Shaping Dreams: Design Ideas and Design Fiction in Movie and Television Production Design

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to show how the design process influences the planning and development of *moving images*, i.e., live-action movies, animation, and television. The paper documents the significance of design in the early stages of film and television production and shows how industry practitioners value the contribution of designers in developing the narrative through visual support. The paper suggests a comparison of design and screenplay research and analysis. In addition, it touches on the subject of design fiction in the case of a project involving collaboration of production design students from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Design, and screenwriting and producer students from The National Film School of Denmark. Finally, this article provides insight into one of the newer trans-disciplinary developments in design, namely the cross-pollination taking place between the fields of design research and film research. As a result, the paper contributes to our understanding of the expanding concept of design.

Keywords: design concept, production design, design fiction, design process, screenwriting, design incarnations.

INTRODUCTION

There are certain moments in movies where the background can be as important as the actor. The design of a film is the script.

- Ridley Scott[1]

When looking at cinematic style or trying to understand motion picture production the significance of production design and the contribution of designers working in cinema or television production is often neglected. However, when film practitioners or, as in the following examples, production designers themselves describe their craft, the significance becomes apparent. The aim of this paper is to show how the design process (especially in the early development or pre-pre-production of the movie)

influences the development of final cinematic work. The paper also suggests a theoretical language handling the design process within the production of *moving images*. (As Noël Carroll, I use the term *motion pictures* or *moving images* in lieu of the term *film* to avoid the misunderstanding linking motion pictures to the physical medium of photographic colloid film (Carroll, 2006, p. 3, 63)).

The first credited production designer in the history of film, William Cameron Menzies, described his method of working as art director in major motion picture productions in a 1930 interview (Menzies, 1976).[2] He points out that the design process most often begins the moment the art director receives the movie screenplay. However, he immediately adds that it is of great advantage for him to know something of the story as it is being constructed. The designer will have many suggestions to offer, he points out, and then continues describing the film designer's general and still recognizable method.[3] Seventyfive years later, when planning the comic book adaptation *Batman Begins* (2005), co-writer/director Christopher Nolan and production designer Nathan Crowley worked closely together producing visual material and building models related to the imaginary world of Gotham City. In an interview, Crowley describes that this was done in what he characterizes as "pre-pre-production"—when only a few pages of screenplay existed (Lisowski, 2012). The design of the imaginary world was thus developed and created simultaneously with writing the screenplay. In the same manner, contemporary production designer Alex McDowell emphasizes the importance of movie production design being developed prior to or simultaneously and in conjunction with, the screenplay (Halligan, 2012, p. 140). There are many examples of this kind of writer/director and designer collaborations in both film and television. The work of designers during the preliminary phases of pre-production, as well as in the final stages of post-production is, however, often overlooked by both design and film research. The

popular conception is that *film design is a process closely following an existing screenplay*, the result of which can be analyzed as the sum of scenic elements (decoration, prop, or costume) represented in the moving image. As I will show, this represents a somewhat limited understanding of the connection between the design process and the production of moving images rooted in both film and design theory.

PRODUCTION DESIGN AS VIEWED BY FILM THEORY AND DESIGN THINKING

Film theory regards motion picture design or production design generally as reactive in relation to a dominating narrative, and in design theory, motion picture design is primarily perceived as representations of design within the moving image. As mentioned above, the popular conception is that *film design is a process closely following an existing screenplay.* This view is summed up in the first phrase of Affron & Affron: "It all starts with the story. Design decisions follow, their purpose in general, to support the narrative" (Affron & Affron, 1995, p. 4). However, when closely examined, reality turns out to be different: In the case of television drama series production, the designer is most often recruited before the screenplay is completed, while in large-scale cinema-productions, the screenplay and the production design might be developed simultaneously through collaboration between designers and writers. Production designer (and founder of the *5D institute – future of narrative media* at University of Southern California) Alex McDowell has often advocated this method of simultaneous development of a *storyworld* as the basis for movie- and/or cross-media-production design:

> Certainly in contemporary filmmaking, there is so much emphasis on the visual component of storytelling, there is so much more capability for the environment to be part of the storytelling, and actually the writing is the least collaborative part of a very collaborative medium. If you were to put the writing process inside the design process or have the two things interlocked, then a visual idea emerges or it becomes a context that intriguers narratives and it can actually trigger new storytelling. This is not about undermining the writer at all, it's really about allowing the development phase when stories are developed to more closely resample the actual way that films are made.[4]

The idea of the screenplay as being the first and most important pre-filmic container is often not supported by real-life experience in development of big scale motion picture development. In film aesthetics the visual *style* of motion pictures has primarily been understood in relation to the camera and its reproducing mechanisms of lenses, photographic film, and editing techniques. Contrary to older recording techniques such as the drawing or painting, the camera records an already existing reality. This characteristic of the camera is typically regarded as the foundation of film as an art form. Traditionally, the result of the recordings made by the camera has been seen as belonging to either one or the other of the following domains: If the recorded reality was pre-existing and recorded as is, the resulting images were regarded as a neutral recording, made for factual genres such as news or documentary. If the recorded reality was created for the purpose of being recorded—through acting, but also with cinematic effects such as stop-motion recording, etc.—following the directions of the script, the resulting images were regarded as fictitious, i.e., as art or entertainment. The tensions between fiction and non-fiction are central to film theory. For instance, influential classic film theorists and critics such as Sigfried Kracauer and André Bazin have characterized non-realistic studio-based cinema as restricted in its relation to the realistic essence of the fundamental photographic medium. The history of film style inspired by Kracauer ((1997)[1960]) is understood through the antithesis between the realist *actualités* (documentaries) of the film pioneers Auguste and Louis Lumière and the formalist movie magic (fiction films based on cinematic effects) of George Méliès. Kracauer accepted the existence of both, but concludes: "As in photography, everything depends on the 'right' balance between the realistic tendency and the formative tendency; and the two tendencies are well balanced if the latter does not try to overwhelm the former but eventually follows its lead" (Kracauer, 1997 [1960], p. 39). In addition Kracauer connects the idea of total cinematic design with fascist ideology (Kracauer, 2004 [1948]), p 76). The withdrawal from reality to the controllable environment in the film studio was perceived as being equivalent to the state of mind in the Weimar Republic that paved the way for Hitler. From this point of view film scenography or production design was ideologically suspect. However, the dichotomy between formalist and realist cinema, used by Siegfried Kracauer as ammunition in a discussion pro et contra use of studio design, is, as George Sadoul mentions, fundamentally misleading.

> … the antithesis between Lumiére and Méliès, are false oppositions when one attempts to find them in them a solution to the problem of realism and art. Films completely outside time have been shot out doors; completely realistic films have been shot in the studio. (George Sadoul quoted in Barsacq, 1976, p. 121)

The notion of a realist essence in cinema is also troubled by the fact that the moving image in (the total design of) animation historically precedes photographic cinema. Lev Manovich even understands digital cinema as a subgenre of painting and a return to the pro-cinematic practices of the nineteenth century (Manovich, 2001, p. 295). For Manovich, the coming of digital cinema meant not only a technological breakthrough, but also an actualization of the initial potential of the moving image.

Design theory: film design as mere decoration

The understanding of cinema aesthetics in classic film theories is that it concerns ways of recording real events on a colloid based media. It follows from this that camera work and editing determine the aesthetics of a movie. The film's design, on the other hand, merely exists as parts of reality to be recorded. This has been an underlying assumption even with well-balanced film theorists as, for example, David Bordwell. Bordwell has first and foremost analyzed film style through its technical register (Bordwell & Thompson, 2001, p. 327-350 and Bordwell, 2002). (He is, however, far from uninterested in cinematic design.[5]) Most of the literature that focuses on production design refers particularly to *representations* of scenographic decorations in the photographic image. Most of the historical or theoretical literature on production design, such as Affron and Affron (1995) and Ramírez (2004), view production design and art direction mainly through the way in which architectural sets function as representations. Donald Albrecht—in *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (1986)—even understands the influence of modern architecture through its presence in popular American movies of the golden age of Hollywood. Tashiro (1998) on the other hand suggests considering the totality of motion picture design, but without any reflections on design thinking and terminology in general.[6] However, in order to fully understand motion picture design or production design, one must first do away with the concept that has been dominant in film theory, that of a photographic and realist *essence* of cinema. Secondly, one must adjust the perception of visual style in moving images as primarily connected to the reproducing mechanisms of photography and editing techniques.

