In this chapter, we want to examine some of the actual scenic elements that make up the picture of the television production. What are the principles of design that should be applied to the use of sets and the construction of graphics? Although the student of production is initially concerned with the technical aspects of reproducing sound and picture—the hardware of microphones, cameras, lights, switchers, and recorders—we must also concentrate on the pictorial elements of what the cameras are looking at. Without a decent setting and without intelligible graphics, the best mechanical reproduction of video components can result only in a technically sharp program with no meaningful content.

10.1 The Concept of Pictorial Design

There are several elements of pictorial design that apply both to sets and to graphics. Although these two topics will be discussed separately in the remainder of this chapter, it may be helpful to consider some of the common elements first.

Functions of Design Elements

In discussing audio production and lighting techniques, we mentioned that there was both a technical consideration and a creative aspect to the use of these elements. To some extent we have a parallel consideration in examining pictorial elements. Here, however, instead of thinking in terms of technical and creative criteria, it is more applicable to consider the differences between informational functions of design and emotional or psychological functions of design.

First, the informational aspects of pictorial design must be considered. They are concerned with conveying appropriate information cues to the audience as accurately and efficiently as possible. In the case of a dramatic
setting, we ordinarily want to tell the audience as much as possible about the time and locale of the action. Where is the scene taking place? What historical period are we in? What time of day is it? We may also want to give other pictorial cues. What is the status of the main character? Where does he or she live? (Of course, there are many dramatic programs where this type of information is deliberately concealed from the audience for purposes of suspense or dramatic surprise.)

Nondramatic programs also need to convey this kind of information data. Are we in a newsroom? Are we on a stage in front of a live audience? Are we in a pulpit? How much do we need to tell the viewers about where they are and what should they know about their surroundings? All television staging considerations should start out with these types of questions.

With graphics, the informational considerations are even more important. The overwhelming use of graphics—especially for simpler productions and basic formats—is to convey information. What is the name of the program (title card)? What is the name of the person talking (super card)? How much of our tax dollar goes to education (pie chart)? What does the race course look like (diagram)? How does the piston work (animated graphic)? How bad was the accident (photo)? In designing graphics, the need for clarity is paramount. The director must always be asking, How can I get this information across as clearly and efficiently as possible? Most of the discussion in sections 10.4 and 10.5 is concerned with this question.

Second, the emotional or psychological functions of pictorial design must be considered. There are many subtle messages that the total production design can convey. All of the scenic elements—sets, props, graphics, furniture—combine to give a “feel” or “image” to the program. In a news program, do you want the image of an advanced technological communications center, of an abstract setting (fig. 10-1), or of a working newsroom (fig. 10-2)? In an instructional TV program, do you want the image of a typical academic setting or of a research lab? In a religious program, do you want the image of a traditional church service or of an avant-garde contemporary movement? In a variety program, do you want the image of a conventional stage presentation or of an electronic collage of entertainment happenings? Again, it is important that the director and designer begin with these types of questions before any decisions are made regarding the construction or assembling of set pieces or graphics.

In dramatic programs, of course, the overall atmosphere or mood is very important. Staging elements—combined with lighting—will tell us much about the mystery of an event, the state of mind of the hero, the lurking tragedy, the atmosphere of a family gathering, the majesty of an accomplishment, the power behind a particular move, the potential danger behind a closed door, the emptiness of a certain thought. The designer should always be concerned with maintaining or building the mood or feeling of every particular scene.

The emotional function of design would also include creating a given style or continuity to a program—helping to maintain unity throughout the entire production. In the use of graphics, for instance, it would be jarring to establish a pattern of cartoons to illustrate a certain process and then suddenly switch to a series of detailed photographs. Several years ago, a church group produced a syndicated variety program dealing with the broad theme of the family. It was a composite of serious vignettes, vocal numbers, comedy sketches, talks, and dances, and featured many different performers and guest stars. The pro-

duction very easily could have fallen apart into many mini-programs, however, the entire production was held together by its scenic design. Every segment of the program was staged on and around one scenic unit—a large, white, abstract open set combining several different levels, platforms, and stairs. Because it had a scenic unity, the production had a continuity that it otherwise could have lost.

Thus, every pictorial design should serve both an informational function and an emotional function. The set should not only tell us what time of day it is, but also give us a hint as to what is going to happen this day. The chart should not only tell us the information but emphasize how important the information is.

**Elements of Pictorial Design**

Artists and critics discourse long and eloquently about the many different factors that constitute aesthetic criteria—unity, harmony, texture, color, rhythm, proportion, and so forth. It is beyond the scope of this book to get into any detailed treatise on aesthetics of the still and moving picture. The beginning production student should be aware, however, of at least three fundamental elements of pictorial design: (1) balance and mass; (2) lines and angles; and (3) tone and color.

**Balance and Mass.** The concept of balance was introduced in section 6.3 in connection with camera work. Asymmetrical balance is generally preferred over formal symmetrical balance. The larger a mass, the nearer it must be to the center of the scene in order to preserve a sense of balance with a smaller mass (fig 10-3). In addition, the placement of mass

---

opening. A scenic unit with heavy ornamentation near the top implies a feeling of uneasiness, suspense.

**Lines and Angles.** The use of dominant lines is one of the strongest elements available to the scenic designer. Straight lines suggest firmness, rigidity, directness, strength; curved or rounded lines imply softness, elegance, movement. The direction of the dominant lines in a picture will carry strong connotations. Horizontal lines represent serenity, inactivity, openness. Vertical lines are dignified, important, strong. And diagonals imply action, imbalance, instability, insecurity (See fig. 10-5.)

Lines and angles can also be used to reinforce or exaggerate perspective, giving more of an illusion of depth. Painted on the studio floor, false perspective lines can reinforce a great feeling of depth. False perspective lines can also be worked into other scenic elements. This kind of false perspective is limiting, however, in that the illusion works from only one specific camera location. (See fig. 10-6.)

**Tone and Color.** Working solely in monochrome television, variations in tone or gray scale value can have a substantial impact on scenic elements. The predominant tones determine, to a great extent, the overall emotional image of a production. Light tones result in a delicate, cheerful, happy, trivial feeling, whereas dark tones result in a feeling that is heavy, somber, serious, forceful. Tone also affects balance. A dark tone carries more mass, weighs more, and can be used to balance a larger mass that is light in color or tone. The position of various tones or blocks of dark and light mass in a picture also affect its stability and emotional quality. A dark mass at the top of a picture tends to induce a heavy, unnatural
feeling of entrapment and depression; heavier tones in the bottom of a picture give it more of a stable base. (See fig. 10-7.)

Color is usually discussed in terms of three characteristics. **Hue** is the actual color base itself (red, green, purple, orange, and so forth). **Saturation** refers to the strength or intensity of a color, how far removed it is from a neutral or gray shade. **Brightness** (or lightness) indicates where the color would fall on a scale from light (white) to dark (black).