

pictorial elements: sets and graphics

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In this chapter, we want to examine some of the actual scenic elements that make up the picture of the television production. What are the principles of design that should be applied to the use of sets and the construction of graphics? Although the student of production is initially concerned with the technical aspects of reproducing sound and picture—the hardware of microphones, cameras, lights, switchers, and recorders—we must also concentrate on the pictorial elements of what the cameras are looking at. Without a decent setting and without intelligible graphics, the best mechanical reproduction of video components can result only in a technically sharp program with no meaningful content.

10.1 The Concept of Pictorial Design

There are several elements of pictorial design that apply both to sets and to graphics. Although these two topics will be discussed separately in the remainder of this chapter, it may be helpful to consider some of the common elements first.

Functions of Design Elements

In discussing audio production and lighting techniques, we mentioned that there was both a *technical consideration* and a *creative aspect* to the use of these elements. To some extent we have a parallel consideration in examining pictorial elements. Here, however, instead of thinking in terms of technical and creative criteria, it is more applicable to consider the differences between *informational* functions of design and *emotional* or *psychological* functions of design.

First, the *informational aspects of pictorial design* must be considered. They are concerned with conveying appropriate information cues to the audience as accurately and efficiently as possible. In the case of a dramatic

setting, we ordinarily want to tell the audience as much as possible about the time and locale of the action. Where is the scene taking place? What historical period are we in? What time of day is it? We may also want to give other pictorial cues. What is the status of the main character? Where does he or she live? (Of course, there are many dramatic programs where this type of information is deliberately concealed from the audience for purposes of suspense or dramatic surprise.)

Nondramatic programs also need to convey this kind of information data. Are we in a newsroom? Are we on a stage in front of a live audience? Are we in a pulpit? How much do we need to tell the viewers about where they are and what should they know about their surroundings? All television staging considerations should start out with these types of questions.

With graphics, the informational considerations are even more important. The overwhelming use of graphics—especially for simpler productions and basic formats—is to convey information. What is the name of the program (title card)? What is the name of the person talking (super card)? How much of our tax dollar goes to education (pie chart)? What does the race course look like (diagram)? How does the piston work (animated graphic)? How bad was the accident (photo)? In designing graphics, the need for clarity is paramount. The director must always be asking, How can I get this information across as clearly and efficiently as possible? Most of the discussion in sections 10.4 and 10.5 is concerned with this question.

Second, the *emotional or psychological functions of pictorial design* must be considered. There are many subtle messages that the total production design can convey. All of the scenic elements—sets, props, graphics, furniture—combine to give a “feel” or “image” to the program. In a news program, do you want

the image of an advanced technological communications center, of an abstract setting (fig. 10-1), or of a working newsroom (fig. 10-2)? In an instructional TV program, do you want the image of a typical academic setting or of a research lab? In a religious program, do you want the image of a traditional church service or of an avant-garde contemporary movement? In a variety program, do you want the image of a conventional stage presentation or of an electronic collage of entertainment happenings? Again, it is important that the director and designer begin with these types of questions before any decisions are made regarding the construction or assembling of set pieces or graphics.

In dramatic programs, of course, the overall *atmosphere* or *mood* is very important. Staging elements—combined with lighting—will tell us much about the mystery of an event, the state of mind of the hero, the lurking tragedy, the atmosphere of a family gathering, the majesty of an accomplishment, the power behind a particular move, the potential danger behind a closed door, the emptiness of a certain thought. The designer should always be concerned with maintaining or building the mood or feeling of every particular scene.

The emotional function of design would also include creating a given *style* or *continuity* to a program—helping to maintain a unity throughout the entire production. In the use of graphics, for instance, it would be jarring to establish a pattern of cartoons to illustrate a certain process and then suddenly switch to a series of detailed photographs. Several years ago, a church group produced a syndicated variety program dealing with the broad theme of the family. It was a composite of serious vignettes, vocal numbers, comedy sketches, talks, and dances, and featured many different performers and guest stars.¹ The pro-

1. *The Family and Other Living Things*, produced by the Church of the Latter Day Saints, 1976.

duction very easily could have fallen apart into many mini-programs, however, the entire production was held together by its scenic design. Every segment of the program was staged on and around one scenic unit—a large, white, abstract open set combining several different levels, platforms, and stairs. Because it had a scenic unity, the production had a continuity that it otherwise could have lost.