HOW DESIGN THEORY CAN CONTRIBUTE TO MOTION PICTURE DESIGN

Although design theory and analysis has shown little interest in motion picture design, design thinking suggests concepts that may clarify the analytic treatment of motion picture design and, specifically, production design. These concepts can also offer us a language to describe design in the early and defining phases of motion picture production. Contrary to most film theory mainly interested in understanding media aesthetics and interpretation or, more recently, production culture (Caldwell, 2008), design theory focuses on process and the manner in which design thinking contributes. The recent interest in topics as for example co-design is symptomatic of a shift in focus from aesthetics to process and innovation in design research, which has taken place in design theory since the 1970es. Bryan Lawson (1980, p. 23) bypasses the delicate problem of defining the slippery term *design* by deliberately shifting attention to the *design process*. In a similar manner, design philosopher Klaus Krippendorff (2007) finds no sense in regarding design artifacts without understanding their history and creation. This dichotomy between attention directed at the design artifact *or* at the design process is underlined by the somewhat confusing characteristic of the term *design* itself. The witty remark by British professor John Heskett that *design is to design a design to produce a design* is not all a joke (Heskett, 2002, p. 3). The sentence includes both aspects of design, as a noun (artifact) and as a verb (process), thus focusing on the problem of terminology. This duality also exists in the use of the term design when applied to design in moving images and production design. The lack of precision in general design terminology is reflected in the lack of precision in analysis. Per Galle suggests a pragmatic solution to this problem. Inspired by a basic understanding of the *design-process* as a fundamentally linear system beginning with an *idea* or a *problem* and ending with an *artifact* in use, Galle is able to name and characterize the different manifestations of design on the path from one form to the other (Galle, 2010, p. 56-57). The simple and generally accepted premise suggested by Galle is that any design begins its journey when the designer faces a particular problem in need of a solution. The formulation of this problem results in a *design-assignment.* From this initial form, the designer creatively proposes a solution, the *design-representation*. Based on this *design-representation,* the design is then shaped into its final appearance as the *design-artifact*. This design process includes feedback-loops that connect the different design manifestations. If accepted, a modification of Galle's basic design concept will clarify some of the general characteristics of design in moving images and production design.

FILM PRODUCTION AND DESIGN PROCESS

Inspired by the American theatre scholar Eric Bentley, I use the term *design-incarnation* to refer to the different manifestations during the production design process (see Figure 1). Eric Bentley views the dramatic text as having a double existence, first as a written manuscript and subsequently acted out as performed and spoken word (Bentley, 1964, p. 133). Thus, I will suggest an elaboration of the various incarnations that comprise the production design process (see Figure 2). The development of production design does not necessarily begin with a *design-assignment* or design problem. Modern screenplay-research generally considers the screenplay as the *problem-statement,* which the creative production team of the film seeks to convert into cinematic structure (Redvall, 2009, p. 45). During the golden age of Hollywood production, the screenplay was considered necessary for the studio to be able to control the quality of the not yet produced film. The screenplay was considered to be and described as

the decisive *blueprint* of the film (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 2004 [1985], p. 94). But as I have suggested above, the starting point of a project could be an early collaboration without any existing screenplay that could be described as a mental concept existing only in the mind and imagination of a designer or writer/director, an abstract idea or vision. Movie and art director Alfred Hitchcock is here essentially describing the design-idea as a pre-filmic vision:

> Sometimes the first idea one has of a film is of a vague pattern, a sort of haze with a certain shape. There is possibly a colourful opening developing into something more intimate; then, perhaps in the middle, a progression to a chase or some other adventure; and sometimes at the end the big shape of a climax, or maybe some twist or surprise. You see this hazy pattern, and then you have to find a narrative idea to suit it. Or a story may give you an idea first and you have to develop it into a pattern.
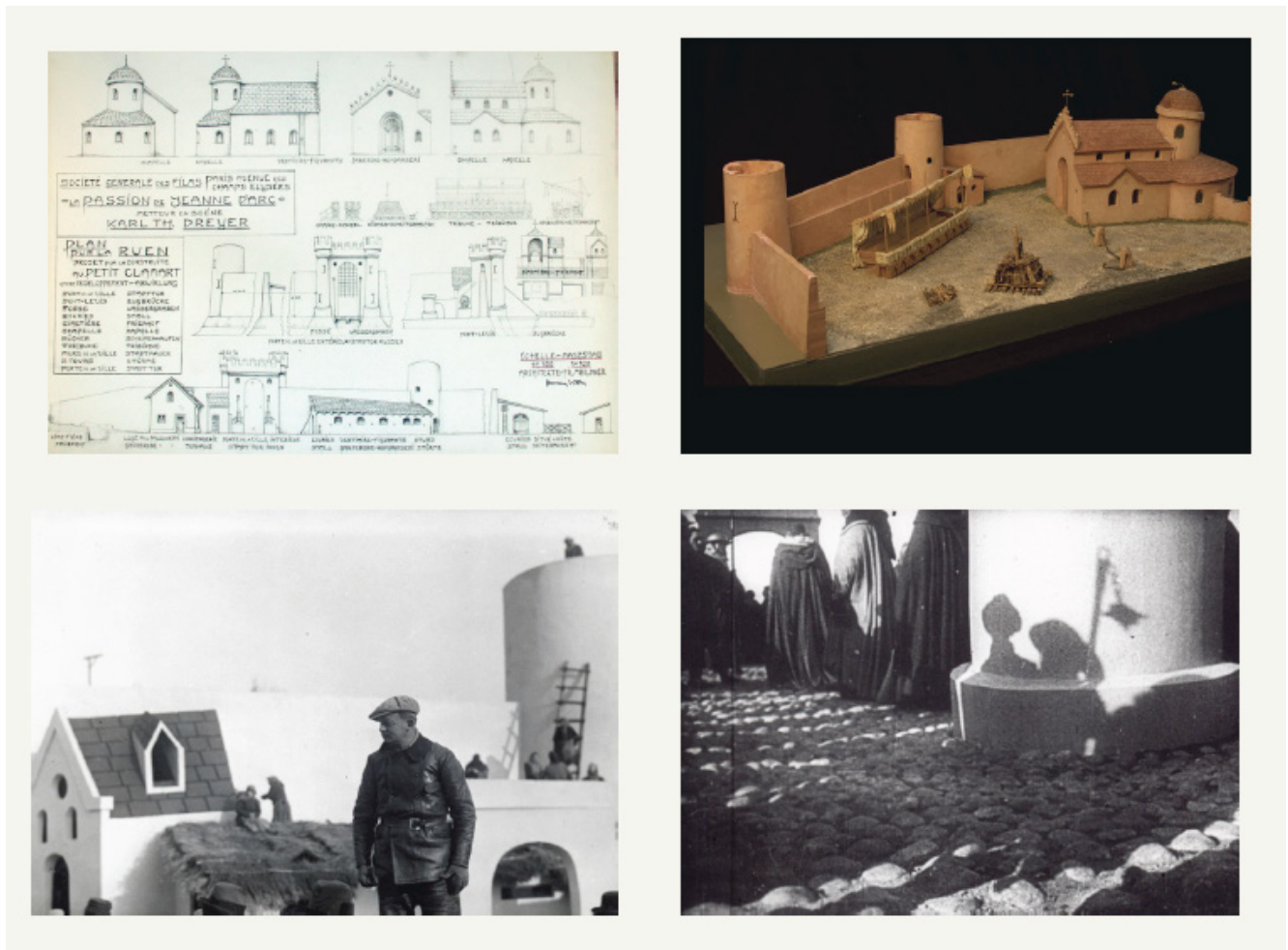> Alfred Hitchcock: *Direction* (in Davy, 1937)

