as well as provide commentary on that time and space from a critically distant perspective. Such on-camera elements as the set design or the position of the actors relative to one another can speak to power dynamics of the time. Certain visual elements can also come to represent characters themselves. While the mise-en-scene of *Mad Men* is meant to evoke the 1960s, other modes of its production, such as cinematography and editing, are more contemporary. *Mad Men* utilizes a modern single-camera style of filming which provides filmmakers with greater options when it comes to setting up camera angles or framing and joining shots. This style of cinematography and editing can speak to a character's emotional state - as well as to the state of a relationship between characters - in a way that is more intimate and impactful than that of the traditional multi-camera filmmaking style popular in the 1960s. Butler has posited that these elements work together to provide additional emotional and historical depth to the narrative.

Key Concepts

- **Mise-en-scene:** All of the elements arranged in front of the camera, including the set, lighting, costumes, and even the actors themselves (p. 38).
- **Cinematography:** The elements associated with the camera, such as the framing of the shot, camera angle, camera movement, and choice of film stock (p. 38).
- **Editing:** A mode of production which determines what is seen on screen, for how long, and in what context (p. 38).

Key Quotes

- “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” (p. 39).
- “Framing and camera angle... signify Don’s isolation. Keeping the camera outside of 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” (p. 44).
- “The emotional and narrative power of looks... 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” (p. 46).

Essential Question

- How could the element of sound also be applied to this analysis?