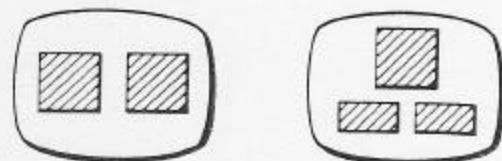
Thus, every pictorial design should serve both an *informational* function and an *emotional* function. The set should not only tell us what time of day it is, but also give us a hint as to what is going to happen this day. The chart should not only tell us the information but emphasize how important the information is.

Elements of Pictorial Design

Artists and critics discourse long and eloquently about the many different factors that constitute aesthetic criteria—unity, harmony, texture, color, rhythm, proportion, and so forth. It is beyond the scope of this book to get into any detailed treatise on aesthetics of the still and moving picture.² The beginning production student should be aware, however, of at least three fundamental elements of pictorial design: (1) balance and mass; (2) lines and angles; and (3) tone and color.

Balance and Mass. The concept of balance was introduced in section 6.3 in connection with camera work. Asymmetrical balance is generally preferred over formal symmetrical balance. The larger a mass, the nearer it must be to the center of the scene in order to preserve a sense of balance with a smaller mass (fig. 10-3). In addition, the placement of mass

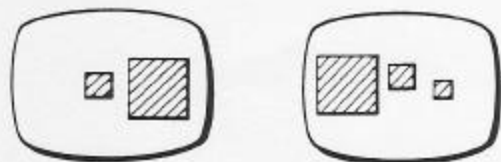
2. For a good discussion, see Gerald Millerson, *The Technique of Television Production* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1972), chapter 15. See also Herbert Zettl, *Sight Sound Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1973), especially chapters 4-6.



(a) Symmetrical balance results in a rigidity and formality that is usually not desired—except for certain occasions.



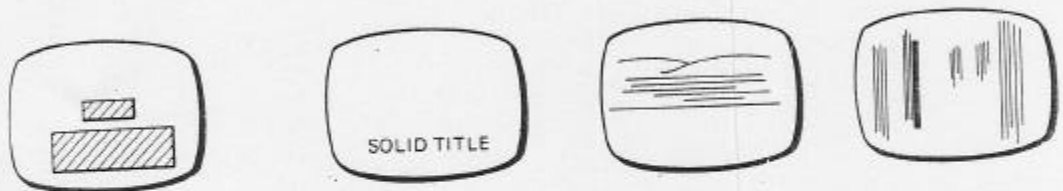
(b) Asymmetrical balance usually is more interesting and dynamic—resulting in a more fluid and creative mood, while just as well balanced aesthetically.



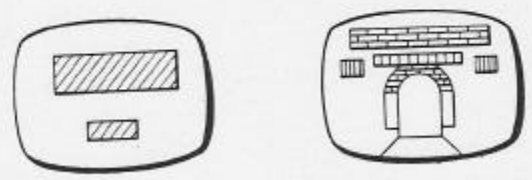
(c) An unbalanced picture can result, however, if care is not taken to position the asymmetrical elements with respect to their weight and mass. Temporarily, this may be desired.

Figure 10-3
Symmetrical and
asymmetrical balance.

within a scenic element will tend to affect the stability of the picture. A heavy mass in the bottom part of the picture implies firmness, solidarity, support, importance. A heavier mass in the top part of the picture projects more instability, suspense, impermanence (fig. 10-4). These considerations of balance and placement have strong implications for the design of sets and graphics as well as for camera composition. A title card with lettering in the bottom of the frame projects a solid, strong



(a) Heavy weight in the bottom of the frame tends to give more stability and security.



(b) If the top of the picture contains more mass than the bottom, the result is a feeling of uneasiness and suspense.

Figure 10-4 Location of mass in the picture.

opening. A scenic unit with heavy ornamentation near the top implies a feeling of uneasiness, suspense.

