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The Evolution of Production Design

Production design, as defined by The International Film and Television School in Paris, is “the overall look of a film that illustrates the setting and visual style of the story. This includes the design of the sets, location choices, choice and supervision of props.” Although production design, at its start, involved simply choosing a background for filming, in today's contemporary setting, the term has a much broader meaning. Now, the job of a production designer is associated with the “collaboration in the fundamental planning of the film” (Barnwell, 2004). Film is often viewed to be among the most collaborative art forms, as it combines areas of art such as illustration, photography, sculpture, design, architecture, sound, music, animation, and VFX. Therefore, teamwork between production designer, director, DP, and the heads of departments is also vital. Researching and interviewing production designer Maria Djurkovic has greatly opened my eyes to the responsibilities and knowledge of what it takes to succeed in the industry. Her work in *The Imitation Game* stood out in particular, not only because it takes place during World War II, and my Narrative short film is also based in that time period, but because she was able to take a subject that has been exploited on the big and small screen hundreds of times, and make it stand out from the rest. As film and television have evolved with time, the role and responsibilities of production designers have also transformed. From early beginnings, with small budgets and limited technologies, to contemporary affluence, production designers now have knowledge in multiple areas of study, resulting in much more sophisticated and believable productions.

The history of production design is linked to the progression and transformation in film and television. In Europe, as early as 1903, and in later movements including German Expressionism, Italian Neo-Realism, and French New Wave, vast leaps in the art department were made (Barnwell, 2004). The use of the term production designer, however, was first used in 1939 to describe William Cameron Menzies' work on *Gone with the Wind* (Fisher, 2015). Art directors of the time would most likely “not recognize their contemporary counterparts” as the role has altered considerably through the

years (Barnwell, 2004). Considering the constant changes in the creative industry, my first question to production designer Maria Djurkovic was how she got started in the industry. In response, Djurkovic stated that she studied Fine Art at Oxford University, where she spent her time involved in “designing plays and building up a practical portfolio.” She also made sure to apply to the Union, for more opportunities, though she disliked “the limitations and the bureaucracy” within the industry.

As production design has transformed, with new technology, opportunities, and funding, productions have become more extravagant, and expectations have become greater. Before, minimal set design such as simple backdrops and static camera only allowed for a two-dimensional image. Now, with Hollywood studios, more emphasis is placed on the look and design aspect in film and television. In *The Imitation Game*, some of the challenges Djurkovic faced were in recreating the authenticity of the World War II era, as well as building Christopher, the enigma machine fictionally named after Alan Turing's loved one. Unlike the original, Djurkovic decided to make it larger and take it out of its original glass case which subsequently showed the machine's skeleton (Chamberlain, 2015). Changing this aspect brought Christopher to life and allowed lead actor Benedict Cumberbatch to have a closer, more personal relationship with it.

In today's industry, the role of a production designer, like Maria said, consists of “location scouting, drawing, designing sets, briefings, supervising the rest of the art department, graphics, set decoration, supervising any building, [and] conversations with the director and DP.” The industry now requires individuals to have a repertoire of skills and knowledge in the various departments of filmmaking. A production designer's ability to understand and communicate with the director and other heads of departments, as well as being open-minded and willing to collaborate are all key to a successful project.

Most individuals working in a creative industry express that their work is inspired or driven by personal experiences and influences in their lives. Maria stated that it “inform[s] rather than inspire[s]” your work. She continued by saying that “it is critical to be visually aware in all areas.” This can be

through travel, visiting exhibitions, looking at examples of architecture, reading books, watching movies, and meeting people. It is also important to acknowledge that with each new project there is a different set of challenges. As Maria expressed, “one is always delving into a new world” which demands new skills and research. In an interview by Caroline Chamberlain, about Maria's work on *The Imitation Game*, Maria goes into detail about making educated decisions in the design process. “[...] It is treading a fine line between balancing the reality, the truth, but also trying to give it its own life, its own character, its own mood” (Chamberlain, 2015).

Knowing that production design requires research, an open mind, and collaboration, my final questions to Djurkovic addressed my interest in how her role varies from project to project, on what basis she decides what projects to work on, and how much creative freedom she is generally given. Her feedback was invaluable, articulating that, “the role does not change, the relationship with each director does.” Elaborating, she declared that her initial response to the material is crucial, and will often dictate her acceptance or decline of a project. Building on her statement, her chief reason for accepting a job remains the guarantee of “total creative freedom [...] If I am unable to [have my own vision] I end up arguing with everyone.”

Interviewing Maria Djurkovic and researching the past and contemporary role of a production designer was valuable in looking ahead and understanding what to expect going into this industry. Over the years, the role of a production designer has evolved, and will continue to evolve, with advances in technology and demand. Certain aspects, such as research, communication and impartiality will, however, continue to be the backbone of production design. Gaining personal experiences and knowledge outside of the realm of the creative arts can impact and enhance the authenticity in the design of new, past, and future worlds.

Works Cited

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