PRODUCTION DESIGN

WITH JIM SOTO

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Production design deals with the visual art and craft of cinematic storytelling. The look and style of a film is created by the imagination, artistry, and collaboration of the director, director of photography, and production designer.

An iconic *Indiana Jones & Raider of the Lost Ark* (1981) scene gets ready to be shot at Elstree Studios, England.

A production designer needs to interpret the script and the director's vision for the film and translating it into physical environments where the actors can develop their characters and perform the story.

Production design is the creation and organization of the physical world surrounding a film story. The term was coined by David O. Selznick to describe the extraordinary contribution of designer William Cameron Menzies to Gone with the Wind (1939), but the exact responsibilities of a production designer inevitably vary from film to film.

Usually, the Production Designer (PD) is almost totally responsible for the overall look of a film; in others, particularly when working with directors with strong visual styles, a PD's input tends to be much more limited.

Art direction and production design often overlap, although credit for production design is seen as more inclusive. Art Directors work for the PD. The PD is responsible for the entire look of the film, while the art director is responsible for set and perhaps prop designs.

The PD's main responsibility is the design of the sets. Exact duties varies from one film industry to another. Before designing anything, the PD develops a "design concept," an overarching metaphor for the film's appearance that governs individual choices. This "concept" may or may not be established in conjunction with the director. Once settled upon, however, it structures all decisions made, helping the art staff to give a film its visual distinction.
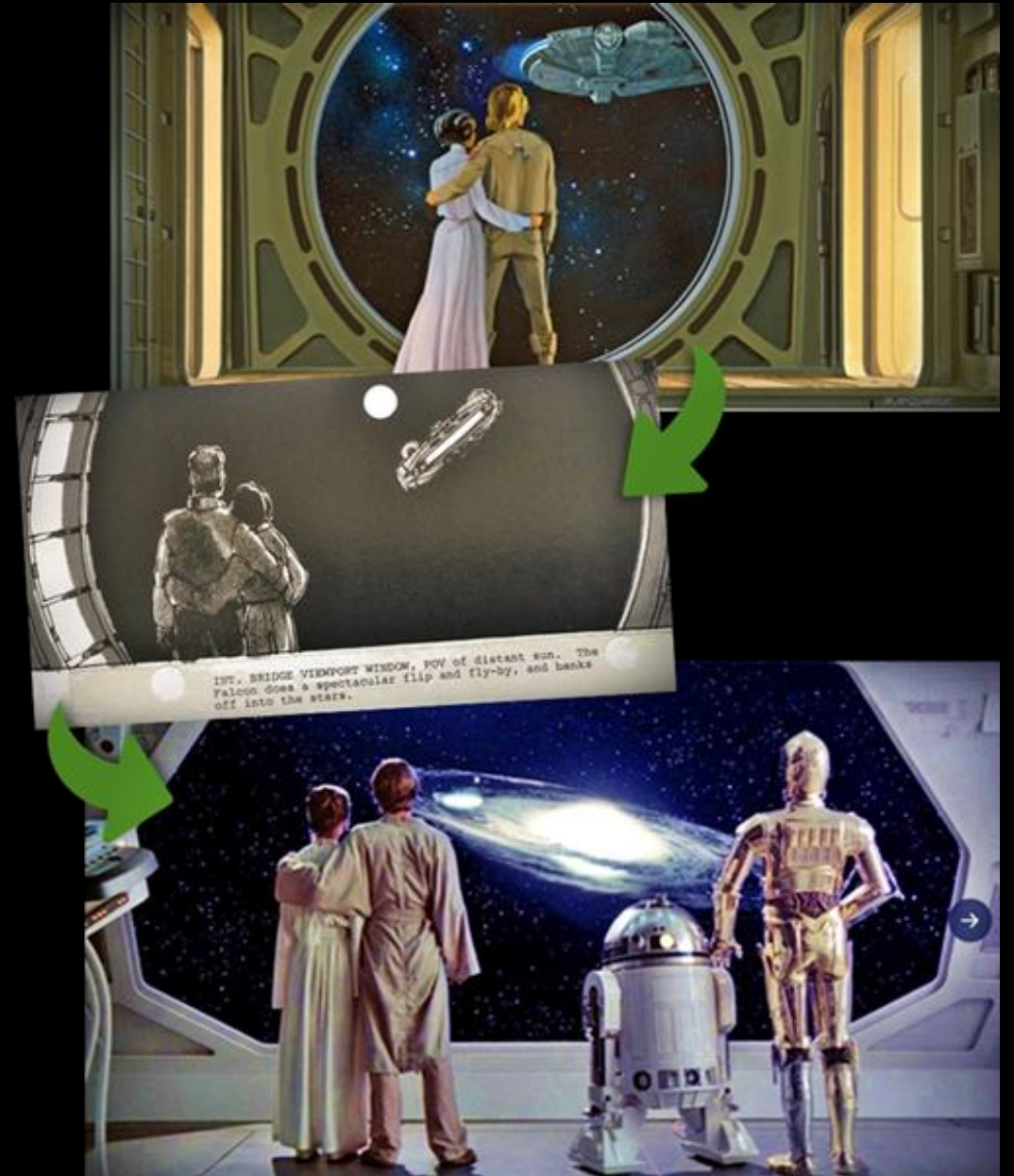
THE PRODUCTION DESIGN TEAM

