



Art Direction as World Creation: Between 18th-Century England and the Dystopian Future of “Mad Max”

Art Direction as World-Building: Between the England of the Eighteenth Century and the Dystopian Future of “Mad Max”

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes art direction as a tool for creating film universes, observing its role in constructing historical verisimilitude and the setting of dystopian futures. The films *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), by Joe Wright, an adaptation of the novel by Jane Austen, and *Mad Max* (1979), by George Miller, the starting point of the post-apocalyptic saga. The objective is to understand how settings, objects and costumes operate as visual narrators, articulating social, cultural and psychological aspects of the characters and their contexts.

Keywords: Art direction; Costume design; *Mise-en-scène*; Verisimilitude; Cinema.

ABSTRACT: This article analyzes art direction as a narrative strategy in cinema, focusing on its role in constructing diegetic worlds across historical and dystopian settings. Joe Wright's *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) demonstrates the importance of costume, set design, and props in establishing historical verisimilitude and social hierarchy, while George Miller's *Mad Max* (1979) explores the creation of a pre-apocalyptic universe through stylized objects, vehicles, and landscapes. By drawing on theoretical approaches to *mise-en-scène* and film production design (Xavier, Bordwell, Sobchack, Higson), the study argues that art direction transcends visual support, functioning as a central element of cinematic dramaturgy.

Keywords: Art direction; *Mise-en-scène*; Verisimilitude; Custom; Cinema.

INTRODUCTION

Art direction is an essential dimension of cinema, as it organizes the visual elements responsible for constructing the diegetic universe. Beyond aesthetics, it's a work of meaning: sets, costumes, objects, and color palettes contribute to the narrative as much as dialogue or performances.

According to Ismail Xavier (2005), art direction integrates *mise-en-scène* as "scene writing," in which each visual detail communicates meaning. Bordwell (1997) emphasizes that the viewer perceives the film world as believable when aesthetic coherence is supported by choices that dialogue with the narrative's times, spaces, and characters.

By analyzing "Pride and Prejudice" and "Mad Max," this article proposes a contrast: on the one hand, the effort to historically reconstruct 18th-century England; on the other, the creation of a pre-apocalyptic world that blends elements of *western*, science fiction, and action.

HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

The film portrays England and society in the 18th century, so the art direction, costumes and hair design play a very important role in the work, as they have the weight of providing the viewer with the character of verisimilitude of the work.

"Pride and Prejudice" was filmed on real locations in England. Only one set was built: the Meryton Assembly Hall. It was used in the scene introducing the characters of Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, and Miss Caroline Bingley because assembly halls like the one used in the scene are either very difficult to find or no longer exist in England.

There are 5 main locations in the film: the Bennet, Bingley, and Darcy residences (Pemberley),

Rosings (Lady Catherine's residence) and Mr. Collins' house, near Rosings. All of these settings were used to set not only the film but also the people who lived there. For example: the Bingley residence, Netherfield Park, which I show in the two images below. In the film, the Bingleys
They are rich people, Mr. Bingley earns 5 thousand pounds a year, which at the time was considered a lot of money. Soon, he would live very comfortably, having homes in the countryside and in London. Netherfield Park was his country home, but even though it was considered a rural home, it was beautifully decorated, with many bedrooms, living rooms, a garden, and woodland.

The first image shows a room used after meals, where the characters would go to read, write letters, talk, play, and entertain themselves. The film not only portrays the era, but also its customs. The artistic elements recreate the entire context of this period, with the chandeliers, wallpaper and wall paintings, and furniture. The painting and easel, for example, are present in the scene because this painting was likely being painted by Miss Bingley. The furniture, the colors—everything worked to not only create the setting, but also to differentiate the living standards of each group, the family nucleus, based on their power.
economic.



The second image is still of Netherfield Park, where a gala ball is being held. The image lacks many artistic elements, as in the first, where we can see more objects, but we notice the colors, the wallpaper, the chandeliers, and the painting on the wall, which convey the film's time period. This also includes the main and secondary characters, who differ greatly from the setting of the other ball shown in the film. In this second ball, the setting, class, and education are evident in every detail. The costumes are more refined and special, the hair is more styled, and there are army officers and servants present. This is in addition to the decor and the setting, where it is being held, as this ball is private. Meanwhile, the first was a public ball, and the entire community could attend. Therefore, we clearly perceive the social and financial differences between the three characters introduced and the others at the ball. The people in the community, including the Bennet family, even though they are more beautiful than the rest, are shown to be disheveled, sweaty, and overly extroverted. Their actions are somewhat exaggerated, further emphasizing their differences. Regarding the setting, the colors used are much stronger, the place is crowded, and even though it's large, it's overcrowded. It's a dingier setting, contrasting sharply with Netherfield Hall. The crowded setting not only further distinguishes and highlights the differences between the characters, but also symbolizes how the main character, Mr. Darcy, feels: suffocated, which further accentuates his prejudice.

