

Making the Invisible Visible:

How can interior design give form to the intangible, making invisible narratives or emotional states perceptible through space and visual forms of communication?

Throughout our everyday life we are constantly encountering, attempting to process, possibly communicate and understand emotions. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), emotions are “a complex reaction pattern, involving experiential, behavioural, and physiological elements, by which an individual attempts to deal with a personally significant matter or event” (American Psychological Association, 2018). Although intangible, emotions are instinctively and universally understood as they go beyond language and culture. Yet, one question remains: if emotions can be felt and experienced by all, can they also be seen?

Film, in its nature, is designed to produce a particular effect on its audience via visual cues. It provokes emotion in its audience by creating an atmospheric experience that allows the viewer to empathize with whatever emotion the film’s subject is currently encountering. This essay explores how film sets and interiors use visual atmospheric qualities to communicate emotion, and how

atmosphere can transform a set into a living breathing character. Here, the scenic space becomes more than a backdrop; it becomes the emotional and symbolic language of the film, a world that extends beyond the frame and lingers in the viewer’s subconscious.

In contemporary cinema, audiences often leave a film recalling the plot, performances, or soundtrack, while the set design is remembered, if at all, as mere background. This essay challenges that notion, it positions set design as a narrative driver and provides a reference for how interior space and design can embody emotions and hold psychological depth. In a world increasingly detached from feelings and emotions especially with the heightened peek of artificial intelligence, this is a call back to design as poetry; where a space has a soul, it is not just built, but felt, where every detail becomes a storyteller. This is where the invisible is finally made visible.

To understand how film brings out emotional responses through space, we will need to look at the nature of emotion itself especially how emotional experiences within the context of the cinema differs to emotional experiences in real life. As the APA defines emotion as “a reaction to a personally significant matter or event”, film does not necessarily fall under this terminology. In psychologist Ed Tan’s work, he describes emotions evoked by film as to those who accompany

fantasy, yet if we accept that a film audience does indeed “feel”, then they must be selecting an aspect from the film’s incoming information that affects them personally (Tan, 1996). Film could notably have a cathartic effect on viewers. Film, as an artistic technique, employs the access of desires, impulses and emotions that are normally unconscious. Hence, evidencing the extremeness and intensity of the audience’s emotive reaction. In Christian Metz, the French film theorist’s work he theorizes that once the viewer has entered the filmic state, they function quite primitively (Metz, Some points in the semiotics of the cinema, 1972, pp. 82-89) explaining the momentous effect of simple visual cues. This is constructed through mise-en-scène, immersing the viewer in a rich imaginative atmosphere. It is here that interior design plays a critical role: the designed space becomes an emotional trigger, and an emotional communicator. Through thoughtful use of texture, colour, lighting, and spatial composition, set design not only supports the narrative but acts as a sensory landscape where emotion is felt physically. The same strategies can be applied in real-world interiors, allowing spaces to embody emotional depth and psychological resonance far beyond the surface aesthetics.

Mise-en-scène, is the art of presenting and expressing, or as defined by Adrian Martin in his book *Mise en Scène and Film Style*, it is the art of framing,

choreographing and displaying (Martin, 2014, p. 11). This cinematic term is also applied to installation art, architecture and interior design, as it could be used to put together a setting to evoke a certain emotion through its harnessing of atmosphere (Whitehead, 2017, p. 21). Atmosphere: another phenomenon that occurs in the interiors and film, is crucial to understanding mise-en-scène and how emotions could be evoked through visual stimuli. Gernot Böhme viewed atmosphere as capable of unifying a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state, while Tonino Griffero described it as “spatialized feeling” or a “quasi-thing” linked to a specific external situation that reverberates emotionally (Böhme, 1993, pp. 113-126) (Griffero, 2014, pp. 7-9) . Hence, mise-en-scène is a device used spatially to create an atmosphere that expressively conveys meaning and evokes a reaction. For the purpose of this essay, I will mostly focus on the psychological elements of mise-en-scène and how it is a form of communication for eliciting emotional responses through the visual elements of colour and shape.

German Expressionism, a 20th century art movement, prioritised the inner feelings and emotions over replicating reality. Its key characteristics include simplified forms, bright colours, gestural marks, and focusing on capturing essence and feeling (TATE, 2025). It was a revolutionary new way of looking at art and life, it sought for a deeper emotional

perception of the world. While German Expressionism was mostly dominated by the art of painting, it had a heavy role in film. Film was an emerging industry which acted as a blank canvas for creative expression, which the avant-garde nature of Expressionism transferred well to the art of the screen and moving pictures. With the country being in a huge economic downfall after Germany lost World War I, the film industry was facing an overhaul. Thus, many independent filmmakers started small film studios to express the reality of the new social and political structures. To this day many filmmakers have drawn inspiration from the dramatic tendencies of Expressionism, such as Tim Burton (Invaluable, 2019).