There are several key crew members that work alongside the PD.

- **Art Director (AD)**: works directly with the PD and oversees the draftsmen, storyboards, artists, and set decorators.

- **Production Illustrator or Concept Artist**: creates the initial sketches and designs alongside the PD and AD.

- **VFX Coordinator or Supervisor**: works with the PD to ensure CGI elements match the film's visual style.

- **Set Decorator**: develops the look of the set through research and obtains items for the set.

- **Set Dresser**: arranges the items from the set decorator and ensures continuity between scenes.
- **Costume Designer**: works with the AD to develop the look of the characters, pays close attention to period and place.
- **Makeup Designer**: designs and oversees all makeup aspects of the production, from simple adjustments to special effects makeup.

PRODUCTION DESIGN: THE THREE-PART PROCESS

1. Concept

Each production design begins with the production designer reading the script to determine the initial visual style. Once this is done, meetings with the director and cinematographer take place to solidify the design.

To make this happen, concept illustrations and mock-ups are researched, produced, and sent to the director and producer for approvals. These concepts and mock-up designs cover set architecture, costumes, props, VFX design, and makeup.
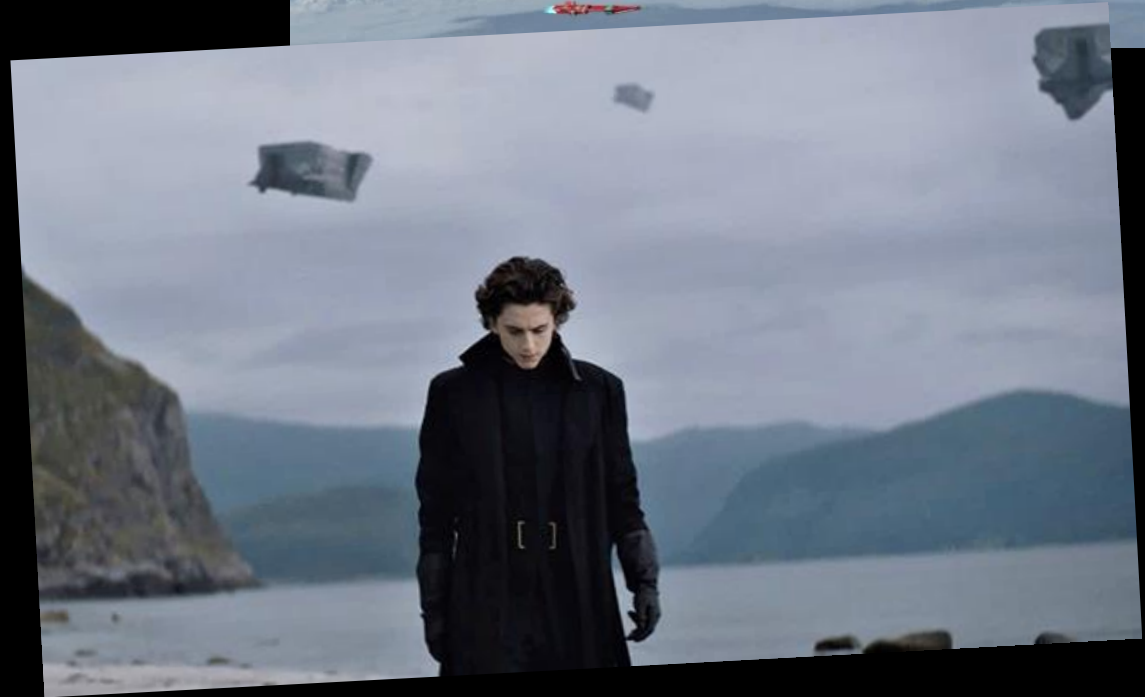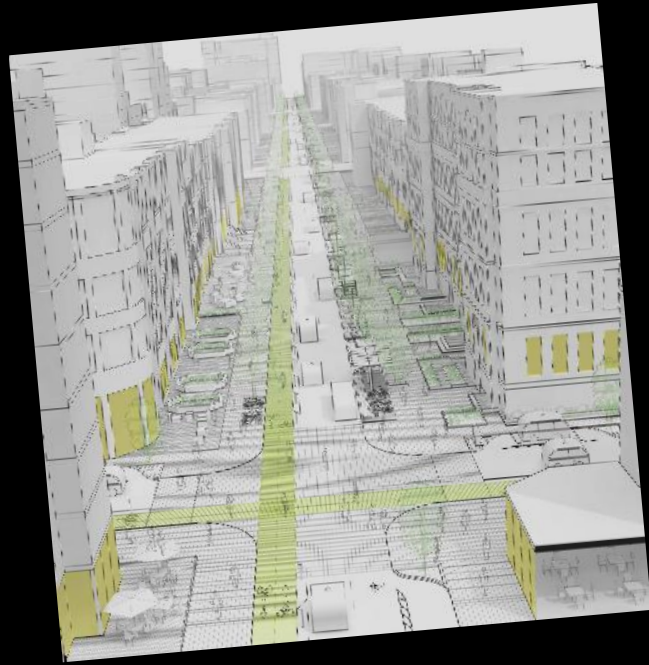
2. Planning