Netherfield Park

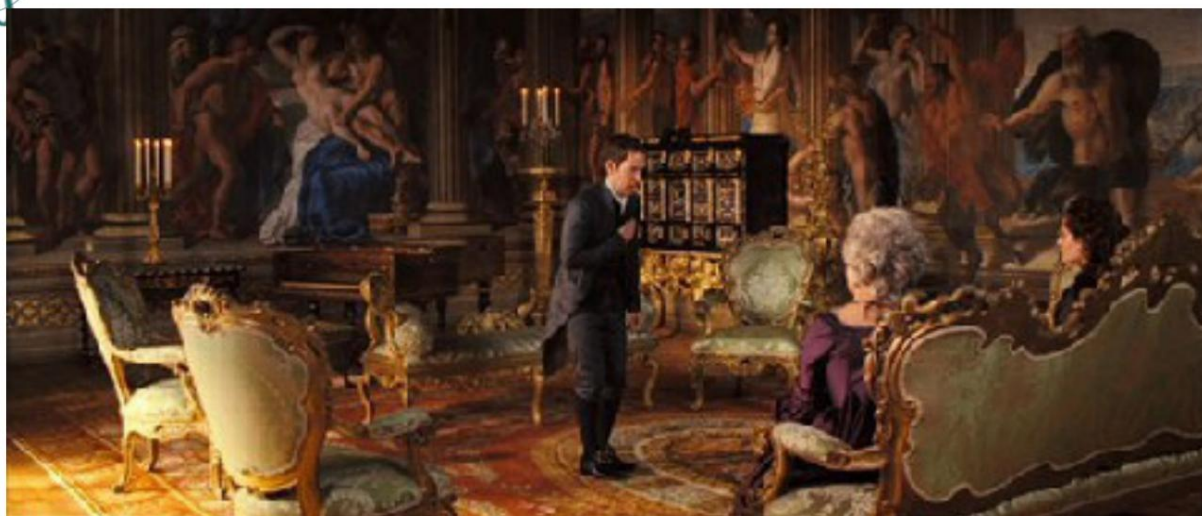


Public Ball - Assembly Hall



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Another important setting is the Bennet house, where the five unmarried sisters, each with diverse temperaments, and their parents live. This set is smaller than the Bingley residence and less opulent. It's "simpler" compared to the other set; the colors are bolder, the furniture is simpler and darker, and the chandeliers are too. The objects in the set are less exuberant, more worn, aged, and worn-looking, lending greater credibility to the setting, suggesting that these people have lived there for years and that this furniture has actually been used. We sense the lived experience in the setting.



The other settings are even more exuberant than Netherfield Park. Rosings and Pemberley are very sumptuous residences, rich in every detail. In Rosings, although the colors are dark, like wine and green, there is a lot of gold, many paintings on the walls. The canvases are large, oil paintings, the furniture is extremely austere, and the setting is dark, which personifies the authoritarian character of the property's owner, Lady Catherine. The entire setting is as ornate as she is, with a heavier, yet classy, appearance.

and luxurious.



Pemberley is Mr. Darcy's estate, larger than Rosings. It's also lush, but much more classic. The house's tones and furnishings are much lighter, and the room is filled with light, which has a golden quality. It's a clean, uncluttered space ; even with many objects, it doesn't feel crowded or suffocating; quite the opposite, everything is perfectly proportioned. The setting symbolizes the character's wealth, class, and moral demeanor. Even though he may be marked by prejudice or pride, he is ultimately honorable, ethical, upright, responsible, and transparent, yet demanding.



The setting of Mr. Collins's house is the simplest of all. It is the residence of Lady Catherine's vicar, a small, unassuming house with simple, light-colored furniture, but one that fills Mr. Collins with pride. Since the residence was not built by Mr. Collins, it does not clearly symbolize him. However, as seen by Lady Catherine,



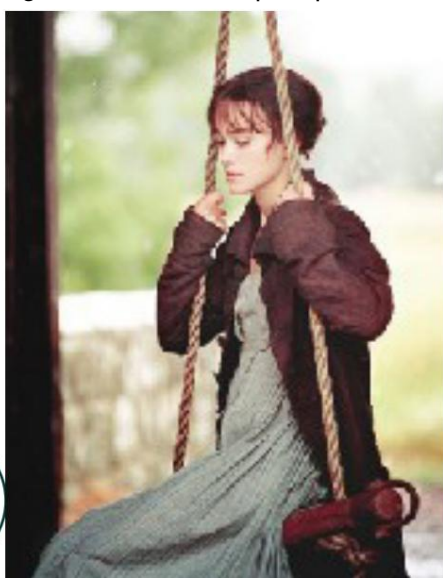
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"Pride and Prejudice," being a period film, requires a lot of contemporary art , sometimes more than movies direction, since it is dated, set in the 18th century. So the sets, objects, color palettes,

Costumes and accessories must be appropriate to the period in which the work is set, and it is these, along with the elaborate dialogue, that give the viewer the character of verisimilitude of the work. And so they receive it, as something ancient, from another era, but real.



