

## The Impact of Mise-en-scene on *Mad Men*'s Character Development and Utopia's theme

*Mad men* is one of the best American quality television shows. The long list of awards and positive critiques have shown that the show itself is a masterpiece, created with great dedication. This television series does not only have an authentic and interesting story plot but also a beautiful visual lushness of the mise-en-scene. This paper focuses on analyzing a few mise-en-scene techniques such as music selection, scenes editing, lighting, costume selection, and camera angles. Among all the well-structured episodes, "Babylon" seems to be the first episode that really pulls the attention of the audience to the show. This is where some of the major secrets are slowly revealed. The development of important characters is also sharpened and solidly evolved in this episode, as well as the idea of utopia. The well-structured mise-en-scene of *Mad men* makes the storyline comes to live in the heart of the audience.

"Babylon" is beautifully created by writers Andre Jacquemetton and Maria Jacquemetton, and director Andrew Bernstein. As stated earlier, this episode opens to many crucial secrets. The opening of "Babylon" reveals the child version of Don Draper via a flashback to Adam Whitman's birth, who is Don's younger half-brother. Additionally, the audience also has a glimpse at Joan and Roger's complicated relationship since they have been sleeping together for a while. Perhaps most importantly, the real Peggy and her characteristics are finally introduced. The audience starts to get a sense of what she is about and where she is heading to. Unlike Joan, who uses her sexy appearance to get what she wants, Peggy utilizes her intellectual to earn her status. There is a quote from "Mad Men and Politics", written by Linda Beail and Lilly J. Goren, that said: "[T]he more complex television shows are the shows that spark conversation and dialog, the discussions are not about how funny a show was the night before or how tragic, but actual conversations about the complicated situations in which complex

characters find themselves and what they choose to do in those situation” (17). This quote applies well to *Mad Men* series, especially this episode. “Babylon” spends great effort on creating sophisticated mise-en-scene details to enhance the development of each character and their situations, which makes the show one of the best complex TV shows.

Meanwhile, Don and Rachel’s relationship is also getting more interesting. They want to be together but cannot be together, just like the idea of Utopia that Rachel points out - the good place as well as the place that cannot be. Indeed, the idea of utopia plays a crucial part in this episode. It is one of the big themes in *Mad men*. It does not simply refer to a romantic relationship but gears more toward a figurative meaning, namely the struggling toward a better life of every character within the series, perhaps the audience as well. This theme is what makes “Babylon” special. The precise structured mise-en-scene in this episode helps deliver the idea of utopia so well that it might actually haunt the audience. Especially the last scene, where the song "The Waters of Babylon" is played. So beautifully haunting.

Among all well-structured scenes, there are a few outstanding scenes that really bring up the haunting feeling toward viewers. This paper will do close readings of two rich scenes from the “Babylon” episode. The first scene is from 23:55-26:32, when all the girls from Sterling Cooper offices are used as testing subjects on Belle Jolie’s new lipstick lines. While all the secretaries are busy trying out the new merchandise, many men of the company are spying on them in a separated darkroom with a one-way mirror that connects their room to the girls’ room. Freddy Rumsen, a copywriter at Sterling Cooper, is the one that asks the “chicken” to test out those new lipsticks. Unlike the other girls, Peggy sits quietly observing the rest excitedly putting on the new lipsticks. When Freddy asks her some questions, Peggy replies that “I’m very particular. I don’t think anyone wants to be one of a hundred colors in a box.” Additionally, she

also refers the trashcan full of used tissues as “the basket of kisses”. Through this conversation, Freddy sees a great potential of Peggy and utilizes her writing talent.

The detail of the story in this scene such as being observed without knowing already sounds scary. Yet, the precise mise-en-scene construction somewhat lifts up the haunting effects. First of all, let’s focus on a shot of this scene at 23:55. The effect of double spying in this shot might give the viewers a weird and contradictory feeling. Some will find that it is wrong to spy on others, and in fact, many people don’t want to share their life to public view. However, many people tend to have an interest in spying on others’ private life such as stalking social media, checking the chat history of your loved ones’ or scrolling down the log of calls received. Thus, even when the audience might feel annoyed by the immoral actions of the executives, ironically, they are also publicly spying on the character's lives, just like the male characters are freely watching the girls doing their own things.

The setting of the darkroom is very similar to that of the cinema. The men at Sterling Cooper are sitting watching the girls through a huge one-way mirror, located in the center of the wall, which reminds the audience of big screens in cinema or TV screens. Some of the male characters also judge the appearance of the female characters. Similarly, the audience also judges the characters while watching movies. The only difference between this fictional shot and real life is that the audience is fully allowed to spy on the characters’ lives, which is one of the beauties of the film industry. Therefore, the scene in the darkroom creates an annoying yet indescribable joy, the joy of learning forbidden knowledge without getting caught. Moreover, the similarity between the setting of the darkroom and the cinema, in addition with the point of view shot, purposely invite the audience to join the men in the darkroom as well as to observe the girls’ activities together as the camera shifts its focus to the girls’ room.

