

Spatial Storytelling:

A Study on the Significance of Set Design in
Shaping Film Atmosphere

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Interior Design BA (Hons) Dissertation

January 2024

Word Count: 6483

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Key Terms

- **Dressing:** The arrangement of furnishings, props and other elements within the set (Barnwell, 2004). In this dissertation the word dressing will be utilized in the context of enhancing the space for a given film.
- **Mise-en-scène:** Is a French term that indicates 'putting into the scene' as well as referring to the way the designer has 'arranged all visual components to set the scene' (Shorter, 2012). This term is similarly defined by Barnwell (2004) as the 'composition of elements in the frame'. This dissertation will use mise-en-scène in the context of what is seen on screen.
- **Production designer:** As described by Barnwell (2004) the production designer is considered the head of the art department, who is responsible for creating the visual concept for a given film or television production. Throughout the dissertation, this is the definition that will be implemented to production designer.
- **Set:** The set can be described as 'anywhere used as the background for a scene' (Barnwell, 2004). It can be understood as the compilation of the scenery and dressing that creates the setting of a film. This definition is the basis of my discussion of the set in this dissertation.
- **Studio:** Refers to a facility where the production of film takes place. It contains several stages and a back lot where sets can be built and a water tank where aquatic scenes can be shot; as well as housing other relevant resources such as: 'production and art department offices, actors' dressing rooms, cutting rooms, equipment hire companies, visual effects companies, construction facilities and paint shops' (Barnwell, 2004). The studio discussed throughout this dissertation will align with this definition.

Introduction

Theme

In the realm of filmmaking, every element is meticulously designed and crafted to breathe life into a story. From costumes and makeup to sound and lighting, each component plays a crucial role in the overall cinematic experience. Yet, there exists an often-underestimated facet that holds immense potential to influence the mood and atmosphere of a film - the set design.

At its most fundamental level, sets provide a film with its unique visual aesthetic, incorporating geographical, historical, social and cultural contexts and associated material specifics, along with the physical backdrop that helps shape the narrative progression of the film (Bergfelder, Harris, Street, 2007, p.11). Film scenery is not simply decoration, it is usually a construction that represents what inhabited spaces would look like in real life (Barsacq, 1978). Yet the practice of set design presents a paradox where the set elements are visible but invisible in our viewing experience, because ultimately their invisibility plays a key role in our enjoyment of how the narrative unfolds (Barnwell, 2017, p.5). By crafting an immersive environment, it not only supports the narrative but also significantly enhances the viewer's engagement and emotional connection with the film's world.

Objectives

In television and film sets, the production designer works with the director to develop the settings where the actions of the characters will take place. This dissertation will delve into the nuanced art of set design, unearthing its profound impact on the cinematic narrative. The aim of this research is to argue how set design is of large importance to the production of a film and how it is an integral part of the film-watching experience. The setting of a film has the ability to provide

immense amounts of information to the viewer in a discreet way. Good set design is not meant to be exact replications of reality but it rather aims to add to the story of the film, give information to the viewer about the character without having to describe it in so many words (Barnwell, 2004, p.21). From the onset giving information on the character's personality and behavior, with its mere appearance it can replace dull verbal explanation and descriptions (Barsacq, 1978, p.125).

Significance of the study

When the set design is wrong, it could become the element that garners the most attention and could distract from the story being told. By dissecting the role of set design in establishing the atmosphere of a film, this dissertation can shine a spotlight on the skill and artistry involved in this critical aspect of filmmaking. Furthermore, it can provide valuable insights for future filmmakers, critics, and film scholars, enhancing their understanding of how effective set design can elevate a film's narrative and emotional impact.

Structure

The structure of this dissertation includes a literature review where context for the topic is being discussed. Looking at the existing text and prominent sources in the field of set design this will provide background on the relevant taxonomies and theories presented by scholars. In the following chapter two case studies, *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996), will be used to explore the distinct aspects of storytelling through set design.

A meticulous analysis will be conducted on the key elements that make up the set design, such as the use of a real location or constructed set, spatial composition and color schemes from both films and how they come together to create a recognizable set. This research will not only assess these elements but will also

evaluate their influence on the overall mood and atmosphere within specific scenes. The study aims to understand how the implementation and meticulous design choices alter and benefit the moving pictures. Beyond the elements and their impact, this research will also unravel the creative intentions and decisions made by the filmmakers throughout the process.

