Directing a Film with the Imaginative World of Production Designers: A Portfolio Proposal for a Senior Honors Project for a Bachelor of Arts in the Academy for Creative Media
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Introduction and Background

Effective production design, which includes color, setting, wardrobe, lighting, and mise en scene within a film, can illustrate the world in which a filmic story is told. In the past I have taken a traditional approach to begin the work on a film, meaning that I start from something or someone familiar to me to build the story around. Then I write the script which leads into creating shots and storyboarding until production. However, I would like to approach filmmaking from a different point of view by starting with a look book for production design and finding locations to build the story around. The usual hierarchy of production components is the script usually coming first followed closely by cinematography and editing. In this honors work, I seek to flip this usual order by giving production design greatest prominence leading to the development of my own creative aesthetic.

When I was in tenth grade, I was introduced to American filmmaker Wes Anderson’s work. The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) caught my attention because of its stellar cast and plot, but it also kept me captivated because of the ways he used lighting, color, set design, wardrobe, and props to tell his story. This film tells the story of Gustave H., a renowned concierge at a famous European hotel during a fictional war, and Zero Moustafe, the new lobby boy who becomes his most loyal friend. Wes Anderson introduces the historical hotel beautifully by showing us an exterior image that is a combination of a painting and a video, as shown in the establishing shot from the film (Figure 1). Immediately, this establishing shot creates something
visually unique by bringing the two media together to create a work of art. The movie begins by placing us in two different time periods, which for some directors would be difficult. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), Anderson conveys, precisely, what time we see by distinguishing the colors and furniture in each scene according to each period.

![The Grand Budapest Hotel](image1.jpg)

*Figure 1: The Grand Budapest Hotel (2014) directed by Wes Anderson*

Vincent Lobrutto (2002), a scholar and instructor of film, video, and animation, comments on the use of color in film: “Color can communicate time and place, define characters, and establish emotion, mood, atmosphere, and a psychological sensibility” (Lobrutto 77).

Anderson understands the importance of colors in his films and uses this to his advantage. Figure 2 shows two screenshots from the movie featuring the same lobby at the same wide angle. The top image represents the past, and the bottom image represents the present. A color palette of purple, red, and pink represents the past, in which most of the story takes place, and a palette of green, yellow, and orange tells the story of the present. There are also specific colors that each character wears to place them in both time periods. Techniques, such as color and wardrobe, are
beneficial when trying to keep the audience from losing track of characters, especially when there are so many. These colors also convey the feeling of each time period. The main character, Zero Moustafa is the only one who is in both the past and present timelines. He is seen as very isolated in Figure 2, and although the orange color is warm, there is something that feels unwelcoming about it. It’s as if the orange and green colors make the present day recede further into the past. This is intentional; the dreamy world of pinks and reds is gone for Moustafa, he lives in a world that has had the color drained from it.

Production design is its own character in a Wes Anderson film. His particular approach to production design may seem aggressive at first. The audience immediately knows when they are watching one of his films. The hotel he chose acts as a character as well and the color has a personality that contributes to building the mood of the film. Andrew Stockhausen, the
production designer for The Grand Budapest Hotel, stated in an interview how the process of developing a color scheme could work:

The funny thing is, we started with all this pink, and I think this would be true of any color—if you use too much of it, you stop seeing it because it’s everywhere and you start taking it for granted. So, we found that we had to add in yellows and different colors to kind of cut it back so you could see it more (Grobar 2015).

Anderson wanted this color to symbolize love and friendship in the past. Relationships were built using that pink to represent emotions. This brings production design to the forefront of the film. Anderson is not trying to be ambiguous. Production design allows the audience to truly understand the film and take hints when the director decides to give them. Through design, one can control the entire story and outcome. This is what makes Anderson’s work so unique and synthesizes the media of art and film.

For Anderson, everything is in the details. He adds a scar to someone's face to give them more character; he paints a wall yellow to complement the purple uniforms; he has a symmetrical staircase to frame his characters perfectly between two pillars. All of these elements constitute a signature approach to production design.

All of these visual elements, set design, color, wardrobe, and props, fall under an umbrella term known as production design. In Lobrutto’s guide to production design, he gives an overarching definition that is commonly understood in the industry. He states:

Production design is the visual art and craft of cinematic storytelling. The look and style of a motion picture is created by the imagination, artistry, and collaboration of the director, director of photography (DP), and production designer. A production designer is responsible for interpreting the script and the director’s vision for the film and translating
Lobrutto contends that production design is the built and visual elements of the film that make the world that the characters live in authentic to the topic of the film. I would further describe production design as anything you see in the scene, meaning the decoration, the set design, the wardrobe, anything tangible that the audience can see, even if they do not consciously notice it. Lobrutto suggests that collaboration between the director, DP, and production designer is a vital element of the filmmaking process. However, for student films, it can be challenging to fill all of these roles. Sometimes the director has a vision and, as students, there is a difficulty explaining that vision to others. Thus, in the early stages of film school, we are writing and directing, but also doing the production design and director of photography work. As Lobrutto states, collaboration is essential and most imperative to learn. This is an industry that is built upon collaboration, which I note as an advanced student in ACM. Our production team has also grown to become stronger and more knowledgeable in the field. We have experienced each of the roles and now can refine our skills in the areas we choose.