Lines and Angles. The use of dominant lines is one of the strongest elements available to the scenic designer. Straight lines suggest firmness, rigidity, directness, strength; curved or rounded lines imply softness, elegance, movement. The direction of the dominant lines in a picture will carry strong connotations. Horizontal lines represent serenity, inactivity, openness. Vertical lines are dignified, important, strong. And diagonals imply action, imbalance, instability, insecurity (See fig. 10-5.)

Lines and angles can also be used to reinforce or exaggerate perspective, giving more of an illusion of depth. Painted on the studio floor, *forced perspective* lines can reinforce a great feeling of depth. *False perspective* lines can also be worked into other scenic elements. This kind of false perspective is limiting, however, in that the illusion works from only one specific camera location. (See fig. 10-6.)



(a) Horizontal lines are restful, inactive, stable. Vertical lines suggest solemnity, dignity, dominance. Diagonal lines represent action, movement, impermanence.



(b) Curved lines generally imply change, beauty, grace, flowing movement. With an upward, open curve there is a feeling of freedom and openness. A downward, open curve has more of a feeling of pressure and restriction.



Figure 10-5 The effect of straight and curved lines.

Tone and Color. Working solely in monochrome television, variations in tone or gray scale value can have a substantial impact on scenic elements. The predominant tones determine, to a great extent, the overall emotional image of a production. Light tones result in a delicate, cheerful, happy, trivial feeling, whereas dark tones result in a feeling that is heavy, somber, serious, forceful. Tone also affects balance. A dark tone carries more mass, weighs more, and can be used to balance a larger mass that is light in color or tone. The position of various tones or blocks of dark and light mass in a picture also affect its stability and emotional quality. A dark mass at the top of a picture tends to induce a heavy, unnatural

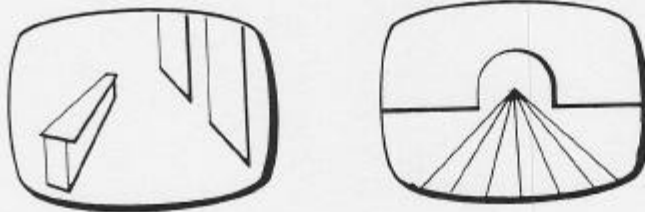
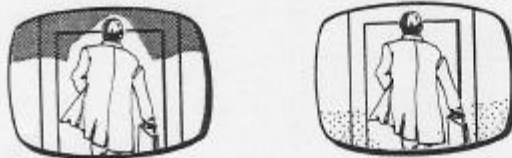


Figure 10-6 Lines and perspective.

A forced perspective can be created by careful use of scenic elements and even by painting false perspective lines directly on the studio floor.



(a) A darker tone tends to imply more mass; thus the darker tone will overbalance the lighter mass (left). A smaller dark mass can be used to balance a lighter mass which is larger (right).



(b) A darker tone, or darker color, at the top of the picture or scenic element will tend to imply a top-heavy feeling of depression (left). The lighter tone, or brighter color, at the top gives more of a feeling of solidity and normalcy (right).

Figure 10-7 Tone and balance.

feeling of entrapment and depression; heavier tones in the bottom of a picture give it more of a stable base. (See fig. 10-7.)

Color is usually discussed in terms of three characteristics. **Hue** is the actual color base itself (red, green, purple, orange, and so forth). **Saturation** refers to the strength or intensity of a color, how far removed it is from a neutral or gray shade. **Brightness** (or *lightness*) indicates where the color would fall on a scale from light (white) to dark (black).

Many of the considerations mentioned for tone also apply to color; for example, highly saturated colors (a vivid red) appear heavier—for purposes of balance—than unsaturated colors (a grayish red).

Various hues are also subjectively classified as *warm* (yellows and reds) or *cool* (blues and greens). Warm colors appear to be “heavier” than cool colors. Much of the secret of achieving good color balance is the art of mixing various hues that are compatible, balancing highly saturated colors with grayer shades, and selecting the right brightness of a particular hue (for example, baby blue rather than navy blue).

All of these elements of design—balance, line, tone—must be kept in mind as we look specifically at the elements of set design and graphics construction.

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