Lastly, a comparative analysis will be carried out to identify the similarities and differences in the set design approaches employed in both features.

Literature Review

Background

While delving into the topic of set design's contribution to the film's atmosphere, it was apparent that this practice is not held at the same standard of visibility and recognition as other areas of filmmaking like directing, screenwriting and acting. Aspects such as the actors and the screenplay can be celebrated and contributed to specific people but recognizing the work that goes into creating the atmosphere of a movie needs to be further analyzed to truly grasp (Barsacq, 1978).

However, there is a growth in interest in the area and academic research that aims to highlight the importance and the contribution of the production designer to the moving image (Barnwell, 2004; Ede, 2010; Shorter, 2012).

Jane Barnwell, senior film lecturer at the University of Westminster, is a notable advocate for this as proved in her books *Production Design: Architects of the Screen* (2004) and *Production Design for Screen: Visual Storytelling for Film and Television* (2017). Both texts are relevant to the study and will be further discussed.

Historical Context

Books such as Leon Barsacq's (1978) *Caligari's Cabinet and Other Grand Illusions: A History of Film Design* and Edward Carricks' (1948) *Designing for Moving Pictures* were some of the first sources to address the relevance of set design as a 'dramatic element' and 'its decisive role in the creation of ambiance, or atmosphere'. Barsacq delves deep into the history and origins of set design, while Carrick provides a step-by-step guide on how set design is implemented in films. Barsacq's work holds greater relevance to the research being undertaken, and therefore, it will be cited more extensively throughout the dissertation. Similarly, it is worth noting the previously mentioned Barnwell (2004) publication provides a contemporary perspective with historical overviews and case studies on the production designer's role.

Collectively, these sources recognize Louis Lumière and Georges Méliès as key figures in the development of film set design (Barsacq, 1978; Carrick, 1941; Barnwell, 2004). Lumière pioneered documentary film by recording real-life events (Barnwell, 2004, p.4). Méliès, on the other hand, emphasized the creation of artificial sets, contributing to the concept of studio sets (Barsacq, 1978, p.5) and the beginnings of dramatic fiction on screen (Barnwell, 2004, p.4). The dissimilar methods introduced by the French inventors is crucial to comprehending the evolution of film and set design.

Taking its beginnings from theatre, the initial sets created by Méliès consisted of painted backgrounds, creating an illusion of depth and perspective through a stationary camera (Barsacq 1978, p.6). As camera technology advanced, the need for more adaptable settings arose, leading to the creation of larger studios and complex constructed sets that provided multiple perspectives (Barnwell, 2004, p.5). This translated into film constructions showcasing a closer resemblance to existing buildings and structures.

Juan Antonio Ramírez (2004) in his book *Architecture for the Screen: A Critical Study of Set Design in Hollywood's Golden Age* explores how production design replicates architecture. He categorizes the six properties that distinguish set design from architecture as: 'fragmentary', altering size and proportion, rarely 'orthogonal' but rather 'hyperbolic' and 'flexible'. These characteristics suggest that set design prioritizes the way structures appear on camera, while architecture must also consider practicality.

The film set that started simply as canvas painted to create an illusion, needed to evolve to keep the sense of realism and authenticity. Therefore, it can be recognized that due to the increased need for realism the practice of three-dimensional backgrounds was introduced. Presently, the practice of set design relates more greatly to architecture. Nonetheless, while architecture demands functionality and longevity, set design can prioritize visual aesthetics without the same functional considerations required for real-world applications.

Filming on Location vs. Studio

During production, the designer often has to make a key decision, to shoot in real locations or to construct sets in the studio (Barnwell, 2004, p.14). Filming in a studio allows for control in all aspects, as opposed to on location where several elements would be unpredictable. Not only is the use of a studio a way to control things like lighting and weather but it has the added benefit of the potential of being specifically stylized for the film. It creates a singular atmosphere that helps blend the visuals and the emotions of the characters and the story, contributing to the overall impact of the film (Barnwell, 2004, p.15). The *Barbie* (2023) set is a current example fitting this argument. The majority of the film was shot in the Warner Bros. Studios, where the production team brought the world of "Barbie Land" to life (Silver, 2023). The studio environment allowed for a high degree of control in terms

of set design and atmosphere, contributing to the creation of a unique and stylized world that perfectly complements the story and characters.

