

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, Jeremy Butler discusses how the producer and crew of *Mad Men* pay close attention to the visual style of the show in order to construct a twenty-first-century critique of 1960s American values. The author describes the show's style in terms of mise-en-scene (elements arranged in front of the camera), cinematography (elements associated with the camera itself), and editing. Several elements of set design, including period authenticity and recurring sets, reflect the rigidity of American society at that time. The office set, in particular, reflects the power structure within the workplace; the "mad men" were masters of their own spaces while women were contained and dehumanized. Other sets, such as homes and apartments, indicate social status and serve as a framework for family life in the story. The show also incorporates time-appropriate objects. Some of them are simply used to construct the program's time frame, while others, such as the television, act as major narrative catalysts which blend personal crisis of the characters with larger moments in American history (p. 42). *Mad Men's* cinematography and editing mirror that of high-budget dramas. Their single-camera mode of production allows for precise control over camera angles, and lighting. This, in combination with the ordering and framing of certain shots through editing, help to build a mood and develop characterization. Overall, by dissecting the program's style, one can understand how the show is able to make such an impact on its audience.

### Key Concepts

- **Mise-en-scene:** "covers set, lighting, and costume design, as well as the positioning of the actors on the set" (p. 38)
- **Cinematography:** "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

- "It is a program about consumer products and the imagery attached to them through advertising. Moreover, *Mad Men* is obsessed with objects and their representation, and - by extension- with humans and their representation" (p. 42).
- "In *Mad Men*, the low angles more often make the ceiling close in on the characters, accentuating the representativeness of their work and home spaces...generate an atmosphere of entrapment, despair, and alienation" (p. 44).
- "The sleek look of *Mad Men* and its reproduction of 1960s modernity might initially draw us to the program, but it is the character's looks at one another that weave the emotional fabric of its stories" (p. 46).

### Essential Question

- Moving forward, what aspects of visual style will be most important for producers to incorporate in order to authentically represent the current/modern-day period to viewers who may be watching the show in the decades that follow?