Figure 1: *Dangerous Streets*, George Grosz (1918)



Figure 2: *Vincint*, Tim Burton (1982)

In *German Expressionist Painting* (1957), Peter Selz emphasizes the central role of colour and shape in conveying emotion, psychological depth, and spiritual intensity, which were the hallmarks of German Expressionism. Selz argued that Expressionist use colour not to represent reality, but they use vivid non-realistic colours to add symbolic psychological impact to their works. While shape's realistic form is also disacknowledged, as Expressionists opt to distorting and rejecting classical proportions to create a raw visual language that communicates inner emotive states (Selz, 1957).

Making the Invisible Visible, is heavily influenced by Expressionist concepts, as both the project and the movement's ethos value the emphasis on inner feelings and their visual vivid expression. The design's expressionist approach acts as an homage to the 20th century film era, a time where art and visual expression had huge impact and value, as verbal expression was limited due to the controversial political views and judgements.

In Wolfgang Pehnt's book *Expressionist Architecture*, he carefully emphasizes that "the expressionist blueprint is bound to its particular historical movement, there is no hope for a revival of expressionism" (Pehnt, 1973, p. 12). While I acknowledge the significant impact of the First World War on

Expressionism and its foundational principles, I strongly disagree with Pehnt's statement. This project, in fact, serves as a beacon of hope for the revival of Expressionism. The movement was sparked by an unstable world, and people's need to get in touch with their emotional human element in a world filled with violence, hatred and power greed. A world that does not sound too unfamiliar to the world we currently inhabit. Hence, if Expressionism allowed artists, designers, architects, musicians and filmmakers of the time to get in touch with the emotional element in their work, then if revived in the modern day, it should provide the same to the Expressionist and their audience.

Understanding the events that triggered Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's to the founding of the artists group Die Brücke or "The Bridge", which led the foundation of Expressionism in the early 20th century, would allow us to understand how Expressionism could (and should) be implemented in the modern contemporary world of art and design. In our modern world we are all facing a war against Artificial Intelligence's amplification of individualism, which is contemporarily repressing our ability to express and experience emotions. With the increase of machine interactions and reduce of face-to-face human communication, we as a human race experience an increase in isolation and emotional detachment (Rainie & Anderson, 2018).

Byung-Chul Han argues in his book *The Expulsion of the Other: Society, Perception and Communication Today*, that modern digital society is becoming increasingly self-referential, where people are less open to "the Other"; that is, anything or anyone different, unfamiliar, or outside the self. This reinforces society turning inwards, hence creating a modern-day form of verbal emotional oppression (Han, 2018, pp. 15-23). Therefore, humanity is in desperate need for Expressionism to relearn how to prioritise emotions and how to use visual forms when verbal forms have become a difficult form of expression.

To ground this exploration in a real-world example, the project will employ a case study analysis of the Egyptian short film *Conquain* by Mohammed Adeeb. A story of loss, grief and shock, where a group of friends experience the sudden death of their friend Sully as they visit his family's home. The story simply acts as context for the space, the film is a vessel that allows the exploration of communicating emotions through shape and colour. It allows for a focused examination of the script to examine the extent of each emotive state and how they could possibly be communicated, whilst designing the film sets that show how through spatial and visual design elements (such as colour, shape, and spatial composition) emotions and atmosphere can be conveyed and expressed on screen.

This project seeks to examine the blurring boundaries of Fiction and Reality, and On-camera and Off-camera.

As the exploration will be through a fictional story, with fictional characters experience fictional emotions, it will still be communicating it through a real space with real actors embodying such emotions. Hence, understanding both ends of this spectrum is crucial. As this fictional medium of film, is not just telling its story to an audience, but it is also a form of expression for the filmmaker. It is a way to visually express the unspoken and address emotions or topics that are most conveniently addressed in such visual manner. Much like in silent cinema, where space spoke louder than words. The very definition of 'film'; a series of still photographs on film projected onto a screen using light in rapid succession (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019, p. 3), highlights cinema's visual origins, where the scene and set themselves held strong storytelling power. Thus, understanding how the visual elements of colour and shape operate across the emotional continuum of fiction and reality is imperative to the study.