Production Designer Sarah Greenwood explained that to make Barbie Land feel 'truly doll-like' they scaled down all the rooms by 23% to make the actors in the film look slightly oversized (Silver, 2023). This level of manipulation would not have been achievable in a real-world setting. This strategic use of scale contributed to the captivating nature and helped to communicate to the audience the doll-ness of the characters. At the same time, it highlighted the stylization and visual elements of the film.

Thus, the discussion of the work of Lumière (outdoors reality) and Méliès (indoor construction) comes back into focus.

As proposed by Barsacq (1978, p.122), there are two main reasons the use of real interiors would be favored: to provide absolute authenticity and using existing structure at minimum expense. During the movements of Italian Neo-Realism (1940s) and the French New Wave (1950s), the use of natural environments was heavily favored, while the use of constructed sets was seen as too artificial and fake (Barnwell, 2004, p.14). It can be then understood that the utilization of natural settings offers authenticity and a sense of realism that could not be replicated in studios.

Simultaneously, it is relevant to address that shooting on location imposes constraints. Namely, as articulated in an interview by Stuart Craig "in the real world there is too much conflicting information" (Barnwell, 2004, p.14). Meaning that choosing the right location is essential due to how the viewer might interpret what is already in existence on the site.

Nevertheless, it can then be argued that 'from a strictly dramatic point of view, only the choice of setting is important' (Barsacq, 1978, p.122). As the technical aspects of determining between shooting on location or shooting in a studio are essential to consider, it is equally crucial to factor in the feature's visual style. The story might not be altered by the choice of a real location or a reconstructed set, but the film's look will ultimately be influenced by it.

Sets as Narrative

Two influential texts that focus on the way design conceptualizes narrative are Charles Affron and Mirella Jona Affron's (1995) *Sets in Motion: Art Direction and Film Narrative*, considered groundbreaking for its production of criteria to analyze the extent in which set interacts with the narrative (Bergfelder, Harris, Street, 2007, p.18) and Charles Tashiro's (1998) *Pretty Pictures: Production Design and the History Film*, where he criticizes the Affrons' primary argument.

The Affrons' theory consists of analyzing the levels of design intensity applied to the set. They approached this hypothesis by creating five categories: Denotation, Punctuation, Embellishment, Artifice, Narrative. These five degrees start with denotation understood as complete transparency by depicting spaces that the audience is familiar with and creating realism that way. Punctuation highlights specific narrative moments. Embellishment describes intentional unfamiliar aesthetics. Artifice is described as sets that are highly metaphoric. While the final category of 'design intensity' is the set as narrative, where the set dominates in a way that it is inseparable from the narrative, it can be related to films with very restricted sets. In this context, the Affrons (1995) suggests that the set is an active participant in the storytelling and identifies its degree of intervention by the lowest (denotation) to the highest (narrative) level.

Tashiro (1998) introduces his taxonomy based on Christian Norberg-Schulz's theory of emotional circles. It results in seven primary circles: costume, makeup, and jewelry; objects; furniture; the liveable: the house/the set; the walkable: streets; landscapes and cosmic space. Similarly, to the Affrons' taxonomy, Tashiro's assigns levels to the circles with costume, makeup and jewelry being the closest to the 'self' and expanding to the last level of cosmic space. His work is crucial because it extends the Affrons' arguments and pushes the idea that the work of the production designer may go beyond what the narrative intends.

Tashiro's methodology deviates from the Affrons' narrative-centric classification, as he is more interested in the significance of recognizing how audiences form emotional connections and interpretations of spatial elements presented on the screen. His viewpoint takes into account the wider influence of design on the spectators, discerning that objects and spaces come with personal associations that go beyond their function of progressing the plot.