In student films, there is not usually a budget for production design. There are more white walls filmed than anything else. What takes students so long to learn is that something as little as pinning up a purposeful poster can enhance the story and draw your viewer in. Studying the work of professional directors has taught me how to improve my filmmaking. By seeing different styles and techniques, I have found what I like, what I find aesthetically pleasing, and what works within a scene. All of these elements continue to develop and get refined over time. As an example, I tend to find that using motifs in color and staging in a stylized way is very appealing and I plan to incorporate them in my final project. Anderson is able to control where the audience’s eye moves. Whether to costuming, the wallpaper in a room, its curtains, carpet, or
walls, Anderson’s attention to design shows that it is a crucial element to controlling the shape of the film’s overall narrative.

**Portfolio Purpose and Significance**

As a young filmmaker, my goal is to emulate Anderson’s active way of creating a world for the characters to live in and to have the visual world play just as important a role as cinematography or editing. Production design elevates the story and makes it more authentic. There are many different approaches to production design. One can be subtle, or one can stand out like Anderson. Through my study of production design, I seek to develop and establish my own style and philosophy for filmmaking. As a student filmmaker in the Academy for Creative Media (ACM), Digital Cinema track, I am expected to write and direct a short film for my capstone. To complement that, my honors portfolio will showcase the production design aspect of film production and allow me to reflect on my development as a filmmaker. Additionally, I want to develop an aesthetic for the film and a visual style for my own work. As I complete my project in the Spring of 2020, I will reflect on my overall process of making this film as well as the style I feel I have developed throughout my time in ACM.

Intertwining the preproduction process of production design into this project will alter how I write a script and prepare to shoot my film. In addition, as a studio art minor, I will combine my artistic creativity with filmmaking. Gene Allen, a former president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, recognizes the importance of other visual and storytelling modes in the development of prospective art directors:

I'd want them to be fine art painters, with a deep knowledge of painting and sculpture. We're talking not about the bread-and-butter movies, but movies as an art form. I would want them to be able to write - to study poetry, literature and short stories (which are the
key to movies more than novels are). You combine that visual side of the fine arts with the literary side of screenwriting, and you come close to someone who could be an apprentice production designer.¹

Lobrutto adds that one should look at local art students to help with production design because they already possess the skills and training for the art department on sets. Coming from a very creative middle school and high school, where art was integrated into our entire curriculum including math, science, history, and English classes, I came into college knowing that my studies would somehow incorporate the fine arts. Previously, I believed that art and my major would have to be separate, that studio art was just a hobby on the side. However, through this process, it has become apparent that the two media complement one another.

At the University of Hawai‘i, I had the opportunity to take ART 202, a digital imaging art class. This was one of the first classes that taught me how to combine different media. In this case, instead of making fine art into a film, I made my film into fine art (Figure 3). I used a video still from one of my first film projects at UH and vectorized it on illustrator. I then overlaid the image of cubes that I drew and adjusted the colors as well as redesigning the images to fit together. This is an example of a way to take a moving image and make it still, fine art. For this current film project, I plan to do the opposite. I will integrate my art into the film. I want to use my opportunity to make a capstone film to develop my knowledge of production design further and advance my skill set as a visual artist in both still and moving media.

Portfolio Components

The work for the components of my portfolio will be spread throughout the next year and a half. Chronologically, each part leads into the next with the end result being a final film. Without each component, the final film would not be able to come together. The types of film options for student capstones are narrative, documentary, or experimental. Narrative filmmaking is fiction. The story is drafted before the film is made and there are clear characters with plot points. Documentaries stem from footage of real events, which may include interviews and archival footage, but it is non-fiction storytelling. Experimental films can take on any shape or form, and they do not need to be told in a linear fashion like narrative films and allow for abstract expression (Talib 2004). Films can be a combination of these types of genres.

An experimental film lends itself best to focusing on production design. However, a challenge is telling a story featuring a character who changes in the end. For my purposes, a combination of narrative storytelling and experimental film can showcase production design best
because it allows for more leeway to create an intricate set and have a unique wardrobe that does not have to fit into what is understood to be “realistic.”