Figure 1. Hermann Warm's *design plans* for Carl Th. Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) include a two-dimensional drawing and three-dimensional model of the castle in Rouen. In the lower section a production still from the set (*physical design artifact*) showing Dreyer in the foreground, and finally a frame grab from the film itself as *visual design artifact*. Art direction: Hermann Warm and Jean Hugo. Cinematography: Rudolph Maté. Photo of model: Kristian de Freitas Olesen. All prints from the Danish Film Institute, Stills & Poster Archive.

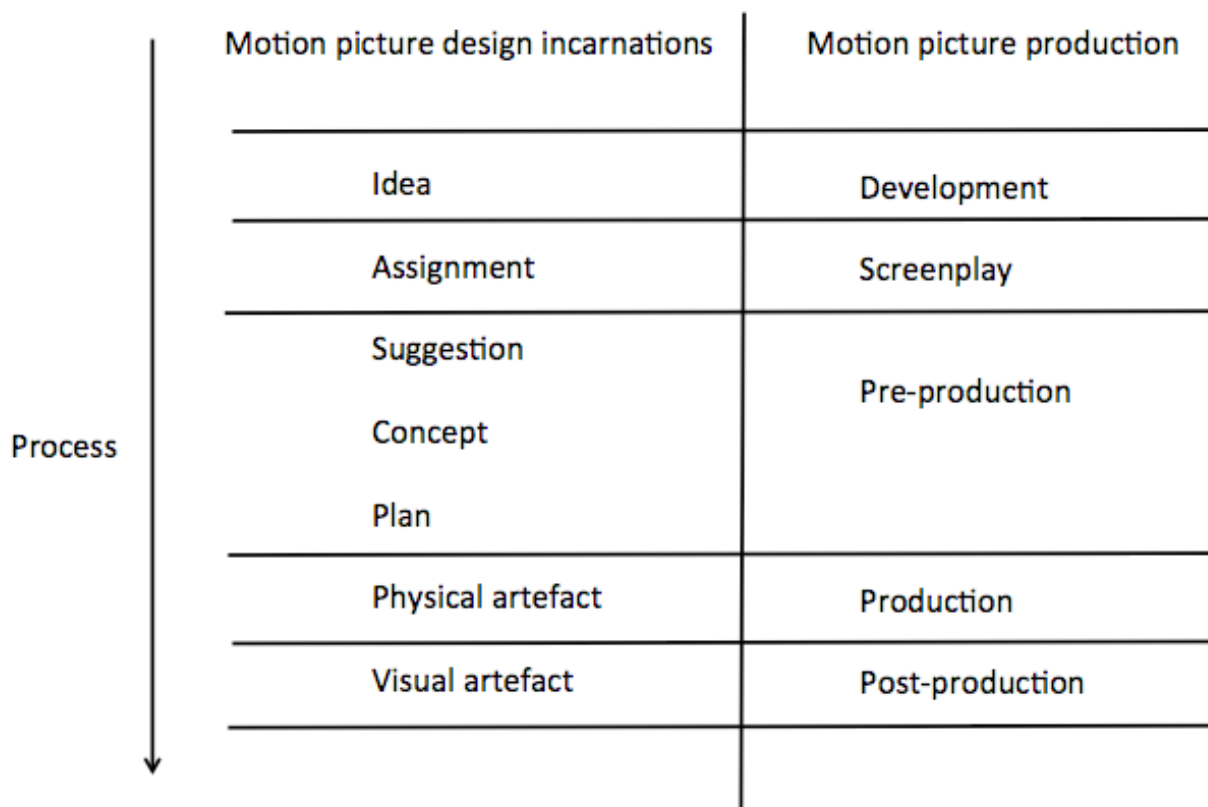| Motion picture design incarnations	Motion picture production
Idea	Development
Assignment	Screenplay
Suggestion	Pre-production
Concept	
Plan	
Physical artefact	Production
Visual artefact	Post-production