The main character is Elizabeth Bennet, the protagonist of the work "Pride and Prejudice", by Joe Wright. She's the second of five sisters. She's not the prettiest, but she's the most intelligent and witty. However, that doesn't prevent her from making mistakes, as she's vain. This vanity isn't about her beauty, but about her intelligence, and she's quite proud when her vanity is hurt.



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Her costumes, of all the characters, are one of the simplest, with dark colors, but not somber, yet they create the impression of wearability. Dark colors because they get less dirty. The cuts are simple, not elaborate, in contrast to those of the richer characters. They have the appearance of wear and tear, of much use.

We perceive the lived experience in the clothing. The bold colors also symbolize the character's personality, which is strong and opinionated. She doesn't allow herself to be influenced, drawing her own conclusions. The costume also portrays her spirit as a fearless, practical, and action-oriented woman. She doesn't wait around like women of the time. She doesn't sit around painting, embroidering, drawing, or playing the piano, nor does she behave and dress with the sole purpose of finding a husband. She rolls up the skirts of her dress and walks miles to meet her sick sister at Mr. Bingley's house.



The costume below is from the first ball. The character wears a green dress, almost devoid of detail, simply cut, and made of a more rustic, dull fabric, which contrasts with the character to her right, her older sister, Jane Bennet, whose costume is more elaborate, with more sophisticated fabric and shine. She represents a more romantic character. It also contrasts with the character to her left, Charlotte Lucas, who comes from a less wealthy family, but whose dress has more detail than Elizabeth's. She is the oldest of the three. Intelligent, "less" pretty, and still single—her greatest concern, since the older she gets, the more difficult it is to get married in that era. The three characters have different characteristics and personalities, and this is symbolized in their costumes.



The second costume is the dress from the Netherfield Park ball, the only time we see Elizabeth wearing a more elaborate costume, with details and finer fabric. She also has a hairstyle different from what she wears throughout most of the play. However, it still reflects her personality. For example, she doesn't wear gloves, one of the few main characters not to wear gloves, which symbolizes her constant contact with reality. She knows that these are sporadic nights, that her reality isn't like a ball, a night of dreams, where everyone can be a prince or princess.



This moment also symbolizes that the character, behind all her intelligence and wit, can also be a beautiful woman when she so desires. However, the character doesn't seek acceptance for her beauty camouflaged behind her worn, simple, and dark-toned clothes. She wants to be accepted for her intelligence, for not being frivolous or vain, like her younger sisters. She challenges everyone around her, regardless of their social or economic status.





Elizabeth Bennet's costume, besides symbolizing her personality and actions, also serves to characterize the time period of the work, which is set in the 18th century.

Conclusion

The film "Pride and Prejudice" (2005), directed by Joe Wright, is a paradigmatic example of the importance of art direction in period adaptations. Setting is not merely an aesthetic exercise, but a way to lend verisimilitude to Jane Austen's universe.

The chosen locations—the Bennet, Bingley, Darcy (Pemberley), Rosings, and Mr. Collins's residence—visually convey the social stratification of the time. Netherfield Park, the Bingley country home, exudes wealth and comfort, with decorated drawing rooms, gardens, and sophisticated furnishings. The Bennet home, while welcoming, reveals simplicity, bolder colors, and worn furniture, suggesting years of continuous use.

This distinction not only sets the narrative stage but also visually conveys the social differences that structure relationships between characters. As Higson (2003) observes, period cinema uses the materiality of space and objects to dramatize social and economic hierarchies.

The characterization of the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, is particularly revealing. Her costume is simple, in dark tones, with sloppy cuts, in contrast to more affluent characters. The rusticity of the fabric and the lack of shine symbolize her practical and independent personality, contrary to the feminine conventions of the time. Elizabeth doesn't devote herself to embroidery or playing the piano; instead, she walks miles to care for her ailing sister, lifting the hem of her dress to avoid getting stuck in the mud.