Secondly, multiple shots of Joan from the first scene tells a lot about her characteristics. She wears a sexy tight-fitting red dress. This unique bright red dress within the scene emphasizes her power gained from her appealing outlook. From 25:25 to 25:27, she purposely leans forward to the table which is located in opposite direction to the mirror to show her curves and her sexy bottom part. The camera moves from her hair to her bottom part really highlights her sexy appearance, as if she is selling her body to those who are observing her movement. When she is showing off her body, the camera catches her face in a close-up shot at 25:29, which reveals Joan's head and shoulder in central focus of frame. Her smug facial expression, caught in the frame, proves that she knows the men are watching her from the darkroom. The low-angle shot at 25:29 shows that Joan is in control; she has certain confidence at winning the male's attention. Psychologically, the effect of the low-angle shot somehow makes the subject within the frame look more powerful. Moreover, the suitable amount of brightness on her face indicates that she is satisfied with her actions. In other words, she has the full control over what is happening.

Joan is also an excellent actress. She successfully performs an act within an act. The shot at 25:40 in the first scene really captures her acting skills. She pretends that she is only looking at the mirror to check on her self-appearance, and that she doesn't know there is a bunch of executives on the other room watching her. Additionally, the fact that she is waiting until the end of lipstick testing session to make her move proves that every step is carefully calculated. She knows that there is a better chance of getting more attention from more people at the end of the session than at the beginning. She is a clever woman who can utilize the power of her appearance and her acting skills to manipulate the male characters. Moreover, unlike the shot at 25:29, part of Joan's face is dark and shady in this shot, which makes her look a bit mysterious and

pretentious. Mysterious in a way that might attract the male characters. Yet, it also reflects her pretentious performance that she is putting on.

Another important character in this room is Peggy, who is totally out of those frames that have Joan as the center. Equivalently, Joan never appears in frames that have Peggy as the focus. This might indicate that Joan and Peggy have very different personalities and perspectives. While Joan's red dress emphasizes her seductive body and how Joan uses that advantage to obtain her power, Peggy's outfit reflects her seriousness in the workplace. Peggy wears a dark color and high-neck dress with a light gray-blue collar, which is very similar to the image of the typical work clothes. At shot 25:54 - 26:10, Peggy is sitting in the corner of the room, observing other female workers excitedly testing out the lipsticks. These two details imply that Peggy is different from the rest and she is, in a sense, isolated. At shot 25:54, the blue shelf and the blue box of tissue match well with Peggy's outfits, which creates a pleasing view for the audience. Additionally, office supplies such as book, pencil, and lamp are also placed in her frame, which emphasizes that Peggy is diligent; she is the type of person that prefer to gain power based on her own works and her intellectual talent.

Another interesting detail that helps compare Joan and Peggy is that both of them have their own frame that captures the backs of their heads. While Joan has her hair tied in a fancy tight round ball (25:24), Peggy has a very simple ponytail hairstyle (25:59). This indicates that Joan invests a lot more effort and time in her appearance compared to Peggy. Moreover, Peggy's frame focuses on the nape of her neck with little appearance of skin. Joan's frame shows the majority of her skin since she is wearing a low-necked dress. Their outfits and styles clearly suggest that they are the opposite of each other.

While the scene settings, outfits, and camera angles describe the differences between the two girls, they are somehow connected by the underlying song. “Lipstick” by David Carbonara is a beautiful combination of muted trumpets, punchy trombones, low flutes, snapping fingers, walking bass lines, one-handed laconic piano playing and the Hammond organ (Smith). The song provides a sense of rebellion. The first few notes of the song, which are very light and attractive, start when Joan begins her sexy “performance”. Then Peggy comes in at 25:51, exactly when the song shifts its melody to create a stronger, more colorful, and yet still attractive feeling. Both of them are in the same song, but they are presented by different sets of melody. They are both rebellious in some ways; they both want to become something better: earning a better position, getting a better salary, having a better life, perhaps approaching their utopia. The different melodies within the song emphasize their unique ways of getting what they want. The effect of “Lipstick” is intelligently integrated into this scene to create unique feelings of the audience toward each character as well as to foreshadow hints of what is coming next.

