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Television Set Design.....

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"Television Set Design"

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by

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INTRODUCTION

The human eye and the human mind are very resilient organs. Today, in a modern world, there is a great danger of these organs being overworked. Both day and night we are constantly bombarded with images, such as photographs, posters, pictures and patterns, good or bad, plain or coloured. Television is another one of the titles in this list. Television has been described as a "domestication of the arts".¹⁸ It was so described because television provides an open opportunity for creativity in a new medium. It is a very selective medium and this is obviously one of the risks that television has to use to its advantage.

Television must cater for a large mass audience. Mass production usually implies mass standards which are monitored by popularity ratings, market research and opinion polls. This is all due to outside competition. There is a constant battle to produce a creative output. Right at the forefront of this battle is the television designer. The television designer is part of a team and does not stand alone. He is both an artist and a technician, who works under constant pressure, in a medium which is all the time subject to technological changes. The television designer relies on his powers of imagination to conceive ideas and his ability to produce these ideas simply, boldly and economically.

Even though he is a member of a team, this does not mean that his individuality as an artist disappears. Television design can only be valued according to the creative individuality of its designers. The largest single expression of design in television is set design. Settings are not just simply designed to provide a backdrop to a programme, but used to assist the whole production; produce a contrived atmosphere and to create an illusion in the mind of the audience. The following chapters will present the fascinating back-stage complications of set design within the production process and explain the magic and mystery with which set design is viewed from behind the eye of the camera. The technique of set design does not exist solely on its own. Lighting and camera operation work along with many other factors, all contributing to the process of set design. Each aspect of set design will be explored, looking also at its influences and origin, to give an understanding and explanation of the art.

Chapter 1 THE EVOLUTION OF DESIGN IN TELEVISION

Section 1 The Incidence of Design

Section 2 The Eye and the Camera

Section 3 Colour and Design

THE EVOLUTION OF DESIGN IN TELEVISION

Design is defined in the dictionary as "the adaptation of means to end" or "the conception of ideas to be carried into effect by action".¹ Design deals with the projected thought, planning and also with the organisation of ideas. Television, when viewed as a "technical phenomenon"² has really nothing to do with art and design. It is also true that television is "a vehicle of artistic expression".³ In the beginning, when television began as a medium of visual expression, it was a means of contact with a whole new type of audience. It was a new way to entertain, inform and instruct an audience. From the beginning, the problems and opportunities of design have been present in television. It has only been through the process of time and experience that the real scope and purpose of design in television has emerged. "Today, after many years of television, we are reaching a more exact definition of the place and importance of the design process in relation to television".⁴

The aim of design in television is to create a significant visual pattern to which an audience can respond. This is the job of the designer. The designer does more than producing scenery elements or sketching backdrops when he is performing his full role. He takes part in a large enterprise, which begins in the imagination of the writer or producer of the programme and ends in the form of an impression in the viewer's mind. The designer is concerned firstly and lastly with pictures. He is trained to visualise the thoughts and needs of the producer. Therefore, it is necessary for the designer to have a thorough technical knowledge of production methods and also to have an in-depth response to the script or the purpose behind the programme. For this reason, it is impossible to discuss the role of the television designer in isolation.

The Incidence of Design

From the contrived drama to regular every-day news reporting, there is an element of design in every programme transmitted through the medium of television. It is almost impossible to aim a camera or adjust the electronic shading of the picture without making a choice related to the aesthetics of design. A predominant factor of television is the need to create a contrived atmosphere in which to stage a programme. Between individual people an emotional foundation exists. In television this intimacy is lacking and therefore cannot provide this bond of trust. How then can this barrier be broken?

The communication of ideas and information between the television and the audience is made valid by a familiar setting. This familiar setting is also guaranteed by a certain style of lighting, a known convention of camera work, recognisable sounds and above all, a background style with which the audience can become comfortable and accept. When the vast majority of people think of set design, they think only of programmes such as the news, current affairs, discussion programmes and drama, but we must also include music items, variety and entertainment programmes of every kind. Artistic performances have always required a scenic background. When these performances take place in the television studio, this is no exception. Set design is by far the largest single expression of design in television.

Scenery is a very cumbersome commodity. It is awkward to move, bulky to store and expensive to make. There have been many suggestions as to how to overcome the problems associated with sets. In nearly every case, the elaborate studio planning, which would be necessary to alleviate these problems, would require a higher proportion of design effort than the replacement of the sets by another type of construction. Because of the development of production techniques, the improvement of cameras, receivers, and also the growth of competition between different television stations for the audience, the demands of set design have increased. There is now a need for sets to be of a better finish and of better quality.

Because television covers such a wide variety of programmes, television design cannot be discussed in general terms. For this reason, I will be discussing television design in terms of programme types. Scenery in television is too often thought of in terms of drama. It is true that a drama will use more scenery, need a longer time to design and will cost more to dress. In terms of television output, drama programmes only account for a small part. If we look at the breakdown of programmes into types, we can see where the greatest demand for set design in television lies. The programmes can be classified into four main groups: talks 55%, variety 20%, drama 15% and music 15%.⁵ This is the percentage breakdown in the England. Under the title of talks, we can include news, discussion, information, education, panel games and audience participation programmes. Regarding the aspect of design, each one of these programmes has to be approached in an individual way. All of the aforementioned programmes are transmitted from a television studio and there is no pretence about this fact. Drama also includes a wide range of programmes. These range from classical tragedy to situation comedy. Variety consists of music hall type programmes, which take in dance routines, music, etc. Finally, music programmes include opera, ballet, orchestral productions, instrumentals and vocal pieces.

So far, we have only referred to set design. There are also other classes of design work within the art of set design. The very soul of set design, which is lighting, is a very important part of set design. It breathes the necessary life into the settings. I will be discussing this whole concept in a separate chapter.