At the Netherfield ball, the only time she wears a more elaborate outfit, Elizabeth maintains her authenticity by refusing to wear gloves, unlike the others. This detail anchors her in reality, suggesting that, although she moved among aristocratic circles, she was not entirely seduced by them. The costume, thus, articulates subjectivity and social context, conveying the character's resistance to the expectations imposed on women.

PRE-APOCALYPSE IN MAD MAX

George Miller's 1979 film "Mad Max" is the first of four films in which the main character Max Rockatansky is introduced. The film's settings still present it as a "normal" but pre-apocalyptic world. Marked by the presence of gangs that disregard law and order. They are transgressors, represented by their costumes, hair, and makeup. They are stylized bikers who ride their motorcycles and terrorize cities, seeking to steal fuel and torment the population, using violence against people. The motorcycles they ride symbolize transgression, the freedom of not following the rules. They make their own rules and laws and exploit the danger they provoke.

Max is a police officer, married with a son. Until the end of the book, he tries in every way not to cross the line of danger and madness, however he fails, which begins the whole saga.



Cars are very important objects in the film, as are motorcycles. In addition to representing the police officers, they use turbocharged and modified models to face danger, in blue and yellow colors. Each officer's vehicle has a code name, such as "Pursuer," for example.



There's the black car that belongs to the corporation and is the most powerful and fastest. The whole story begins with the theft of one of these cars by a member of the biker gang and ends with another, when Max takes it without permission and decides to take justice into his own hands. Cars, especially black ones, confer status on the characters. These aren't the only vehicles in the film; we see several vehicles and motorcycles, and they all play a vital role in the film—they're characters.



The settings are somewhat reminiscent of a Western: the abandonment, the dusty streets, the roadside businesses, the train tracks. There's also the apparent desert surrounding the roads, where most of the film takes place, and the clear conflict between the law and the "criminal."



However, there's the setting of Max's house, near the beach. It's a more bucolic setting, but the objects in the house lend a somewhat confusing air to the story, as it's completely different from the arid landscape of the city or the roads. The objects present in the location also don't reveal any explicit personal characteristics, for example. Perhaps this indicates the confusion between the two worlds he lives in: that of a police officer and that of a husband, in which he ends up choosing neither, as he becomes a "deserter," a solitary champion, after the death of his family and the attempted murder of his partner.



The settings, besides being marked by considerable destruction, are also somewhat exaggerated, bordering on the implausible, giving us the impression that this is a fictional world, from the near future, but not futuristic, despite the presence of silver objects. This first George Miller film is still a world under construction, developing into what will become the world of "Mad Max." Later, in the following two films, we see this world built and ratified in Miller's vision.





Conclusion

In George Miller's "Mad Max" (1979), the art direction constructs a universe that blends recognizable elements of the present with traces of social disintegration and imminent collapse. It's a "world under construction," which anticipates the more desolate settings of later sequels.

Costumes and props are crucial to marking this transition. Biker gangs, with their stylized clothing, extravagant hair, and makeup, symbolize transgression and a lack of order.

Their modified, aggressive motorcycles are extensions of their violent identity. The police officers, including the protagonist Max, use souped-up cars and sharp uniforms, reinforcing the tension between law and order.

Vehicles, in particular, take on almost character-like roles. The black car, stolen by the gang and later taken by Max, represents power and status. As Sobchack (1999) observes, objects in science fiction and action films often go beyond their utilitarian function, becoming symbols of identity and conflict.

The settings also reveal this hybrid construction: deserted highways, roadside bars, and small towns evoke the Western, with its frontier atmosphere and latent violence. At the same time, the aridity of the environment and the presence of metallic and silver objects signal a futuristic aesthetic. Max's house, near the beach, contrasts with the arid spaces, but its objects reveal no striking personal characteristics, suggesting the fragmentation of his identity between the roles of police officer and husband.

The exaggeration present in some scenarios borders on the implausible, reinforcing the notion that this is a fictional world, a threshold between a recognizable present and a dystopian future. This visual hybridity is the initial hallmark of the "Mad Max" universe, which in later sequels will consolidate itself as a post-apocalyptic imaginary.

Final considerations

The comparison between "Pride and Prejudice" and "Mad Max" highlights the versatility of art direction in creating film worlds. In the former, the challenge is to reconstruct a historical past, giving it verisimilitude and social coherence through costumes, sets, and objects. In the latter, it involves imagining a disintegrating near future, in which sets and vehicles become symbols of violence and the breakdown of order.

Both cases confirm that art direction is more than a visual medium: it is a constitutive part of cinema's dramaturgy. It constructs meanings, translates subjectivities, and creates atmospheres that situate the viewer in time and space. As Xavier (2005) points out, every detail of the *mise-en-scène* is writing: a form of



visually narrate what dialogue and action cannot express.

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