Process

Figure 2. Simplified model of the production design process referring to the phases of film production. ©Jakob Ion Wille

The description of the pre-filmic vision is supported by neuroaesthetic research on the visual experience, as Portuguese/American neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (1999, cited in Grodal, 2009, p 163) compares motion pictures and the pre-linguistic experience:

> *What goes on within each shot, the different framing of a subject that the movement of the camera can accomplish, what goes on in the transition of shots achieved by editing, and what goes on in the narrative constructed by a particular juxtaposition of shots is comparable in some respects to what goes on in the mind, thanks to the machinery in charge of making visual and auditory images, and to devices such as the many levels of attention and working memory.*

This pre-filmic vision could be defined as the *design-idea*. The first *materialization* of this idea might then be defined as a *design-suggestion* (in form of a so-called pre-visualization or visual idea, mood boards besides research and reference material). The still basic but expanded chain of *design-incarnations* could then be described as emerging from the *design-idea*, to *design-assignment* (the screenplay) and *design-suggestion*, then manifesting itself in visualizations as concept models beside concept and production art of characters and possible arenas and images in the *design-concept* and finding stable format of technical drawings and models in the *design-plan* and finally produced as a *design-artifact*.

The design-artifact of production design in live action films can be understood in terms of two physically separate but indexically connected incarnations. Firstly, one can understand the design-artifact as the physical three-dimensional studio or set and all scenic elements designed for the use of performing and recording dramatic action. Secondly, it can be understood as the graphic two-dimensional moving image representing dramatic action in time

on screen. To differentiate, I suggest the terms the *physical artifact* and the *visual artifact* of the motion picture design. (An exception to this duality would be the case of digital animation, as the physical artifact is non-existent. Artifact and image are made of the same digital material).

> Here we have not only a creation of space as primary compositional framework (above and beyond the cinematic frame) but the camera, as an agent of perspective, becomes a compositional 'element' rather than a compositional 'tool'. Through the virtual camera, and constructed or composited 3D spaces, digital cinematic forms no longer stage for the camera but stage and compose the camera itself as a form of specific purpose scenic content. The constructed space becomes the macro-frame work, what I've termed the mise-en-space, whereby camera 'objects' are composed into the space to serve as a viewer-aware spatial-frame, extending well beyond the momentary framed window. (Jones, 2007, p. 240)

PRE-FILMIC CONTAINERS: PLOT AND PLAN
Generally, film production is divided into three or possibly four production phases. These phases are referred to as *pre-production*, *production* and *post-production*, sometimes supplemented by a preliminary phase for (screenplay) *development*. A simplified model of the production design process referring to the phases of film production (*pre-production*, *production* and *post-production*) and incorporating design incarnations could be a useful tool for analyzing the design strategies used (see figure 2). Within motion picture production, visual design work is thought of as taking place mainly during the pre-production and production phases, but after the screenplay has been finished. As shown in the preceding paragraphs, this conception of design work is limiting and misleading. Some of the magic of motion pictures is that it can be perceived as a projection of a mental image, after a physical production, existing only as illusion in the mind of the spectator. In the pre-production phase, as well as during the production process, screenplay plays an important role, but however important the screenplay might be, a paradox of conventional cinema is that the audio/visual structure of a film has been thought of as mainly contained in textual structure. As demonstrated in the previous paragraphs, design thinking and language can help balance this misconception of motion picture development, replacing it with a potentially clearer conceptualization including both textual (narrative) and visual (design) structures. The use of terms such as *design-idea* and *design-suggestion* is useful in that connection. While design language can help us define various design

manifestations or incarnations, assessing the influence of design during the early development phase of motion picture production could provide insights that might question the status of the screenplay and consequently one of the premises of screenplay research that would support a new understanding of production design.