The Eye and the Camera

The medium of television can be very deceptive and confusing for the set designer. The aim of his work is to transfer its importance to his audience. For this audience, sound and picture have an instant effect. When a production team has watched through the same scene several times, each time different details and features become noticable, which were previously overlooked. The designer always faces the danger of losing the initial idea or concept. Between the drawing board and the studio floor, by the time these ideas are interpreted and discussed, many of these ideas lose their initial magic or vibrancy. This can also be due to technical constraints.

As a designer works within the set, he can become so familiar with the various elements which go into making up a set that he may overlook details which may not be as obvious or understandable to the audience as they are to him. For example, strange shadows, which may be projected onto the set from an overhead tree branch, are unexplained to the audience. The designer, on the other hand, accepts this technique as part of the set, because he has become so familiar with these techniques. It is so easy for the designer to get carried away with the techniques of set design and presume that ideas are directly translated to the audience. The designer must never forget that, on the screen, the camera is our eye. These facts are just reminders of a few hazards in this creative process. In lighting also, as with all other contributions to the whole production, the success comes not from what we know to be there, but from how it appears on the screen.

Colour and Design

Colour is an essential factor, even for black and white television. In every day life, colour plays a necessary role in distinguishing objects and detail. In the early days of television, all programmes were transmitted in black and white. This presented designers with the problem of inventing and working with an artificial grey scale which had to correspond with the varying degrees of colour and hues in real life. Because the actors always appeared in natural flesh tints, the colour of the settings, in comparison, provided an atmosphere of unreality. The natural flesh tint acts as the "tonal and chromatic datum"⁶ of all television pictures. The degree or level at which this tint is reproduced on the screen determines the tone of every other object seen on the screen. It is even more important, therefore, for the set designer to work in collaboration with the lighting, make-up and costume designers to represent each tone naturally and with reality, whether in colour or in black and white.

In life, each race contains a natural spectrum of colour particular to its environment. Even within each race the subtleties of individual skin types are unspoken signals which we receive concerning the age, health and condition of the person at whom we are looking. If there is any flaw or unreality in what we see, or expect to see subconsciously on the screen, then our chord of belief begins to strain. In colour television, the set designer has a greater responsibility for both the real and dramatic quality of the pictures on screen. When designing a set for a monochrome picture, the changes of tone in the background become only a change of hue in colour television.

Subtle changes in colour become more obvious and all more essential in colour television. "The colour television picture is one of the most complicate single operations the human mind has so far conceived and succeeded in carrying out".⁶ It is a very complex and difficult process in which creative work is constantly progressing. The adjoining illustration (Fig.1) shows a set designed for monochrome television. The programme was a variety programme shown on R.T.E.1. The background is designed in two tones of grey. It is a basic abstract backdrop. There is nothing complicated or detailed to take away from the performance of the musicians.

Television is neve going to get simpler. As colour television has advanced from the beginning, the set designer has learned to "paint with light and colour on new materials" ⁷. Where he once applied tone as an expression of design, he now adds colour to give his interpretation of mood and atmosphere.



FIG 1

Chapter 2	THE INFLUENCES OF THE THEATRE
Section 1	Theatre Stage Design
Section 2	The Selective Role of the Camera
Section 3	The Role of the Designer in the Theatre

THE INFLUENCES OF THE THEATRE

It is difficult to discuss set design in television without speaking of the rich source from which all set design has originated - the theatre. If we look back briefly at the origins of theatre design, we will notice the basic elements which have influenced the design of the modern theatre of today and, therefore, television set design.

Back to the Roots

In the shadow of the southern corner of ancient Athens is built the Theatre of Dionysis. (Fig 2) Like every subsequent theatre, it had three elements. The main acting area, a large circular dancing floor known as the "orchestra", which was used by the chorus. The second element was the audience, who sat on the slope that rose outwards from the stage area. Thirdly, there was the acting area. As a backing or definition of the acting area, there was a building known as the "skene" which provided an architectural setting for the play. Aristotle was to have said that Sophokles introduced painted scenery (skenographia). There are also recordings of the use of "periaktoi", painted triangular prisms at each side of the stage, and a crane (mechane) for raising and lowering the immortals from the top of the "skene". These are the very first attempts at stage design.