The components of my honors portfolio will highlight the different elements and skills I seek to develop over this year-long process. The linear and traditional way of starting a film is beginning with the script. However, for this project that would not be the best way to start. I want to reverse the order and start with the creative and artistic design of creating visual motifs, props, and colors. I would like to try three different approaches to starting the film and gaining inspiration. One approach would be to find a location that might generate a story. A second approach might be using music or poetry in search of a story beginning. The third approach might be to use still frames from past films, drawing on my look-book, to imagine ideas.

The first component of my year-long honors portfolio process will be a look-book that will be completed throughout the pre-production and production process. A look-book is what directors, cinematographers, and production designers use to visualize the story (Figure 4). The example by Williams (2014) is a character look-book which will be one aspect in my look-book as well. This is the first step to making the story come alive. It will show color palettes representing the character's color and the arc of the character. I will also have drawings of wardrobe options for each character as well as what kinds of designs will be on the wall. If anything needs to be built for the set, there will be blueprints and models to visualize that process. Notes about hair and makeup will be included. I will look for motifs in props and also look for where to obtain these props. There will be writing incorporated to explain why each color is chosen and when. The look-book will be a combination of hand drawn and printed images, but this will be a tangible book for my final project. I can scan it to turn in, but I would like the original to be a traditional workbook with my handwriting. The look-book will plan out
everything relating to design on set which allows for a smooth shooting process, as represented in Figure 4. Nothing will be forgotten or left out because each prop will be included and have a specific place and time to be in the scene.

The second component completed will be the script. I will draft it in the summer of 2019. It will be about five to seven pages in length. I plan to research the differences in how a script with heavy production design is different from one with no design preparation. I would like to use production design as a key element while drafting my script so that nothing is random. Everything will be placed purposefully within the scene. Anderson's scripts tend to be so descriptive that they read like a novel. Scripts can be detailed but the action lines are usually brief. Anderson describes exactly how many suitcases are in the room and the initials on each one. Anderson knows that the rescue dog will be a St. Bernard, and this isn't random. However, it isn't good enough for him to just say it's a dog and expect people to understand the world. There is a reason why people can distinguish a Wes Anderson film from the very first shot. There are certain characteristics that are his and that he has built, yet he can make each film unique by using details within his production design to create a new world.

The last component of my portfolio is the final short film which will have a running time of approximately seven minutes. As stated before, I plan to do a combination of narrative and
experimental filmmaking because it will showcase the production design research in the most effective way while also challenging me to keep the audience’s attention with a story. Pre-production will take place in the Fall of 2019, this will include assembling a crew and pitching to the ACM faculty for greenlighting. Once they have approved the project, my team will start location scouting, casting, and raising funds to produce this film. Production will start sometime in February of 2020 to be finished with production in March. Post-production will then begin, and editing will start. This will lead up to the ACM showcase where I plan to show the film, along with the Honors Spring Showcase. Additionally, I plan to submit this film to festivals in Hawaii and all over the world. ACM capstone projects are usually shown at HIFF and go on to do well at other festivals as well. Following this component, I will reflect on the process of making my final film in a reflection essay. I plan to keep a journal along the way for myself as the film progresses to recall the emotions and trials and errors of my decisions. This journal will inform the final reflection essay that will frame the components of my portfolio.

Why a Portfolio?

I chose to present a portfolio because it is the right choice for this type of project that I am passionate about. I want to make a film that showcases what I have learned and something that I am proud of as I graduate from the University of Hawai'i. I would like to be able to use this project to apply to film programs for grad school. Also, I can incorporate the research of production design and the work of professional filmmakers into my project to prove how production design supports the story. A thesis could not give me the same opportunity to showcase a film in the same way that a portfolio can.

Resources and Materials for Portfolio

The ACM Media Center will supply equipment. I plan to apply for the UROP grant for funding
as well as using a platform such as Indiegogo for fundraising. After graduation, I plan to submit to film festivals with the finished film.

**Timetable or the Creative Work (present-graduation)**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester</th>
<th>Honors Program Senior Project-Portfolio Components</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Script</strong></td>
<td><strong>Look Book</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spring 2019</td>
<td>Ideas for script and what format would be the best for showcasing production design. Experiment with visuals, locations, and poetry.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Summer 2019</td>
<td>Draft script during semester and summer. Solidify script to pitch by August 2019.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fall 2019</td>
<td>Pitch to ACM faculty and assemble crew. Script should be finalized by the end of the semester, with minor changes afterward.</td>
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- Spring 2020: A reflection essay will be added recording the process and philosophy of filmmaking. This will also tell the audience what I am showcasing and how it has transformed and developed who I am as an artist.
Works Cited


“Art Departmental.” Art Departmental, artdepartmental.com/.