The second scene is from 44:30-45:07. Don Draper comes to visit Midge, his mistress. Then Roy, who is Midge’s friend, shows up and asks them whether they would like to come to see Midge’s friend performance. The three of them finally agree to go watch the performance in the Gaslight Cafe together. During the time staying at the Cafe, Roy continuously antagonizes Don and keeps criticizing the emptiness and the blatant lie of the advertising industry and the mass consumption. Their intense conversation ends when “The Waters of Babylon” song starts. While the song is performed, several scenes are integrated and transitioned smoothly: a scene with Rachel rearranging the men’s ties at her stores, Betty putting lipsticks on her daughter Sally, and lastly the affair of Joan and Roger at the fancy hotel room. The following paragraphs rise its interests in how music and scene transition helps the audience have a better insight into Utopia.

Before getting into the music and scene editing analysis, let's have a look at the physical setting of this scene. The location of this scene is the Gaslight Cafe, located in Greenwich Village, NY. Every little details and actions happened in this scene creates a nostalgic feeling for those who understand the hippie culture of the 1960s. The clothing, the style of chair and table, the stage setting - all reflect the hippie coffee style. One specific example is that the Gaslight was called a "basket house". People who performed there would pass around a basket at the end of their performance in hope of getting paid. Their only income source is from the audience and not the coffee store (Beacham). The shot at 43:58, when Midge puts money in the basket for the reading poem performance, recalls perfectly the "basket house" in the 1960s and the culture of the hippie community. In the book *Mad Men*, written by Gary Edgerton, there is a quote that said: "Madmen's visual design brilliantly implements historical signifiers. It speaks the visual language of the era" (56). This quote expresses perfectly how madmen use many little visual effects to present the historical aspects as well as the cultures of the 1960s.

While not being seen, music can really enhance the visual and the story construction of the scene. Using "The Waters of Babylon" as a closing song creates a haunting and trapped feeling to everyone, including the characters and the audience. The song is the lamentations of Israel (Jewish) in exile. They were living in an oppressive and isolated condition. They were always longing for a better life. Similarly, every character within *Mad Men* is trapped and isolated in one way or another. For instance, Midge follows the beat generation which is a community that has its own rules and is totally separated from the "normal" society. Peggy is not familiar with the New York culture; she cannot fit in. Don Draper is the true exile. In the bar, Don's outfit and lifestyle are very different from the rest. He is literally separated from the hippie

environment. Moreover, he has been truly exiled since the moment he killed Dick Whitman, his old-self, in hope of achieving a better life. Yet, that better life is still nowhere to be found.

The effect of the song is so strong that it traps Don's attention, who, a few seconds ago wanted to leave the bar. In addition with the zoom-in camera movement from 44:29 to 44:34, the audience has to stop paying attention to the storyline for a moment, and simply listen and feel what the music gets to say. Moreover, since the camera movement stops at the medium close-up shot, focusing on Don's face, the viewers have to question what Don has in mind. Then, they are most likely to join him on a journey of thoughts on the topics of isolation and Utopia.

The transition between multiple shots really helps emphasize the different approaches to the idea of utopia. The scenes of Don, Rachel, and Betty are perfectly blended one shot into another using the dissolve transition technique. Applying the dissolve technique in this scene conveys a strong connection between them; and how they are all tied to "The waters of Babylon" song. As discussed earlier, Rachel and Don's ambiguous relationship is very similar to Utopia; they want to be together but cannot officially be together since Don has his own family and a beautiful wife, Betty. Another way to understand Utopia is through Rachel's Jewish related culture. She understands what it is like to be a part of a culture but not be part of that culture, which is a very lonely feeling. She does not fully belong to the American culture nor the Jewish community. Thus, putting the shot of Rachel right after Don's enhances the isolation theme and the longing for the desire that they both can never have.

The shot of Betty putting lipsticks on her daughter gears more toward the nostalgic feeling. While Don and Rachel's relationship represents the desire for a happier life in the future, Betty desires something from the past. The image of a mother doing makeup for her daughter is very common. Thus, it is likely that Betty is missing her happy childhood. Although Betty's



family has not been introduced, we still can assume that she believes she had a happy childhood experience. The real childhood is not necessarily a happy one. What matters is what Betty remembers and believes. And this shot shows that she wants to live in that happy childhood moment again; the moments that can never be revised. They all long for the perfect land, the better and happier life, either that unrealistic idea is derived from the past or future. That better life is just like “Utopia” - an unrealistic place that only exists through our minds.

In conclusion, the precise use of the mise-en-scene such as scenes editing, lighting, costume selection, and especially music selection helps emphasize the development of character in the first scene and the utopia theme in the second scene. *Mad Men* is one of the better shows that utilizes the use of mise-en-scene to reinforce the characteristics of each character and to foreshadow bigger story plot. Additionally, the use of music in both scenes and the simulation setting between the darkroom and the cinema really forces the viewers to react emotionally to the story. It has created a solid bridge that connects the audience to the series in a mysterious way. Moreover, while watching the show, viewers have a chance to partially live in the world of *Mad Men* because the realistic and the fictional details are smoothly mixed together, expressed through the perfect uses of the mise-en-scene.

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