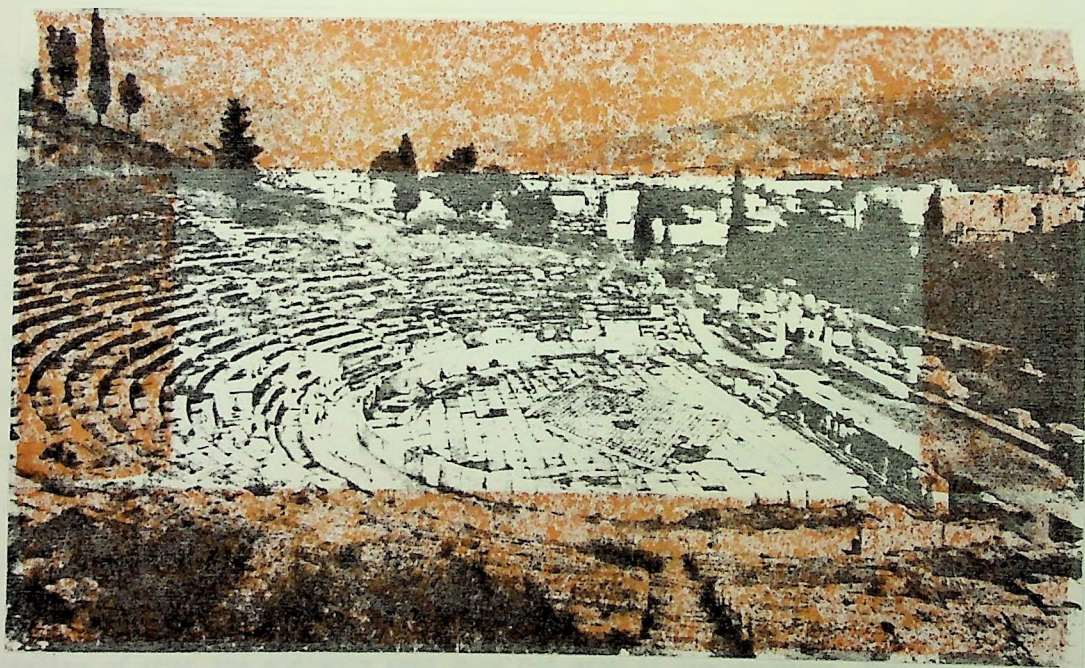


FIG. 2



FIG. 2

In the Elizabethan theatre, the largest part of the audience stood around the stage. The theory was that the play ultimately depended on the relationship the actors had with their audience and this depended on their physical relationship. Today in television, we can see this theory reconstructed, especially in discussion and music programmes. The audience is used as part of the programme or the set and encouraged to partake in the discussion or music.

Theatre Stage Design

The designers who work in the theatre say that it is the camera and not the designer which controls the focus of the spectators in the world of television. Most of the enjoyment of the stage designer lies in the fact that he has total control in this medium. "You're not telling the audience where to look. That is what the camera does in the media. And that is what the designer does in the theatre."9 (Margorie Bradley Kellogg) Although we are dealing with two different media, the basic theory behind television set design and theatre stage design remains the same. The distinct differences lie in the physical size of the media and the expectation of the audience. Stage settings must overcome their physical limitations if they are to suggest reality. The reality of what the audience sees does not stop at the backdrop. The backdrop merely suggests a physical limitation. Beyond the backdrop are the walls of the theatre, which are separate again, unless incorporated into the design of the stage setting and thus, as far as the audience is concerned, become a natural extension of that setting.

People have a great ability to imagine and to convince themselves that they see what they imagine. When this bond occurs with the audience, when the 'magic' transports the audience, when the limitations are broken, then the designer knows that he has been successful in his work. The set only suggests a universe which has infinite borders. Every play suggests a much larger world of which it is a part. When a character walks out a door, we believe that we see him walking through into another room, another country, on the moon! In actual fact, he is going to a backstage area which is, in contrast, finite.

The magical illusion of the stage occurs when the audience loses its awareness of the physical limitations of the theatre. They participate emotionally and intellectually in this world. It is not always necessary to hide the limitations of the stage to be successful. This is done in many different ways. For example, to give the illusion of sky, you do not put up a drop and say 'this is the sky'. Often, the opposite is done, by taking down the backdrop and exposing the back wall of the theatre. From this representation, the audience will see the sky in some magical way. This deals with the great ability humans have to imagine and to convince themselves that they see the sky, when they are given just one clue.

The Selective Role of the Camera

Designers who work in the theatre find the theatre more of a challenge than television. The audience's expectations differ. In the world of television, if the camera mistakenly exposes the top of the set, the illusion for the audience is immediately ruined. They no longer see what they thought to be a strong brick wall as part of a room, but a thin wooden backdrop. Because the television camera acts as the eyes of the audience, the camera selects only what the audience is supposed to see. Another selective feature of the camera is its ability to move in and out of focus to enhance certain areas of the set. When the television camera looks at an old prop which has become grubby or discoloured, the camera can select to cut out or not register this detail. On stage, everything registers. Therefore, props have to be kept in shape and are slightly more exaggerated than on television.

The Role of the Designer in the Theatre

The role of the stage designer in the theatre is also important, if not more so than that of the set designer. The designer begins his work almost immediately at the outset of a production. He is working on the project even before there is a play, or is on call to the writer as the play is being written. The stage designer in the theatre, as in television, gets his inspiration from life, the past and places.

"We search pictures, photo magazines and newspapers of the period. We observe silhouettes, reflections in windows, the calligraphy of street signs. So many details which seemingly have nothing to do with a specific text. We look at paintings, sculpture, architecture, furniture, the changing shape of household appliances. We look at faces leaning out of windows, we dissect expressions or the absence of them."¹⁰ (Harold Prince)

The designer is primarily concerned with the visual reconstruction of the mood, atmosphere, theme, style, period, place and socio-economic background of the play. Stage design in the theatre today is concerned with the total visual effect of the dramatic production. In any type of production, whether on television or in the theatre, the total visual effect is a combination of all the elements, which together make an impact on the audience. The scenic background is the largest and most obvious visual element which supports the production. The designing of a set is not just confined to the creating of shape and colour alone. The design also includes the planning of the lighting, which reveals the mood of the set, the selection of the furniture, and also the consideration of the actors' costumes to make sure that they either blend or contrast with the set as required. The combination of all these visual elements represents the total visual effect.

Another argument which the stage designer has against television design is that television concentrates on faces, their expressions and emotions, minimising the scenery. This argument has been answered already when we discussed the expectations of the audience in both media. In the theatre, the forms of the set put less emphasis on overall theme or on making a visual statement. There has been a gradual movement in the past few years towards a more refined and innovative stage design. Television also has aided and become part of this advancement.

Chapter 3 TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF SET DESIGN

Section 1 The Requirement of Sets

Section 2 Studio Layout

Section 3 The Studio Setting and Background

Section 4 Visual Clues

Section 5 The Technique of Lighting

TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF SET DESIGN

The make-believe world created by set design has materialistic foundations. Set design, as already mentioned, is a "fabric of illusion". Essentially, it must follow very practical lines. Cost and budgeting are two very important factors in the design of sets, even before the design gets off the ground. There are the usual limitations which are particular to this medium, as also in the theatre. In this chapter we will begin to appreciate not only the art of set design, but also the craft.

