

Design sets the stage

Esquire's resident design expert **CYRIL ZAMMIT** on the subliminal impact of design on cinema



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABDULLAH TOUK

THE IMPORTANCE OF GREAT SET DESIGN IS CRUCIAL TO REPRESENT THE WORLD YOU ARE BUILDING

Shakespeare famously wrote “all the world is a stage and all the men and women merely players.” So, the importance of a great set design for actual stages in film and television is crucial to represent the world. Beside the soundtrack and the cast—and any number of other factors that go into a production—design is what will please the eye.

The tone for the film industry was set as early as 1925. It wasn't in Hollywood, but rather in the Soviet Union, with Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. Just two years later, *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang transported audiences to an expressionist and futuristic period—and became the most expensive film (at the time) in the process. I could endlessly list the films with iconic set design, from *Ben-Hur* to *Cleopatra*, *James Bond* to *Star Wars* and recently the sequel to the world-building masterpiece *Avatar*.

In the entertainment industry set design defines (almost) everything. It extends the script, supports the context of the storyline, and sets the tone and personality of a show. It also brings visible or subliminal topics to the audience. What would a Wes Anderson film be without his famous symmetry and stunning image composition? His films are immediately identifiable. The clothes, the furniture, the colour blocking, all serve to tell the story.

One of my favourite design films remains *Mon Oncle* by Jacques Tati, which came out in 1958. It is a fierce critique of Modern Architecture and the race to build new concrete accommodation by tearing down human-sized homes—and the interactions they enabled—forever. It was a real slap in the face aimed at Le Corbusier's *Cité Radieuse* in Marseille and other brutalist housing spreading around the world thanks to rapid economic growth in the post-war era. The film was a pure design delight—from the house with circular windows, to the outdoor furniture, to the famous green sofa in the 'living room', a new word in English that the neighbours did not understand.

Later, contemporary design furniture found its way into the biggest science-fiction productions. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick wanted to have 'modern looking' furniture. He opted to use a set of Djinn sofas and chairs by Olivier Mourgue, cutlery by Georg Jensen and even a desk by George Nelson. It created a future by way of the 1960s.

Closer to our contemporary lives, there have been studies to determine the influence that film and TV set designs have on real-world interior design trends. *Mad Men* was very popular in reviving interest in mid-century pieces, while TV shows like *Friends*, *Gossip Girl* and *Sex and the City* proved to be very influential in driving aesthetics and furniture prices.

A few years ago I was doing a lecture about the most expensive furniture design of the 20th century. I was showing a piece by Eileen Green that sold for a record of €21.9 million. As soon as I said its name—the Dragon Armchair—someone in the audience asked me if it had been part of the set design of *Game of Thrones*. The dates didn't match up, as it had been made a hundred years before the show, but maybe they should consider it for the next spin-off? ☺

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