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/ CONSCIOUS DRIVING FORCES BEHIND PRODUCTION DESIGN

<u>*THESIS*</u>

A production designer is the architect of the film space, the creator of the illusion, authenticity, and mood of the film. We are creating an alternative reality for the short period of the shooting, an in-between frames presence, that makes possible the involvement of the audience into the story, even if the created visual world would be an abstract, improbable or unknown parallel reality.

The idea behind this dissertation originated from the need to pass my production designing skills, as efficiently as possible, to the Art Direction MA students of the University Of Theatre And Film Arts. In this text, I analyze the driving forces behind my artistic work, and find the answers for the formulated theoretical questions, from the perspective of my empirical knowledge. My goal is to formulate in an objective manner any generally valid directive that influences the work of a production designer. I intend the present writing to be an educational, inspiring, debate-provoking act.

The main focus of my dissertation is the conscious criteria behind the artistic work of a production designer. The second focus examinates the transfigurations of the designer in their cinematic work: safe and free navigation between genres, historical periods and styles, from design minimum to design maximum in the intensity of the cinematic visual approach.

In the introduction of my work, after *ars poetica,* I continue with *modus operandi*, specifying the team dynamics, discussing the autonomy of the designer, and formulating short definitions of art department members, as well as a detailed job description of the work of a production designer.

In the following chapter, *Teaching production design is to give roots and wings*, I claim that it is just partly possible to teach production design: its process, its structure, its context, the knowledge related to the designing techniques, and the analytic thinking related to the visuality in films. The knowledge of the other - artistic

- part is not teachable. However, it is possible to encourage, and it can be obtained through practice, being redefined in each project, together with the co-creators. The ultimate goal in the instruction of this special art form is the development of the student's own artistic personality, keeping in the meantime the flexibility that allows the continuous style changes at a high artistic standard.

Arriving at the core of the dissertation, I examine *The conscious driving forces behind production design*. My thesis is that the creative decisions are led by the following three principles: the requirements of the narration, the overall visual style of the film, and the appearance on the physical level materialized through shape, surface, and arrangement, and their subcategories. In order to get closer to the essence of cinematic production design, we need a closer examination of these topics.

In chapter *The binding and inspiring effect of the film dramaturgy on design*, my argument is that a strong and correct art direction is sending us messages, already before an actor starts to talk. The sets contain signals, transmitting unconscious codes to the audience that are not just illustrating, but also completing the story, its authenticity, and uniqueness. The source of these signs is the script itself, or references that have an inspiring effect on design. Spaces have function, aesthetics, symbolism - attributes that transmit dramaturgically required information. The authenticity is one of the most important quality indicators of production design, that completes and deepens the narrative. The designer is the constant juggler of these visual signs on film screen.

Later, in the chapter *The visual style of a film* I argue that the *novum* or at least a new film language is the directive that makes production designing an art and not a profession. The first and the most difficult objective of this work is to discover, create than fix the visual personality of a film, together with the director and cinematographer. This language constantly evolves during preparation, until it crystallizes. It is an all-encompassing organizing principle, that nearly all creative decisions should be subordinated to. Keeping the overall style during the entire film proves to be a difficult task to accomplish, since there are many locations and/or built sets that audience is seeing. The order of appearance of the sets has its rhythm and musicality - the visually surprising moments have to be carefully dosed for the audience.

The level of abstraction is a decisive forming force behind the visual set of rules of a film. Each oeuvre has to find its most efficient film language, that is compatible with the artistic vocabulary of its filmmakers. Memorable visual styles can be articulated in several ways.

Naturalist, realistic sets can be created based on accurate research – this is the typical cinematic approach that best facilitates the involvement of the spectator. During the style search of certain films, the filmmakers decide to create *stylized film* images, that emphasize the shapes that contain important messages and neglect the irrelevant ones. Another film language is *surrealism,* which combines the visual elements in a surprising, unusual, even absurd way, based on a dreamlike, irrational formula. The tendency towards particular and new sometimes leads the filmmakers towards creating *mixed genres*. The number of visual rule systems is infinite, but each one is supposed to strengthen the emotional truth of the story.

In the chapter *The criteria for designing the film space and choosing locations,* I examine the following questions: Are there rational driving forces that shape the intuitive artistic decision-making of a production designer, in the case of built stage sets as well as location shoots? What conscious parameters form the inner, intuitive images into impressive film images?

Based on my artistic experience, my thesis is that behind the decisions of a designer is the navigation between the following visual criteria: SHAPE, SURFACE (materiality, texture, repeat/pattern, color/tone/contrast), and ARRANGEMENT (rhythm, depth, density/silence/counterpoint, composition/graphic line leading/frame). In my opinion, the disinterest or precise decision-making in this coordinate system results in mediocrity or outstanding style in the work of a production designer.

The second center of gravity is chapter *The diversity and intensity of production design*, that discusses the flexibility and multilingualism that we need in this art and profession.

The part *The transfigurations of a production designer* is about the duty of a designer to subdue their work to several genres and film languages, even if these were chosen often without them, but, in the meantime, to keep their artistic integrity.

In *The level of force of production design*, I examine two extreme intensity levels: design at its minimum, and design at its maximum. The questions that I address here are: Is it necessary to hire a production designer in order to have a high-

quality feature film? Is the visual manipulation absolutely necessary in order to achieve cathartic effect during film watching? Can a film be visually appealing without sets? At the other end, when the visual expression is at its maximum, I explore how it causes a stronger impression than the story itself.

Finally, in *Iconic film images –essentialized visuality,* I argue that it is not just the imagery of the whole film that transmits the core of the story. On the contrary, it is possible to have decisive experience through the perception of a single iconic film image.

Production design for films is a finely tuned art, that produces conscious and subconscious effects that are hard to grasp in words or theoretical descriptions. Hence, I support my arguments with examples of images from remarkable international films as well as visually of films designed by me. This way I give a chance to the visceral understandings, beyond the verbal analysis of cinematic imagery. Suggesting, perceiving, making impressions, creating feelings through visual approach is not a precise science. It is an instinctive, difficult process that can be much better understood from a few images rather than from definitions. Through these examples and designing criteria, I would like to teach critical thinking and analytic attitude. Students will instinctively adopt this mindset when watching and interpreting films, continuously learning from each seen film.

This dissertation aims to address not only academic audience but all those who are interested in understanding the visual side of film production and perception. First of all, I would like to address those who study this art/profession, my students or even those who play a different role in a film crew (directors, cinematographers, screenwriters, producers) but are in connection with the work of a production designer and, last but not least also for the audience who wants to gain deeper knowledge of the mechanisms and criteria of the creation of visuality.

The greatest difficulty in my targeted goal is the fact that we are dealing with multiple transmissions: I try to capture and formulate with linguistic methods the functioning of the visuality of an emotionally charged narrative. I hope that, despite this obstacle, language formulation will enhance awareness of the subject. Thus, it will deepen and optimize creativity.