The Requirements of Sets

To be completely successful, there are three requirements which sets must satisfy. The first says that the design of the set must be appropriate to the subject, purpose and aims of the programme. The second requirement deals with the mechanics involved in the setting. The mechanics used in the studio must suit the dimensions and facilities available. They must also accommodate the cameras, sound and lighting operations. The third requirement says that to achieve the optimum pictorial effect, the characteristics of the camera should be taken into consideration when choosing the tones, colours, contrasts and finish of the sets.¹¹ Taking all these facts into consideration, the success of the designer's work relies not only on his own vision and interpretation of the production, but also on that of the lighting director and programme editor. All three must work hand in hand.

Studio Layout

It is important for every member of the design team to be able to communication with each other. There are set conventions for the interaction of ideas between designers in television. Ideas can be communicated through scaled drawings, models and sketches. The scaled drawings show the layout, proportions and distribution of the settings. These drawings are shown in both plan and elevation. Copies of the plans are distributed to craftsmen, technicians, lighting staff and the programme team.

Sometimes, scaled models are made of the studio arrangements by cut out and erecting elevation drawings on a plan drawing. This also helps the performers in visualising the set up. A scaled model is not always required in every case, but is very helpful when a setting is complicated. It can save a lot of time and explanation.

Sketching can be a very quick and versatile way for the designer to communicate with the rest of the crew. Sketching can be used to show the atmosphere and architectural setting of the set. What the scaled drawing cannot convey, sketching can provide.

The Studio Setting and Background

The studio setting is usually built from a number of separate, prefabricated units which are put in place and joined together. They are then 'dressed'. This means that the set is furnished with drapes, furniture, etc to complete the total scenic effect. In the studio it is necessary to erect or dismantle the whole set with the minimum of time and trouble. Most units are designed so that they can be easily removed from the studio to be re-used when needed. There are several 'basic generic forms' in which the units are made, which are the flat, the solid-piece (rigid units), the cut-out and the background.

The flat is basically a plane piece of plywood which is treated with colour, texture and patterns. (Fig 3) This is usually done by using materials such as fabric, metal, plastics and cording. (fig 4) The solid-pieces are divided into two sections. The first is the direct imitation of architectural features such as doorways, fireplaces and windows.

These are built separately and then fitted into the flats.

The second section includes units which have mechanical purposes such as rostrums and ramps. The cut-out is a type of flat which is attached to the already standing flats to modify their outline. They are usually placed at a distance from the camera. They can be used to suggested scenic planes such as roof tops, skyline of hills, etc. If suitably painted and built, they can be a cheap and effective substitute for elaborate scenic arrangements.



FIG. 3



FIG. 4

"The background is a scenic surface in front of which action takes place."¹² The word background also refers to scenes beyond windows, doors, etc. Different materials can be used to form backgrounds, from drapes to flat surfaces. They can be brought to life with lighting or surface texture. Drapes can be very versatile scenic units, used stretched, pleated or just hanging loose. Sometimes, flat pictorial backgrounds in television are provided by painted cloths, photographic enlargements, back projection and electronically inserted backgrounds.

Visual Clues

When we look at a photograph of the three-dimensional world, we accept this flat, two dimensional medium as a representation of the real scene. We can imagine the depth, scale and space of the scene. In reality, we are reconstructing in our minds impressions of what we are looking at from various clues in the photograph. These clues are perspective, light and relative sizes. We do this through force of habit, subconsciously.

These clues can also be used by the set designer in television, by using lighting and camera, to give false clues to the viewer. Television scenes can create a convincing illusion of depth, deceiving the viewer about the true size, proportions, etc.

For some technical effects, such as dramatic and comic effects, various clues are used which temporarily mislead the viewer's judgement. Some of these clues can be summarised as follows: converging lines, relative sizes, overlapping, foreshortening, surface tones, vertical displacement, surface contours and colour. There are endless uses to which visual clues are put, all in the name of illusion and deception. What I have spoken about in this chapter so far is all physical trickery which is used as part of set design. Lighting is another aid in the created illusion. Technically, the lighting of a television set is similar to that of theatre lighting. The technique of lighting must consider factors much as the type of television camera and lens aperture in use.

The lamps are controlled by what is known as a console, which allows the operator to control the lamps both singly and in groups. (Fig 5) A variety of effects can be produced. The technique and purpose of lighting will also be discussed in more detail.

The Technique of Lighting

In our day to day routine, most of us only put half an eye to the visual world around us. We respond to the influences of the world, but very often, we do not think of its effects. For example, we all know the concept of 'soft candlelight' and accept it. Yet, if we look more carefully, we will notice that this small flame has quite a sharp contour. If we look at it from a technical point of view, there is nothing softly diffused about candlelight. It is a concept which is accepted.



FIG. 5

The designer has to take an active interest in his surroundings. "He is a manipulator of light and shade, form, proportion, texture, colour, mass and unity."¹³ Part of his skills includes recognising these influences and using or recognising them in a controlled medium to express his ideas.

"Light is a phenomenon which one accepts naturally and unquestioningly."¹⁴ Looking closely at the nature and effect of lighting, we become familiar with its properties. "How it can reveal, conceal, exaggerate, confuse our interpretations, lure our attention, distract our interests, conjure a mood, enter a time"¹⁴ These principals still apply whether it is natural daylight or light from studio lamps about which we are talking. All of our interpretations and impressions which we have about the world around us depends on how we perceive them. For example, if we perceive a surface to be smooth and plain, then we interpret this information as such. Though, supposing that this surface is really quite rough and consists of different tones of colour, these facts will not really concern us as observers.

We see what we think we see and are unconcerned with what actually exists. That is, unless a flaw in the set causes the viewer to disbelieve, he will go on unconsciously believing in the created illusion which he perceives.

This theory is used in the designing of sets. The idea being that we might falsify the appearance of a subject, according to how we light it. Lighting, when used in various techniques, can exaggerate or suppress different characteristics on the set. It can also imply features which do not exist.