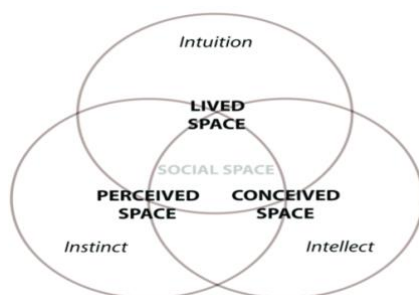


Figure 3 Lefebvre's Triad of Space Production

Furthermore, the exploration includes building sets that resemble homes from the script, yet not all elements of such homes will be featured on camera. This raises a critical question: how can the 'off-camera' components of these spaces be effectively communicated and sensed by the audience through the cinematic frame, thereby enriching the narrative context, therefore, enriching the emotional communication? The 'off-camera' environment, although unseen, informs the atmosphere, the characters' interactions, and the spatial logic, contributing significantly to the audience's perception of the diegetic world. This could be linked to Lefebvre's epistemological approach to space, he outlines a triad of space: *perceived space* (how we perceive a space through our senses) – which could be linked to the physical visual elements of colour and shape in a space, *conceived space* (how we understand a space through our knowledge) – linked to how previous experiences of such visual elements could determine how we perceive them in this new current space, and finally *lived in space* (the meaning we attribute to a space) – this refers to the emotions experienced and communicated through the visual elements in relation to the filmic space. Lefebvre's approach to how the social and the physical interact with the mental validates how the invisible intangible emotions could become visible using this visual form of communication (Lefebvre, 1974) (see Figure 3). Therefore,

my approach will consider how off-camera spaces can be hinted at through colour and shape, to enhance the audience's engagement and emotional connection with the film space.

After deep analysis of the film *Conquain* and its locations, Moussa's studio living room and Sully's living/dining space, both located in Cairo, Egypt, have been chosen as the sets to be designed for *Making the Invisible Visible*. Both spaces encounter deep emotional vulnerability and act as reflections of their users, which could easily allow for these emotions to be examined and designed in an Expressionist approach.

The space occupied by Moussa undergoes a progression of emotional states, shaped by the presence of a solitary inhabitant. This isolation enables the design to articulate the emotional transition and foreshadow future affective developments, while simultaneously visualizing the intimate and personal dimensions of Moussa's emotional experience. While Sully's space, featured in 6 scenes, is a transitional space between the public world and the private family home, as it fosters the mourning guests and friends coming to support Sully's fragile shaken family. The space encounters emotions on a much more dynamic wave as it holds the emotional journey of many characters, all except Sully. These elements of the space, allow the design to experiment with the idea of

the barrier from the public into the private world, investigate how one space could visually express changing emotions, and how the space would be a visual representative to all characters including Sully's invisible presence.

Spatial design and fictional narrative align most meaningfully when emotional changes are expressed through the physical environment. Both Moussa's and Sully's spaces exemplify how set design can act as an emotional interface, whether that be through a solitude emotional journey or collective mourning, it reveals not only what is seen on camera, but what is felt beyond the frame. By combining the cinematic language of visual storytelling with theoretical frameworks such as Lefebvre's spatial triad, the design approach navigates the blurred boundaries between fiction and reality, internal and external, seen and unseen.

Moussa's living space encompasses a general mood of calmness which is swiftly transitioned into shock and disbelief (as he receives the news of Sully's death). These emotions determine the space's atmospheric visual language as they are the 'message' that is relayed by the space to the film audience. The space's evolving emotional tone can be understood through abstract visual forms, much like Kandinsky's '*Composition IV*,' which conveys conflict and resolution through colour and shape.

Peter Selz particularly points out artists like Kandinsky and how they saw colour as a gateway to spiritual truth. Kandinsky believed certain colours had inherent emotional and symbolic truth, which has developed through the years of human civilisation and how we tend to associate certain colours with certain emotions (Selz, 1957, p. 223) such as blue for calmness and red for violence or passion. The painting includes both: the peaceful blues, yellows and graceful safe curves, and the violent harsh black strokes, sharp shapes, and vibrant colours. It embodies both juxtaposing moods in complete harmony, highlighting the transition from one to the other. Which is a visual quality the design aims to possess.



Figure 4 Composition IV Wassily Kandinsky (1911)

Specific colours and shapes have been curated to build the set's mise-en-scene and grant it the ability to communicate its required mood. The emotions the set communicate lie on opposite spectrums, which the design aims to communicate with contrasting cool and warm toned colours. High arousal emotions, as described by

psychologist Karen Niven in her book *Encyclopaedia of Behavioural Medicine*, are feelings of energy for pleasurable states or tension for unpleasant states, while low arousal emotions are the opposite feelings of low energy whether in pleasurable or unpleasant states (Niven & Miles, 2013). Therefore, the design uses low saturated blues and white to visualise the low arousal emotional state of being calm and relaxed. While elements of highly saturated warm orange represent the high arousal state of shock and disbelief. The complementary colour scheme of the set emphasises the opposite moods and foreshadows the news Moussa is about to receive.