Subsequently, in her book *Production Design for Screen: Visual Storytelling in Film and Television* (2017), Barnwell introduces the methodology called Visual Concept Analysis. This methodology consists of the creation of a Visual Concept by the production designer after thorough interpretation of the script (Barnwell, 2017, p.57). To visualize the script and aiming to enhance and heighten aspects of the story, characters and atmosphere, five categories are employed: Space, In and Out, Light, Color and Set Decoration. Barnwell's approach offers a middle ground between the Affrons and Tashiro's classification systems. It emphasizes the importance of a film's script and narrative, integrating various elements to convey the story effectively. Unlike the Affrons' method, Barnwell's analysis is more precise, and it equally diverges from Tashiro's by not treating the categories as isolated entities, but rather linking them closely to the narrative.

Methodology

To answer the question of how set design contributes to the atmosphere created in film, the methodology employed in this research is the use of case studies. The utilization of this approach is supported by Ramírez (2004) identifying the fragmentary, yet hyperbolic and equally ephemeral characteristics of set design. As film sets are made and built to be portrayed in a specific way through the camera, what is portrayed on screen provides the most controlled form of study.

The following chapters comprise in-depth analysis of two features highly acclaimed for their contribution to the Scottish film industry and their unique set design: *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996). After covering both films, I will delve into a comparative analysis between them. These films are particularly suited for this study due to their distinctive visual styles and their effective use of set design to evoke specific emotions and thematic resonance. Furthermore, the existence of a common director and production designer in both these films enhances the intricacy of the analysis. This will allow for a more nuanced examination of the diverse approaches employed by the same creative team in response to distinct narrative contexts.

It is important to acknowledge that this study has limitations with respect to its exclusive focus on two films. This could potentially introduce a bias where the findings might not be applicable to a larger range of films or genres. Additionally, as the films were released within similar time frames, it may fail to capture the evolving filmmaking trends and shifting expectations of audiences.

Case Study 1: *Shallow Grave* (1994)

Shallow Grave (1994) is a dark comedy thriller that acts as Danny Boyle's directorial debut. The film follows three young professionals in Edinburgh: Alex (Ewan McGregor), David (Christopher Eccleston) and Juliet (Kerry Fox), who are looking for a flatmate to take over the fourth room in their flat. After a series of interviews where they show unwarranted cruelty towards potential candidates, they decide upon Hugo (Keith Allen). On his first night in the flat, Hugo dies of an overdose leaving a large sum of money. The main characters find it and decide to keep it for themselves, and bury the body. The story continues as the reality of their actions unravels. It works as a captivating exploration of human nature, greed, and the consequences of moral ambiguity.

The Constructed Set

When talking about the setting of the film, Producer Andrew Macdonald (1994) explained: "He [Screenwriter, John Hodge] was very conscientious, unlike most script writers, that the film had to be made very cheaply so he'd set most of it in one location, a flat."

The choice of shooting on location or constructing the setting for the film, was of major importance as the production would spend 'about two-thirds' (Boyle, 1994) of the time filming in the flat itself.

As Production Designer Kave Quinn (1994) discusses, even as they spent time trying to find an Edinburgh flat, in the New Town area that would fit their requirements, they ultimately realized that "it was going to be practically impossible to find the right flat". It can be argued that real interiors oftentimes do not lend the architectural qualities needed for filming. As Barsacq (1978, p.123) posits, techniques such as 'lowering the ceiling', 'bringing columns closer together' and even 'changing the angle of a wall' will be incorporated to allow the camera to

showcase as many key characteristics of a given setting as possible. What looks good on screen might be entirely different in real life. Which can be proved by Ramírez's (2004) discussion of the difference between real architecture and architecture in film. Architecture needs to be functional, while a filmed or photographed set lasts only as long as the production itself (Shorter, 2012).

Thereby, the decision to use a constructed set for *Shallow Grave* is substantiated by not only insights provided by the production team but additionally the need for a space capable of fitting the necessities of filming that could not be provided by any existing flats. The deliberate enlargement of the rooms by 'about a third' (Quinn, 1994), attests to the filmmakers' commitment to produce a space that would optimize the cinematic experience. Enlarging the rooms helps in facilitating the filmmaking process but it equally allows for more dynamic positioning of the camera and characters within the set. This results in a nuanced spatial dynamic and fosters a more complex *mise-en-scène* that would not otherwise be possible in a standard-sized location.

Furthermore, in a narrative like *Shallow Grave* where the relationship dynamics between characters and the tension created in particular relationships play a principal role, the spatial separation is an indispensable tool for storytelling. All these elements add to the visual impact created in the film.