FIG. 6

An example of this is the passing of lights on a train or the beam of sunlight streaming through a window. The audience can be confused so that he cannot interpret accurately what he thinks he sees before him. This is the basic principal of lighting techniques, whether it is in the theatre or on television.

The designer decides which part of the set needs to be emphasised or which part needs to be suppressed. Features also have to be considered on the set. They draw the attention of the audience and add character to a set. Lighting can also be used to compare a subject to its surroundings or make it stand out. For example, if we want to draw attention to the texture, shininess, sparkle, smoothness, toughness or delicacy of an object, this can be attained with the trickery of lighting. Figure 5 shows an example of this technique. The set was designed for a musical show and is based on a theatrical setting. The lighting is used to dramatically emphasise the arches, steps and columns. There is a startling contrast in dark and bright areas. The technique used creates a dramatic but subtle, moody and atmospheric setting. This reflects the theme and music performed in the show, which is classical.

Another example of the dramatic use of lighting to emphasise and contrast detail and features is shown in Figure 7. The spot light effect is used on the actor's face with the lamp and the bed in the background. This represents the foreground, mid-ground and background of the setting. The harsh lighting on the face of the actor draws the audience to the pensive expression and mood on his face. The lighting on the brass lamp shows the shiny, reflective quality of the material. The bed in the background is illuminated to give the setting depth and complete the total atmosphere.

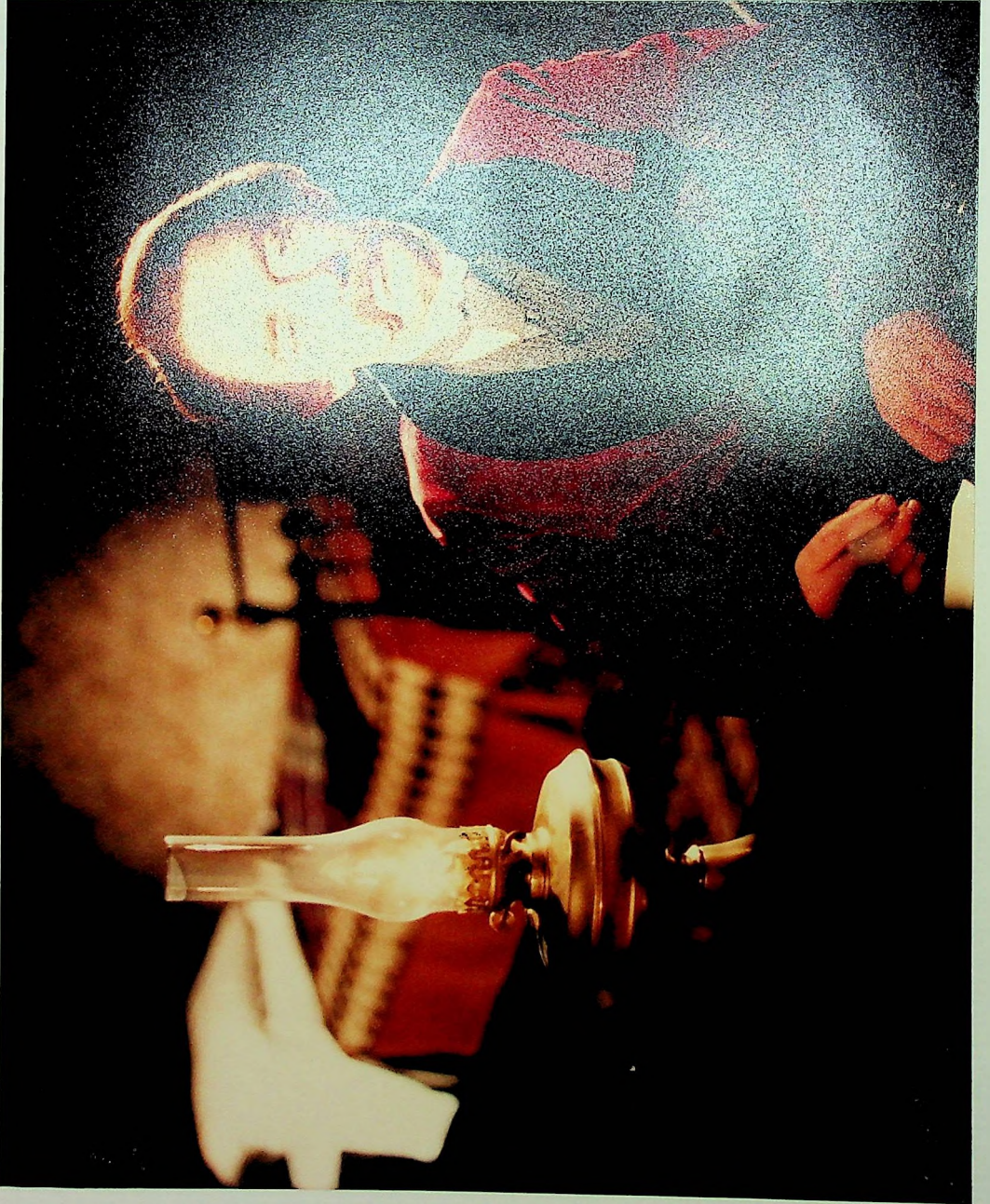


FIG. 7

As in the theatre, the set designer relies on the ability to conjure up a feeling of an atmosphere or an environment as already shown. He must conjure up this feeling quite persuasively. The most effective use of lighting is only arrived at through experience and perceptive observation on the part of the lighting director.

The task of creating an atmosphere can be a very tricky job for the lighting director. Some atmospheres can be created simply, as when a powerful and dramatic shot is needed in a small area. On the other hand, some shots the director may need to build up lamp by lamp, until a total and convincing illusion is created; until the studio set takes on the reality of a modern room inside a house, for example. To the audience this is what he sees - a room inside a real house. The real success is if the viewer is left with the idea that the place actually exists. There are several questions which we have to ask here. What makes the shot look real? What causes too much lighting to appear contrived and theatrical while, on the other hand, too little lighting can also fail to achieve a level of reality. The lighting director, like the rest of the production team, is involved in the concept of make-believe.