Once the designs are approved, the PD's team moves into the planning stage. Additional research to build locations for the sets takes place. Blueprints for set construction are drafted. Also, budgets and property lists are developed to ensure that this portion of production doesn't run beyond the funding allowed.

3. Fabrication

Once designs are approved and plans are finalized, the actual fabrication of the design begins. Construction crews come in and actually build the set if needed.

Also, the set decorator, dresser, costume designer, and makeup artist begin the process of developing their individual parts of the production design. When this portion is done, the director, cast, and crew begin film production.

LOCATIONS TO FILM

A location in the film industry is any place where filming will be done that is not a studio or a set. Finding the perfect location is the location scout's job, who uses investigative research, travel, and photos to document potential locations for filming.

A location scout may be hired before the director, very early in the process. They work very closely with the Production Designer to achieve the project's needs. Usually, the scout is hired by the PD, sometimes by the location manager if a site has fallen out.

DPs know how important locations are to establishing the tone of a film. They use both interior and exterior locations to fulfill the story's vision.

Interior Locations - Old, new, functional, weird, and out of this world.

Exterior Locations - Scenic, urban, country, desert, seascape, colorful and drab.

A Pasadena home was used to shoot Kill Bill Vol.1 (2003).

Shooting Top Gun: Maverick at Fallon Naval Air Station, NV (2022).

INTERIOR

EXTERIOR

Important considerations keep in mind while scouting locations for a film:

- Look for places that offer color and depth.
- Identify areas that support the story/script.
- Locate sources that offer power for lights and gear.
- Determine how busy the area will be during filming (foot traffic).
- Test audio conditions.
- Identify opportunities for set design (what props, furniture, etc. will be available?)
- Determine how the crew will load in and out.
- Finalize where equipment will be staged.
- Confirm the protocol when arriving on the day of the shoot (who to check-in with, contact numbers, etc.)

SETS TO FILM

A set is an environment used for filming. When used in contrast to location, it refers to one artificially constructed. "Set" shouldn't be confused with a movie's setting, which refers to the locations and historical period in which the film's story takes place. A hot set is one in which furniture and props have been positioned for an imminent shoot, and shouldn't be moved.

Large soundproof sets are called "sound stages" and smaller ones, studios. These offer advantages locations don't. A few are:

1. More Control of the Environment

Sets allow for better lighting and sound control for each shoot. Instead of being subject to weather variables, filmmakers can light each scene just as they want it to look. And rather than abandon an otherwise great shot on the cutting-room floor because of a random noise, each shot's sound can be controlled on a set.