Implementing Color

The atmosphere of *Shallow Grave* is profoundly shaped by the nuanced and deliberate artistic decisions of its stylistic representation for the flat.

"And what's interesting now about looking at the film is that what you gain from the exterior world is very little and that's a very curious feeling because you're making a film to be shown on a big screen people want

landscapes, they want air and in fact actually what gives this its landscape and its air is the inside of this flat really.” (Boyle, 1994)

As expressed by Boyle, the main attribute giving the film its essence is the interior of the principal setting, the flat. Given this comment we can infer that the styling and dressing of the flat was crucial to the narrative and storytelling. Quinn (1994) highlights the aim of the flat as being ‘somewhere you’re supposed to want to live in’ yet it also strives to feel slightly odd (see figure 1) without being overtly strange.

The work of achieving this subtle balance between allure and discomfort accentuates the immense thought needed to create a space that directly reflects the characters and actions portrayed while keeping the visual appeal.



Figure 1 The flat living room. Boyle, D. (1994) Shallow Grave.

The color palette used in the film stems from using Edward Hopper’s painting as reference (Barnwell, 2004, p.55). The use of large expanses of plain color with no motifs or pattern contribute to the film’s much emulated look. Hopper’s work often features its subject in a state of contemplation (see figure 2) and isolation (see figure 3); this could be seen as a direct reference to the characters’ psychological struggles within the film.



Figure 2 Edward Hopper (1957) Western Motel



Figure 3 Edward Hopper (1932) Room in Brooklyn

The only instance the flat's color palette differs from this reference is in Hugo's room (see figure 4), the place where his body is found. Thus, working as a way to 'punctuate' (Affron and Affron, 1995) a specific element of the plot, and further enhancing this point of climax.



Figure 4 Hugo's room. Boyle, D. (1994) Shallow Grave.

Boyle (1994) notes the reasoning behind the stylization of the flat was to create a space that was very seductive to the viewer, with the goal of awakening a sense of avarice in them. This directly ties into the characterization of our anti-heroes and entices the viewer to mirror their response. The attractive and intentional use of colors and set build shapes the emotional response of the audience while creating atmospheric richness.

At the same time, the objects used to dress the flat are used as indicators for character perception. In an interview actor Christopher Eccleston (2012) recalled: "I remember being stood in the hallway between shots and there were some Blake prints placed on the walls. I remember thinking these three wouldn't be into Blake, they wouldn't know who Blake was, they just think oh that looks cool.". Objects like the Blake prints give us an insight into the personality and psyche of the characters. The main characters in the film are self-centered, gluttonous and egocentric and the set objects exemplify it.

Symbolism of the Flat

The setting of this film can be seen as a representation of how the theme and narrative of the relationship between the three main characters unfolds. It becomes a metaphorical space where as the relationship between characters deteriorates so does their lived environment.

Firstly, to address the themes of the film, the argument can be supported by how the flat is represented in the script:

Alex:

“So tell me, Cameron, what on earth -- just tell me, because I want to know -- what on earth could make you think that we would want to share a flat like this with someone like you?”

(Shallow Grave, 1994, 0:03:31)

The aim was to create a flat that was coveted, representative of how the characters possess something that is desired by others (i.e., in the mocking of potential flatmates). As it is openly expressed in the script, creating a space that the viewer themselves find appealing is comprehensible.

Barnwell (2004, p.26) proposes that the use of the attic (see figure 5) in the film can be compared to the use of staircases in production design, as staircases are often used to express hierarchy. It can be inferred that they are working as a way to explain without words that specific characters have the upper hand, the power. When this is applied to the film we are discussing, David's character is the one showcased with the moral higher ground. When he moves into the attic of the flat after he is chosen to dispose of the body, he drills holes where he is able to see into the flats' different rooms. This grants him both a physical and emotional

advantage as he not only occupies an elevated position but also keeps visual awareness over the other two characters, while they remain unaware of his occupancy. Hence, the set serves as an indicator of the change in dynamics while equally providing the viewer with a sense of premonition.



Figure 5 . Flat foyer, stair leading to attic. Boyle, D. (1994) *Shallow Grave*.