The better they do their job, the less obvious their work will be. In other words, the better a designer reconstructs a village square within the studio walls, the less apparent it will seem that the village is actually basic scenic units nailed together. It is this novelty of reconstruction which is the designer or lighting director's art. Going back to the village square scene, what part does the studio lighting have to play in such a scene?

There is a very large difference between the screen image and the actual mechanics on the studio floor. In the aforementioned scene, a certain intensity and shade of light gives an atmospheric impression, engaging our attention. In the studio, none of this is evident. This can only be seen or experienced from behind the lens of the camera. In the studio it is no more than a lit set. The camera plays an important role in being in the right place at the right time, capturing this atmosphere at the right angle. Neither the setting without the lighting nor the lighting without the set would function. It is part of the lighting director's job to perceive the change between what is before the camera and what becomes the end result on the screen. It takes a lot of experience to calculate these anticipations correctly.

Chapter 4 THE FOUR APPROACHES OF TELEVISION DESIGN

Section 1 Contrived Realism

Section 2 Stylisation

Section 3 Abstract Design

Section 4 The Studio Background

Section 5 Contrived Realism and Drama

Section 6 Drama in the Theatre and on Television

Section 7 The Technique of Contrived Realism

Section 8 Stylised and Abstract Design

Section 9 The Presentation of Opera on Television

Section 10 The Presentation of Variety on Television



FIG. 8

THE FOUR APPROACHES OF TELEVISION DESIGN

There are three distinct styles used in the design of sets for television production. The three styles are contrived realism, stylisation and abstraction. There is also a fourth style which cannot be compared to any other expression of design. It is called the studio background.

Contrived Realism

Contrived realism is the recreation of a realistic scene, designed for the eye of the camera. This means that the surfaces of the sets have to be of the correct shape, texture, pattern and quality of age. (Fig 8) Also, the appropriate furnishings or properties must be used on the set. All of these factors create an illusion of reality within which the actors can move with complete authenticity.

Stylisation

This is called a "derived design".¹⁵ It is an alternative way of expressing reality. Stylisation "refines the detail of a scene to its simplest and most symbolic elements".¹⁵ The design of this setting is used to suggest merely a place and atmosphere. (Fig 9)



FIG. 9



FIG.10

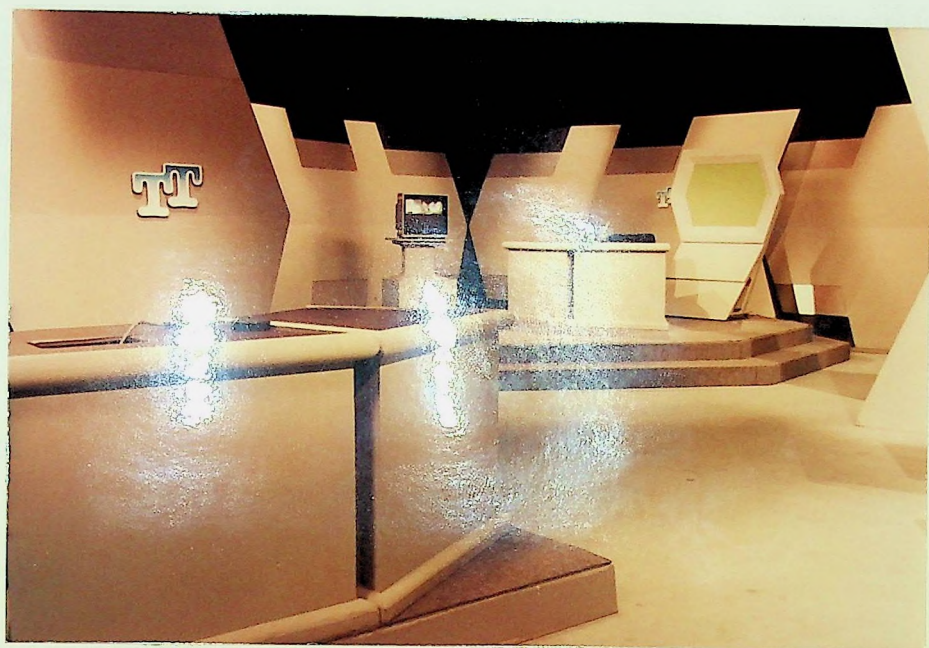


FIG. 11



FIG. 12

The actor may be seen in a contrived studio setting, following a scene in which real people take part in a true event. To the audience, this gives a link of reality. The actor in one programme may seem as real as the news reader who may have preceded him. The reality is carried over from one item to another. Taking the scene as already mentioned, if the scene of the true event is shown followed by the actor walking into a stylised or abstract setting. This juxtaposition can cause a sense of conflict or doubt in the mind of the viewer unless resolved. This problem of showing different kinds of material is quite a difficult task.

There is also the conflict between the contrived scenery, which is removed from reality, and the flesh and blood of the actors. This is a bridge which the set designer and the rest of the design team have to take into consideration. The aim of the design of the sets is to make the separate scenes gel so that the audience can follow the drama without any confusion or distraction.

These problems, which are associated with television, do not exist in the theatre. In the theatre, both actors and scenery are seen as a single image within the frame of the stage. The difference between the two media lie in what is expected and accepted by the audience. Conventions of acting and scenery on stage are traditional. Through the technology of camera work in television, close-ups bring the audience right into the acting area. This is called "re-instating the fourth wall"¹⁷ which the theatre removes.