2. No Travelling Needed

Filming on location is costly and time-consuming, on top of the complications related to moving to locations. When shooting on sets, crews can be hired from the local area, cutting travel and hotel costs.

3. Creating Desired Settings

Films requiring historical, fantastical or futuristic setting will benefit from set filming, since all the details of the long-vanished or imaginary location can be created just as the filmmaker envisions it.

LIGHTNING CONSIDERATIONS

Lighting is an essential aspect in filmmaking. Just like eyes do, a camera captures the images for a movie through light. Whether using available natural lighting or using lighting equipment, every production requires a suitable lighting design according to the needs of the film's story and the director's vision.
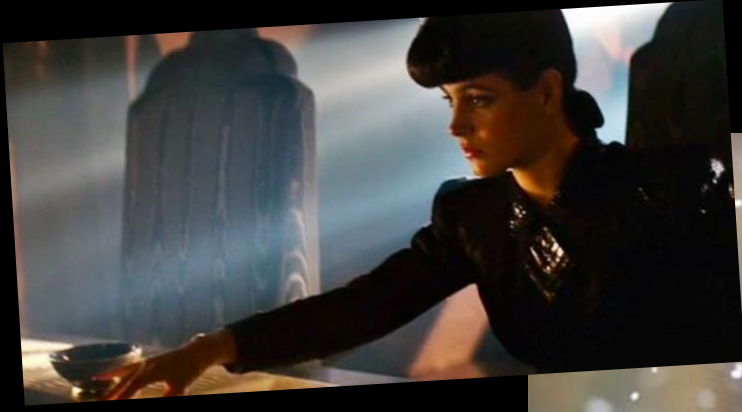
Every lighting set-up provides a specific mood, emotion, atmosphere, and aesthetics to the film viewing experience. Without light, it is impossible to see anything, and it is not possible to shoot a film.

To be able to accomplish the Director's vision for a film a good PD needs to understands the importance of proper lighting. Before locations are selected and sets are built careful consideration must be given to how light, colors, props, and camera work will interact with one another in order to bring the story to life.

Roger Deakins's stunning cinematography impressess in *Skyfall* (2012).

Costume design is a form of storytelling. The function of a costume is to help audiences understand "who" a character is. Simply put, a costume designer strives to conceptualize and design garments that capture and define the personality of the characters from a screenplay. They work closely with the director and the actors.

Bob Ringwood's amazing costume design for John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981).

Costume design for Morticia from
The Addams Family (1991).
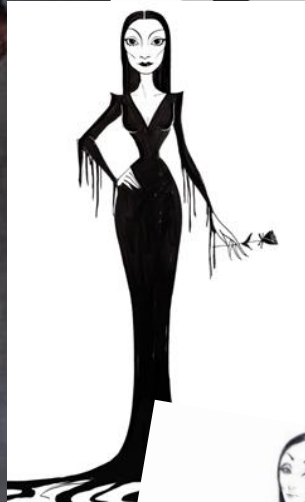
The ultimate goal of a costume designer is to create believable characters, with the intent of advancing the story's progress. In many cases, especially in films, some say that the costume designer is considered successful if audiences DON'T notice the costumes at all, but are nonetheless deeply affected by the characters.

Great period costume designs for *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), *A League of Their Own* (1992) and *House of Gucci* (2021).

Accurate and thoughtful costume design always supports the narrative and creates characters that audiences care about (or at least get interested in).

Costume designers must also work closely with the PD, the art department, the cinematographer, and the hair and make-up artists to determine the overall design approach and color palette for the film. Then they must decide how the costumes will blend with the concept they have created.

Ralph Finnes and Uma Thurman strike a pose for *The Avengers* (1998).

In addition to the actors, costume designers also create clothing for stunt people, doubles, and animals of every species, puppets and miniatures, robots, dummies and even CG and animated characters!

RESHOOT

1. What is the difference between a location and a set?
2. What considerations should be kept in mind while scouting locations for a film?
3. Name the three parts of the production design process.
4. Which are the advantages of shooting on a set instead of a location?
5. What is the importance of light and what role does it play into the story?
6. Why are actor's costumes and clothes important in the storytelling of a film?

STORYBOARDS