Case Study 2: *Trainspotting* (1996)

After the success of *Shallow Grave*, the team that worked on the film was ready to tackle another project together. That came as *Trainspotting* (1996), the film adaptation of Irvine Welsh's acclaimed book of the same name. The film follows a group of heroin addicts in Edinburgh: Mark Renton (Ewan McGregor), Spud (Ewen Bremner), Sick Boy (Jonny Lee Miller), Begbie (Robert Carlyle) and Tommy (Kevin McKidd) navigating an economically depressed landscape and as our main character, Renton, aims to get sober. Years after its release the film is still considered one of the defining movies of the 90s (Davidson, 2017). In the following

analysis we will discuss how the film's visual language aided and cemented the movie as the icon it is today, even more than 20 years later.

Scotland in the 1980s

Trainspotting is set in the late 80s in Leith, Edinburgh. It needs to be stated that Scotland during the late 80s was at the tail-end of Margaret Thatcher's reign. As much as the book and film depict heroin addiction it is also in the same vein as life under Thatcherism (Castles, 2017). A time when unemployment was on the rise and the economy was in decline (Smith, 2002).

During an interview with *The Quietus*, Author Irvine Welsh expresses how Thatcher was the 'invisible author of the book'. As she created the conditions and the hubris whereby the whole culture flourished, she had an invisible hand behind it. Without the conditions created by her government there would be no story (Welsh, 2013).

This entailed the principles of 'no society' and prioritizing individualism, exemplified by a direct quote by Renton when he states:

"There was no such thing as society and even if there was, I most certainly had nothing to do with it." (*Trainspotting*, 1996, 1:02:54)

While the film does showcase locations of big heritage to Scotland (see figure 6) (Edinburgh Castle, Princes Street) it mostly brings attention to the 'un-heritage Scotland' (see figure 7), with its deteriorated council estates, run-down flats and dreadful toilets (Smith, 2002). There is an emphasis in depicting the way of life of the characters in these urban landscapes that is a direct result of Thatcherism. Which also lends to the sense of reality that needs to be addressed through the settings of a motion picture such as this one.



Figure 6 Hanover Street, with a view of The Royal Scottish Academy. Boyle, D. (1996) *Trainspotting*.



Figure 7 Mother Superior flat. Boyle, D. (1996) *Trainspotting*.

The 'Look' of the Film

Barsacq (1978, p.126) proposed the idea that the style of the set should be directly related to the genre of the film, further explaining how 'light colors are suited to comedy, and dark contrasting colors to drama'. But Barnwell (2004, p.40) argues how this might be harmful to the creative process as it sets preconceived expectations to the look of any given film. *Trainspotting* as a dark-comedy drama genre exemplifies this contrast. While the film portrays a very real and dramatic theme, its color palette is made up of bright oranges and pinks. This acute opposition helps create a balance to the narrative of a what would be considered a gritty and terrible topic with the characterization of the main cast which is filled with

humor and sarcasm. At the same time, the emphasis in the use of highly saturated colors makes the film have a more interesting essence than just its documentary bare bones.

The same way *Shallow Grave* used paintings by artist Edward Hopper, *Trainspotting* referenced works by painter Francis Bacon (Niesewand, 1998). Production Designer Kave Quinn (2018) explained that what was mainly referenced from the artist's work were his use of color (see figure 8) and the way isolation (see figure 9) is depicted in his work through said colors. *Trainspotting* can be interpreted as a film that encapsulates the singularity and individualism of each of its characters. However, the intention was not about allocating an individual tone to each of them or to interpret the concept of isolation in a strictly literal sense as another equally prominent theme of the film is the camaraderie between the group of five.



Figure 8 Francis Bacon (1978) *Figure in Movement*



Figure 9 Francis Bacon (1953) *Portrait of Pope*

Bacon's work is dominated by purple, red and orange which serve as a basis for the color palette implemented in the film. But the film showcases intensified yet muted versions of these colors (see figure 10), this can be interpreted as trying to

represent the 'fun yet awful' (Miller, 2021) characteristics of the drug use and theme of the film. Even while exploring the intricate facets of a challenging subject matter such as addiction, the film adeptly crafted an immensely memorable color composition throughout the film. It can be argued that is one of the aspects that made the film as much of a 'cult' classic (Rasmussen, 2016) as it is today. As noted by Quinn (2018), the main goal in the use of color in the film was to create a balance between the 'horrific' and not 'glamorizing' drug use. The active compositions of colors worked as a vehicle in which to convey what they did but also reminded the audience that they are only human.