Drama in the Theatre and on Television

In television there are various levels of realism. From the pure documentary programme to the very stylised performance of the opera, there are obvious differences to be considered. A dramatised documentary must be shot in a setting which is designed with absolute realism, just as the script is written in a realistic way, trying to reproduce sounds of every-day speech. When the degree of realism moves further away, when the style of writing and the performance of the actors also move from this realism, so too must the design of the setting, to compliment these factors. The set must be designed around the authenticity of the characters and script, rather than around the reproduction of real life in this instance.

One of the most difficult forms of drama, in terms of acceptance by the television audience, is opera which is written or adapted especially for television. In the theatre the conventions of music and drama are accepted. When an actor bursts into song, there is immediately a departure from reality, which is accepted by the audience. If this occurs in a stylised or abstract setting, then any clue of reality is removed. When an opera is written for television, it has a greater chance of success if it is set against a familiar scene. An example of this is Menotti's "Saint of Bleeker Street". (Fig 13) The setting is a New York tenement building. This touch of realism, the reality of the script and acting achieve this unity, where the singing does not seem out of place.

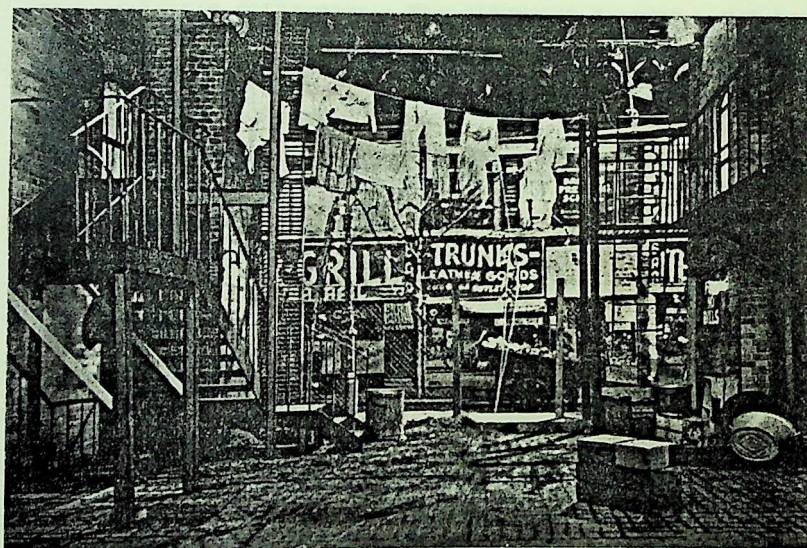


FIG.13

A similar problem also exists in television in the area of comedy, whether it is stand up comedy or situation. Here the problem also is how to deal with this move away from reality. The whole basis or source of entertainment in comedy depends on this departure from reality. As in opera, if the comedy takes place in a "comic setting"¹⁸, the majority of the impact is lost. There is no reality from which to move. It is the reality of the situation which is the comedy, the contrast between the comic actions of the actors and the casual, realistic setting. If you compare comedy and opera purely from a visual point of view, there is little difference. For different reasons, as I have mentioned, both need realistic settings. In the case of the opera, the setting serves to draw it closer to reality, and in comedy, the setting serves to set it further away or draw a comparison to reality.

The Technique of Contrived Realism

In the area of television drama over the past few years, there has been considerable development, with the help of the design team. Much of the writing that is done for television which is "conceived in terms of fantasy"¹⁸ depends of the realism of its setting for its effect. While it is necessary in these cases for real people to be set against a background of seemingly real objects, it is not always necessary to include all the real objects. One form of stylisation involves the omission of the objects. An example of this stylisation is where walls disappear, leaving the furniture; landscapes may vanish, leaving only one tree. "Real things may be taken out, but it is always real things, or apparently real things, that must remain".¹⁸ When a setting is designed based on simple but very significant detail, the imagination of the viewer is stimulated. The audience is drawn to these details by using techniques such as leaving areas in shadow, drawing the attention of the audience to the details seen in light.

Also, details placed in the foreground set the atmosphere of the whole set. Sometimes sound and lighting can instill so much of what we cannot see in the imagination. Attention to simple details in sound and lighting can be enough to produce an elaborate set in the mind of the viewer. When the actor leaves the set and we hear the sound of a closing door, his actions and movements can be transmitted purely in terms of sound, even though we know that anything beyond the closed door only exists in our imagination. This example can be backed by a statement which a young boy made to an audience research assistant when he was asked whether he preferred drama on television or on radio. He replied that "he preferred the radio, as he thought the scenery was much nicer".¹⁹ This statement speaks for itself.

In the area of drama, the design can only improve if it takes place in all areas such as writing, production and also setting. In the whole area of set design, the actual physical setting is the most important element. There are also many contributing factors, such as camera work, picture composition and lighting. The design of realistic scenery requires a lot of technical skill and experience from the designers involved. The studio must be planned in relation to the camera movement. The placing of the settings in relation to each other is also necessary. The drama designer must research and have knowledge of different periods, styles and places. The set designer is not only involved in the actual 'architecture' of a set, but also in the selection and arrangement of the various objects which make a set seem 'lived in' by the characters. This is called set dressing and requires the designer to have sensibility, feeling and understanding for the drama itself.

Stylised and Abstract Design

Television, as a medium, provides an escape from reality for its audience. A lot of television programmes are abstract in their content. This escape from reality is probably partly the reason why people watch television. There is a need in every one of us to enter a world beyond our reality, where all our desires and aspirations seem to exist. This form of design can be the most challenging and rewarding for a designer. There are two main areas of entertainment which require this style of design. They are music and variety. Of these two, variety presents the greater problem for the designer. These problems exist because of the large number of variety programmes which exist in comparison to other programmes.