SHAPE DREAMING: ONE SHAPE DREAMING OF ANOTHER
In the paragraphs above, I have described motion picture design through a series of design-incarnations created throughout the design-process. Any of these design-incarnations would be worthy of serious in-depth research potentially revealing how the various design-incarnations are related to the whole of the design process. As suggested, the nature of design research in general, and production design research specifically, mirrors research in the field of screenwriting. First, it is impossible to understand production design without understanding the importance of dramatic narrative or action. Secondly, research in screenplays resembles research in design in the transient nature of its subject. If one studies the screenplay, one has to choose among different formats, for example treatments, different drafts, the final draft, spec-script, transcripts, published script, etc., not necessarily written by one but maybe several screenwriters. The screenplay exists as a container or plan for the moving images, as does the design, in its different incarnations. The etymology of *plot* (as in the narrative of a screenplay) and *plan* (as design) share a common origin: plat; map. The plan and the plot both serve as "maps". We might also understand some essential, albeit banal truth concerning the nature of design mirrored in the understanding of the screenplay. The Italian poet, film and theatre director and semiotician Pier Paolo Pasolini (1965) describes the screenplay in a fashion that might also inspire a flexible, even poetic, definition of design that could prove useful in understanding design in moving images and production design. Pasolini defines the screenplay as a *Structure that wants to be another Structure.* In other words, the screenplay is seen as a paradoxical artifact, which on the one hand has an autonomous existence, but on the other hand only makes sense as a potential motion picture. The screenplay then has a diachronic form as a textual structure suggesting the structure of the moving image. The reader of screenplays must be able to visualize the text. In the same manner, the observer of any design suggestion, concept or plan for moving images must have

an understanding of is dramatic narrative content. Metamorphism and re-shaping also rests in the core of design thinking as noted by Latour:

> I see in the word "design" (in addition to its modesty, its attention to detail and the semiotic skills it always carries with it), is that it is never a process that begins from scratch: to design is always to redesign. There is always something that exists first as a given, as an issue, as a problem. Design is a task that follows to make that something more lively, more commercial, more usable, more user friendly, more acceptable, more sustainable, and so on, depending on the various constraints to which the project has to answer. In other words, there is always something remedial in design. (Latour 2008)

The idea of one structure wanting to be another is adaptable for design thinking in general. We might here think of one shape wanting to be another as a design-suggestion hopeful of becoming a design-plan, and a design-plan aspiring to become a design-artifact. The idea is particularly persuasive in motion pictures; touching not only the design process but also the very spine of cinema itself. The basic illusion of moving images is created by one picture rapidly replacing another. This pattern is repeated in all the units of the cinematic work. One take is followed by the next, as the dramatic scene is justified only by its successor as *one shape dreaming of another*.

DESIGN FICTION

In the preceding, I have established a framework for facilitating an analytical understanding and handling of what in broad terms has been described as motion picture design or production design. I have shown how the concept of describing design manifestations or incarnations during motion picture

Figure 3. One of the teams of screenwriters and production designers working within the framework of a program involving DR (National Danish Television) TV-DRAMA; students from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Design, Department of Production Design; and producers and screenwriters from The National Film School of Denmark. Production design student Sune Ahler supervised by production designer Knirke Madelung during development of a design concept for the television series *Over Hækken* (scriptwriters Jesper Fink (in the foreground) and Rikke Lassen,). Barbara Adler and I have participated in developing the program since 2004 on behalf of the department of production design. Photo: ©Jakob Ion Wille

production can make the design work visible and clearly identifiable. In addition, I established the value of design work done in the pre-pre production or early development phases of the production. In closing, it should be noted that the notion of designers developing concepts inspired by or in the context of fiction is not an unknown in design thinking. Design philosopher Klaus Krippendorff (2006, p. 170) underlines the link between design and narrative thinking and encourages designers to use fictional frameworks when thinking in future design. Using so called *what-if-scenarios* as a common point of departure in development of both design and fiction is occasionally labeled *design fiction* (Thomas Markussen & Eva Knutz, 2013). Working in design fiction, however, mostly refers to technological development and development of design in imagined settings for future use in the real world. The design process here is one of designers and writers and/or directors developing content together using fictional frameworks for the benefit of motion picture screen fiction. In a way, the phenomenon is comparable with the so-called Mike Leigh method in film theory that places emphasis on contributions of improvising actors in the cinematic development and production (Coveney, 1993). The process begins without a script, but with a basic premise or storyline from which characters and action is developed through lengthy improvisations by the actors.