Figure 10 Mother Superior flat, opening scene. Boyle, D. (1996) *Trainspotting*.

On Representing Reality

When it comes to the film set as realism in *Trainspotting*, it can be discussed that shooting on various locations adds the needed element that would have been otherwise absent if most of the film was filmed in a studio. A big component of the story telling is the city of Edinburgh. Scenes taking place in recognizable areas, such as Princes Street (see figure 11), Hanover Street, Regent Bridge and even shots of Edinburgh Castle as backdrops for the action immerses the viewer into the life of these young Scottish men. And while constructed sets were utilized for a few

of the interior spaces, a higher number of real locations dressed to fit the visual concept of the feature can be seen (see figure 12).



Figure 11 Princes Street, shoplifting scene. Boyle, D. (1996) *Trainspotting*



Figure 12 Repainted hotel room. Boyle, D. (1996) *Trainspotting*.

When asked about how important was conveying realism in her work in *Trainspotting*, Quinn (2018) explained that it was crucial for them to understand the reality of how heroin addicts live, with the purpose of fostering an in depth understanding and go onto confidently crafting the ‘humorous’ and ‘funny’ aspects of the story as they are portrayed in the book. Not explicitly to create an exact replication of that reality. She goes on to note that “*Trainspotting* is a story about drug addiction but it's not really it's more about those people and those characters

and their interaction that's the thing.” (Quinn, 2018). Their aim was to push away the depravity and then convey it in a more abstract way, while also keeping elements of realism, which is what ultimately made the film have its unique look.

However, it is also important to discuss that the realism represented in the film should not be considered social realism but rather surrealism. The plot of the film is not linear; it can be seen as following a more episodic narrative. Which attributes to what could be described as a way to disorient the viewer so the feelings of instability found in the characters can be felt by the spectators.

“The look of Trainspotting is drawn from real life but very much exaggerated. And it's quite stylized, which makes it more interesting than just documentary style.” (Quinn, 2017)

Throughout the film the idea of surrealism and hyperrealism is enhanced by the cinematography, especially in scenes such as ‘The worst toilet in Scotland’ where Renton is swallowed by the toilet (see figure 13) while digging through it for a suppository and when Renton is again engulfed by the carpet. These scenes can be seen as a reflection of Ewan McGregor character’s disposition during periods of heightened intoxication. He exhibits a single-minded focus in obtaining his subsequent dose, indifferent to the gruesome state of the toilet (see figure 14). The set depicted as ‘the worst toilet in Scotland’ is essential to creating a sense of disgust and dread to the viewer. It communicates to the audience the lengths the main character will go to reach his high. These scenes and those of the ‘baby on the ceiling’ give the setting a dreamlike quality that contributes to the atmosphere trying to be achieved throughout the narrative.



Figure 13 The worst toilet in Scotland, toilet scene. Boyle, D. (1996) Trainspotting



Figure 14 The worst toilet in Scotland, bathroom. Boyle, D. (1996) Trainspotting

Comparative Analysis

Shallow Grave and *Trainspotting* have several similarities in terms of their production team. After the trio of director Danny Boyle, producer Andrew Macdonald and screenwriter John Hodge found success with *Shallow Grave* as the highest grossing British film in 1995 (Smith,2002) they decided to tackle another project together. Production Designer Kave Quinn worked on both films as well and the films even star the same actor (Ewan McGregor). But as this dissertation aims to dissect how set design influences the atmosphere created in films, it is worth

understanding the way the same individuals approached the set design differently for both scripts.

Set in Scotland

As previously discussed, the use of a constructed set for *Shallow Grave* was necessary as no flat location scouted by the production met its requirements. While the use of location shooting in *Trainspotting* was increasingly more prominent, though the use of constructed sets was still applied for certain interior spaces (Renton's room, Mother Superior's flat), most venues were real sites. This difference points back to the debate of Lumière versus Méliès.