As mentioned already, variety programmes consist of music hall type programmes, which take in dance routines, music, etc. There are two different approaches to the design of music programmes. There are the straight forward concert recitals, where the performer and the performance has to be clearly seen. These programmes usually have a setting of the studio background type. In contrast to this, there are the music programmes where the set is used to play a part in, or evoke, the character of the performance or the mood of the music itself. Music, when shown on television, is a challenge to both the producer and designer. There is always the difficulty of resolving the images created in the mind of the audience by the music and the visual images created by the scenery. Most music evokes images in one way or another. It is then necessary that the scenery or visual accompaniment should not confuse or disappoint the viewer.

It is said that "the ear is a relatively simple organ, by comparison to the eye, it is very sensitive and highly efficient and capable of transmitting an enormous amount of information to the brain".¹⁹ This statement explains what the little boy said about his preference for the scenery on the radio. For the true music lover, it is a fact that the television picture accompanying the music is almost always distracting. The eye dominates the ear in this case. Where the image created in the mind by the music conflicts with the picture on the screen, the "sensitivity of the ear"¹⁹ is reduced. This is partly true of pop videos today. It has become a fact that we see a song before we hear it.

The Presentation of Opera on Television

As I have mentioned, the presentation of opera on television causes difficulties. The main object of the presentation is the enjoyment of the music, but for reasons which I have referred to, there are obstacles in the way of this enjoyment. Most opera audiences in the theatre today go to hear a particular singer in the performance of a role with which they are already familiar. The television audience watching an opera is a completely different audience to that of the theatre-going audience. To some people, opera on television can be disappointing and sometimes strange. However, it would deprive the audience of a rich musical experience if opera was not transmitted on television, and would also deprive those who cannot afford the luxury of opera tickets of the experience. Opera is also an educational experience. With opera, like drama, the audience is stirred by the music and the energy of the performance. Opera, therefore, as a setting, has to be viewed by the designer in this way.

The best way to transmit an opera on television would be to take the television camera to the opera house, where there is a 'ready made' atmosphere, as opposed to taking the opera to the television studio, where the atmosphere can sometimes be slightly sterile. The television camera in the opera house should be used as the eye of a member of the audience. It should take in the whole stage, with occasional close up shots, simulating the use of an opera glass by a member of the audience. When opera is televised in a television studio, a careful approach is required. A familiar technique used for opera stage setting is the style of romantic realism.

When this style is properly used it brings out the glamour of the traditional opera. Classical ballet transmitted on television should be treated in the same way as opera, that is, broadcast for television as the theatre audience would see it. Presented in the correct way, the romanticism experienced in the theatre can still be experienced on television.

The Presentation of Variety on Television

Variety could also be said to be another area of musical programming. Its presentation causes similar problems to those of opera and ballet for television production. Variety travels even further from reality in content into a fantasy world of entertainment. In the traditional music hall settings, as in the theatre and opera house, conditions exist which are lacking in the television studio. The spontaneous response of the audience to the physical presence of the performers and stage is lost. In the television studio, the reconstruction of a stage loses all purpose. Again, these problems have to be handled completely differently in the studio. Variety is entertainment which is fresh and spontaneous.

Sometimes, it is live and has not been used before. In the music halls of long ago, a performer could appear in front of the public for years with the same repetoir. Today more fresh material is required from the performers on television. New material is constantly needed. Scripts, musical arrangements, dance routines all become stale in a very short time. No matter how imaginative and innovative the ideas may start out, it is not long before the source is played out. On television, the same variety programme may be televised weekly. Each variety programme has to find an original slant, and has to be given new life constantly, through versatile production and design.

Sometimes, shots are built around the personality of a well known performer, singer or comic. The designer must work with this idea to create an identity for a programme. The better and clearer the designer develops this identity, the more zest and individuality he can give to the show. There is always the problem for the designer of supplying a flow of new ideas in the shortest possible time. Television variety today must continue to be fresh and original. This is largely the responsibility of the set designer. He provides that all important visual link on which the producer can work. In this particular area, the set designer is under a lot of pressure to deal with this creative turnover.

CONCLUSION

In my discussion of set design in television I have focused on set design from behind the scenes and from behind the lens of the camera, to investigate and discover why set design is used or needed. In this investigation, I have gone back to the influences and sources to help in the understanding of the basic principals. Set design encompasses many techniques, such as lighting and camera work which breathe the necessary life into the units and furnishings known as sets. Television sets are not only based on physical properties, but also on the powers of perception and imagination.

There are certain conventions and styles mentioned which help the set designer determine the type of set he should use. With the continuous advancement in the areas of electronics and technology, the art and craft of set design must also move forward. The set designer has become not only an artist, but also a technician, who is required to be sensitive to the needs of both the producer and the audience. Even though set design is advancing with the years, the source from which all set design has originated - the theatre - need not necessarily be forgotten. The theatre, from its very roots, has influenced the design of the modern theatre and therefore television set design. Today, utilising these technological advancements, set designers are looking back at more simplistic types of setting, not trying to hide or disguise the fact that the programme is shot in a television studio.

This new use of settings utilises every aspect of the studio; the audience, the cameras, and the mechanics of the studio, to form the basis of the settings. This method has become very popular in live programmes which are fast moving in content and divert the camera from set to set in the one studio.

Sets are designed for the eye of the audience. That design begins in the imagination of the designer and ends up as an impression in the mind of the audience. The concern in the mind of the designer is with pictures.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig 1 Setting Designed for Black and White Television
- Fig 2 Theatre of Dionysos, Athens
- Fig 3 "Jo Maxi" Set, RTE
- Fig 4 "Jo Maxi" Set, RTE
- Fig 5 Studio 2, RTE
- Fig 6 "Geraldine O'Grady Show", RTE, 1980
- Fig 7 Drama, Using Spotlight Effect, RTE, 1979
- Fig 8 "Glenroe" Set, RTE, 1984
- Fig 9 Stylist Setting, RTE
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- Fig 11 "Today Tonight" Set, RTE
- Fig 12 "Halls Pictorial Weekly", RTE, 1978
- Fig 13 Menotti's "Saint of Bleeker Street" Opera, BBC

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