Experimental work in design fiction using traditional graphic and physical design artifacts has been carried out by Thomas Markussen and Eva Knutz at Design School Kolding within a fictional framework by writer Kaspar Colling Nielsen. The method here is thought of as related to other experimental design methods such as *speculative design*, *critical design* and *co-design*. During the past ten years, an educational partnership between production design students from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, School of Design and screenwriting and producer students from The National Film School of Denmark has been the forum for establishing new routines for developing concepts for television drama series for, and with support from, DR Fiktion, a department within DR (Danish Broadcasting Corporation; the oldest Danish electronic media enterprise).[7] (See figure 3). The program has been repeated every other year for the last ten years, and other Scandinavian film schools are replicating the setup. Although methodology in this area needs further development, the examples mentioned here and in the introduction of this text point to the potential contribution of designers to the development of moving images. It also points to an important area in film and design studies yet to be established.

NOTES

1. British movie director (and artdirector) Ridley Scott on the making of *Blade Runner* (1982) (Sammon 1996, p 71).

2. The title "production designer" was created for Menzies by David O. Selznick for his work on *Gone with the Wind* (1939).

3. In the interview, Menzies describes his work as motion picture art director in a manner that is recognizable for both art directors and production designers working in motion pictures today: "It might be interesting for you to go through the routine of the art director's work from the moment he receives the script. In the first place, although not customary, it is of great advantage to the art director to know something of the story as it is being constructed. Very often he will have many suggestions to offer. Now, what I am describing is my own method. Except for some slight variations, I think most of the art directors follow the same method. When reading the scenario, notes are made, and if there is sufficient time, rough sketches of the separate scenes are prepared. After consultation with the cameraman and director and incorporation of their suggestions, the art director works up his sketches into presentable drawings. He considers such things as point of view, nature of the lens to be used, position of the camera, and so forth. If he is concerned with intimate scenes, he concentrates on possible variations of composition in the close shots. If he is designing a street, or any great long shot, he considers the possibility of trick effects and miniatures, double exposures, split-screens, travelling mattes and so forth. When the drawing is finished the director, cameraman, and designer confer again, and when all interested are satisfied with the drawing, it is projected through the picture plane, to plan elevation. (That is, an isometric drawing is produced which shows the true elevation of walls, doorways, windows, etc. in order to assist in planning camera positions or movements of actors around the completed set.) However, this process reproduces the composition line for line, and retains all the violence or dramatic value of the sketch, even with change of point of view. The finished plan and elevation is blue printed and sometimes transposed into a model and turned over to the construction department. From then on the artist's main interest is the supervision of the texture and the painting of the set. Texture is a rather interesting subject. All our straight plaster textures are cast in sheets nailed to a frame, and then pointed or patched with plaster. Brick, slate roofs, stone work, and even aged and rotted wood are casts taken from the original things, made in a sheets and applied. That is, if we have stonewall, we get in a lot of stones and build up a wall about six feet high, it and peel it off like you do a

cast from a tooth. You can cast any number of pieces of wall like that. The painting is usually done by air guns, and in many cases the light effects are put on by expert air gun operators" (Kozarski, 1976, p. 245-246).

4. Alec McDowell interviewed by the author at Warner Brothers Studios, Los Angeles, in 2011.

5. On his blog, Bordwell calls directly for a biography of William Cameron Menzies, but unfortunately refuses to write it himself (Bordwell 2010).

6. Tashiro is however partly inspired by the writing of Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz (Tashiro 1998, p. 18).

7. The cooperation is well documented by Eva Novrup Redvall (Redvall, 2013, Chapter 4).

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