The colours are accompanied by shapes to fully communicate the atmosphere. The space is characterised by two main elements the "Circle" and the "Wings". Wassily Kandinsky quotes "the circle is the synthesis of the greatest oppositions; it combines the concentric and the eccentric in a single form and in equilibrium" (Kandinsky, 1979, p. 58). This explains the whole essence of the "Circle" (see figure 5), and why such shape is ideal to communicate the calm restful atmospheric elements of the space, as it is a concentric form. Yet the form radiates outwards in all direction, suggesting an exterior eccentric world with lack of balance and stability, foreshadowing the shocking tense atmosphere the space transitions to.



Figure 5 Several Circles Wassily Kandinsky (1944)

In Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception*, a foundational book that explores how we understand and respond to visual art through the psychology of perception, showing how elements like shape, colour, and composition convey meaning and emotion, he explains how the formal qualities of shapes (e.g., angular vs. rounded) evoke different psychological and emotional responses: "Sharp, pointed shapes are visually associated with pain, threat, and hostility, while rounded forms suggest safety, softness, and comfort" (Arnheim, 1974, p. 245). This could be linked to evolutionary psychology and how sharp objects are naturally threatening, hence they evoke feelings of fear and tension. To convey such shapes spatially to represent the second atmosphere in the space I aim to take inspiration from stage wings and create jagged triangular separators from floor to ceiling that split up the set in a

similar manner to how stage wings divide a stage. The wings serve as a visual metaphor for what's just around the corner, a quiet foreshadowing of the news Moussa is about to receive. Their presence builds tension and hints at unseen events waiting to unfold. They create hidden zones for safety and retreat, offering spatial moments of pause or protection within the narrative. This design element pays homage to set design; the invisible labour and mechanics that bring stories to life, by exposing the backstage as part of the scene. The wings spark curiosity, inviting the audience to look closer and wonder what lies beyond. In making them visible, I let the unseen become part of the story.



Figure 6 Concept collage of Moussa's Space

In contrast, Sully's space primarily conveys an atmosphere of grief and tension, functioning as the emotional foundation of the environment. Other emotional states such as; anger, fear, and trauma, emerge intermittently in response to specific narrative moments, but these are articulated in a more fleeting and

dynamic manner. Consequently, grief remains the dominant and enduring emotional presence and atmosphere within the space. Picasso's *Still Life with Skull, Leeks and Pitcher* (1945) conveys grief and anxiety through symbolism, shape and colour. Using a muted palette lacking vibrance and vitality suggests the lack of life. The sharp angular forms and shadows enhance emotional harshness and creates claustrophobic tension that mirrors emotional suffocation and grief's weight. This influenced and supported my design choices; communicating low arousal emotion through low vibrant blues and black, and using slanted walls to create sharp corners and enrich the trapped atmosphere.



Figure 7 Still Life with Skulls Leeks and Pitcher Pablo Picasso (1945)

The design includes a window overlooking a backdrop of the city's skyline to fuse the sharp, dark, dull and depressed atmosphere of Sully's space with the outside world. Backdrops are a traditional craft in filmmaking that play a vital role in providing visual context and aiding world-building. As Megan Williams notes in

Celebrating the Art of Hollywood's Movie Backdrops, these works are "testament to a nearly lost art form" and to the "overlooked artists who created them." (Williams, 2022). By integrating backdrop design into this project, I aim to honour this rich cinematic tradition, one that quietly but powerfully supports storytelling through crafted illusion and atmospheric depth. The backdrop would also provide the dynamic element of the set, as it would be lit up in a colour corresponding to any emerged emotion in the narrative, thus, making the character's emotions not only visible in the form of colour, but visible to their contextual world.



Figure 8 Concept Collage of Sully's Space

Making the Invisible Visible positions set design as a narrative driver, and provides a reference for how interior space and design can embody emotions and hold psychological depth. By grounding the design in Expressionist theory, and psychological spatial cues it creates a methodology that merges cinematic storytelling and interior design intentions, thus creating a precedent for interdisciplinary studies in design. The project's reinterpretation of Expressionism and dispute of Wolfgang Pehnt's claims, allows the exploration of emotional truth in design. Making the invisible visible creates interiors that revolve around Gaston Bachelard's concept of the home as a "psychic state" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 72) and emphasize atmosphere as a critical spatial layer. As we move forward into an age with alarming emotional detachment, this marks the return of design as poetry, where a space is designed and curated to communicate the designer's feelings and evoke an emotional reaction in its audience and/or users. Where every element speaks, and the atmosphere itself tells a story. Where the invisible is finally made visible.

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