While the employment of a studio set in the production of *Shallow Grave* is pertinent to the script, I would contest that opting for an authentic Edinburgh flat was not imperative. Delving into the essence of the storyline, one might argue that the events have the capacity to unfold within a residential setting in any urban center without fundamentally altering the narrative of the story. However, in contrast, *Trainspotting* is intrinsically tied to Scottish culture; emphasizing a fundamental need for the settings to be authentic to the geography of Scotland. One could posit that this film implements Lumière's documentary film style, in that it aims to capture the Scottish youth during the 1980s.

Shallow Grave touches upon themes of greed and attitudes of human nature, as Edinburgh is mentioned in the film it does not play a significant altering element in the film. While *Trainspotting* is heavily induced by social commentary of the time the story is set in, therefore it is essential to encapsulate the setting of Scotland in differing manners.

Color as a Styling Tool

It is notable that for both of the films color plays a crucial role in creating the atmosphere and mood. The use of striking palettes is not merely used as a decorative element, instead it guides the spectator through the plot in understanding the actions, characters and themes taking place. And while both utilize color in a desirable and striking way, they assist the film in individual ways.

Shallow Grave employs a more muted and subdued set of colors, often leaning toward darker tones, which could be related to the ominous and suspenseful element of its thriller genre. On the other hand, *Trainspotting*'s bright hues complement its element of hyperrealism and mirrors the chaotic and rebellious nature of its story.

Additionally, it is worth noting how Boyle's first feature sets' aim was to be highly symbolic with the themes of moral ambiguity made for a more controlled visual style. Using the darker hues to enhance the film's psychological nature of tension and suspense. While it can be said that *Trainspotting*'s goal was the antithesis of just that. With its frantic and heightened visual style aiming to embrace an increased experimental and stylized approach. It is used to augment the hypnotic yet gritty aesthetic to create a balance in the storytelling through set design.

Audience Perception

Shallow Grave was a huge success at the time of its release due to the climate in which it was released. During the early 1990s British cinema had adapted comfortability in 'tastefully made, well-acted, impeccably mounted period literary adaptations, guaranteed to upset nobody' (Kemp, 2012) hence, the release of a film as experimental as *Shallow Grave* presented new ways British films could be

made and represented. Its set design, which did not conform to the conventional and its jovial expression of the thriller genre through its atmosphere, made the film stand out.

It is worth recalling that during the 1980s, when *Trainspotting* is set, Scotland underwent the challenges of the Thatcher era which was characterized by pronounced economic struggles and increased unemployment. It becomes apparent how for the age group represented by the main characters, mid-twenties, the ideology of 'Choose Life' was especially resonant. This observation is supported by the immense relatability British audiences, not only Scottish, found from the film. Yet it was accused of 'glamourizing drug use' (Kelleher, 2023). The way the sets of the film depict a state of surrealism and the production's use of vibrant color schemes for interiors that would be otherwise grim and gritty in real life, induced the atmosphere of the film with an exhilarating and sense of liveliness. These cohesive elements determined both the praise and criticism the film received.

Conclusion

This dissertation has sought to demonstrate how set design plays a crucial role in creating the atmosphere in films. It explores the environment in which the actors and their actions take place. Examining the research and information documented in this study I found that even as ‘the film set is a discreet but ever-present character’ (Barsacq, 1978, p.122) it does not garner as much recognition as it should.

Throughout the course of the study, the exploration delved into the contrasting benefits and drawbacks of utilizing an actual location versus a studio set, as well as the alignment and supportive role of sets and objects in storytelling, all with the aim of enhancing the narrative.

The understanding of that research led to the analysis of two features directed by Danny Boyle, *Shallow Grave* (1994) and *Trainspotting* (1996). It can be said that these two films are intricately related as the success of the former led to the realization of the latter. The distinct set design approaches employed by the same creative team for the differing scripts were critically broken apart. Dissecting the reasoning behind the chosen approaches of a constructed set for *Shallow Grave* and a mix of real locations for *Trainspotting*, while also understanding the use of colors in crafting idiosyncratic visual styles and factoring in the cultural contexts present in the narratives has led me to conclude and confirm that the role of the production designer must not be disregarded. Undoubtedly, the design of the sets seen in these films directly relates to creating an emotional response in the viewer. This substantiates the significance of the atmosphere shaped by precise design choices. Thus, set design continues to help create worlds on the screen that evoke unique reflections of the characters and stories being told.

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