COSTUME DESIGN: CREATING CHARACTER THROUGH

CLOTHES; AN INVESTIGATION OF COTUME

DESIGN THROUGH VISUAL CULTURE

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for Departmental Honors in

the Department of Theatre

Texas Christian University

Fort Worth, Texas

May 7, 2018

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<u>ABSTRACT</u>

This project outlines major concepts of visual culture as they relate to my process in designing costumes for the world premiere of the play *Mister Major and the Minor Wife*, by Devin Berg, produced by Theatre TCU. I have specifically detailed several key ideas of visual culture as they are described by visual culture pioneer Nicholas Mirzoeff in his book, *How to See the World.* I then go on to use these concepts to help accurately describe my process of designing costumes: from initial concept discussions to the actualization of thought in my head. I relate how I used visual culture to aid my design process and my communication with the cast and the rest of the production crew. With special attention to the ideals of the study of visual culture, I have learned to affectively solve problems and communication only to my peers in production and design but also to laymen and experts in the audiences. Through this process I have learned that in theatre, characters are carefully crafted, not solely by performers but also by the complex interplay of visual culture ideals and the elements of design.

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INTRODUCTION: CONNECTING VISUAL CULTURE AND COSTUME DESIGN

In my sophomore year at TCU, I took a course called Visual Culture: From Icons to iPhones. It fulfilled a lower division honors credit, the subject matter seemed intriguing to me, and the teacher (Elisa Foster) had great reviews on rate my professor. I had no way of knowing that this class would move me so much and ignite my passion for costume design in a whole new way. In the course, we referred to the text "How To See The World" (HTSTW) by Nicholas Mirzoeff, professor of visual media and communication at NYU known for his work in developing the field of visual culture. Already interested in costume design at the time, this book gave me a platform of knowledge of visual culture from which to grow as a costume designer. I have seen the incredible connections to be made between visual culture and costume design and I will be using this project as a platform to share my discovery of two fields, which when applied to one another are mutually enriched. In this paper, after setting up a language of visual culture, I will demonstrate the relationship between visual cultured costume design by recounting my experience of costume designing the world premiere of a play by Devin Berg, TCU Alumnus, entitled *Mister Major and the Minor Wife (MMATMW)*, produced by Theatre TCU. Before diving into my design experience, I will provide a basic understanding for the key concepts and terminology outlined by Mirzoeff in HTSTW which I will then use to discuss the crossover that experienced between visual culture and costume design.

HOW TO SEE THE WORLD: KEY CONCEPTS OF VISUAL CULTURE

Visual culture is a rapidly developing field of study that is relatively new. Mirzoeff describes in the introduction of HTSTW the ways in which the unprecedented proliferation of access to the Internet around the world has created a global connection. "This [internet] is not just another

form of mass media," Mirzoeff explains. "It is the first universal medium." Mirzoeff goes on to argue that this connection across the globe has been primarily utilized to share images. He cites several examples of the astounding amount of content created and shared over the internet, such as the six billion hours of video viewed on YouTube every month or the fact that "…every two minutes, Americans alone take more photographs than were made in the entire nineteenth century" (Mirzoeff 6). Mirzoeff makes it clear that this connection and communication through visual material is a phenomenon that is worth investigating and learning about. As he takes the reader through the basics of the study of visual culture, it is necessary to outline some of his major concepts and basic terminology in order to effectively relate the study to my process of costume design.

The Selfie

 What is a selfie if not the modern version of a self-portrait? Mirzoeff uses this social media fad as a way to express how even in a modern society, ancient ideals of visual culture are still prevalent. "The selfie resonates not because it is new, but because it expresses, develops and intensifies the long history of the self-portrait" (Mirzoeff 31). Self-portraits, or portraits, in general, were reserved for the wealthy before photography was created. Being able to create a representation of oneself was profound and painstaking. It is now available to the vast majority with relative simplicity. We utilize selfies to hone our outward representation of ourselves to the rest of the world. Because it has become so commonplace it has also become very important to ensure one creates their truest, best image to present to the world. I relate these ideas to costume design because everyday humans wake up and decide how they will present themselves in society by choosing their clothes. The costume designer has been given the power to decide not

only how characters see themselves but also how they want to be seen by the world and what kind of a message that sends to the audience members.

The Gaze

The Gaze is a concept originally coined by Laura Mulvey when she explored the male gaze in her study of classic Hollywood cinema (Mirzoeff 53). To gaze is to look with power or dominance. Applied to old Hollywood movies, it is easy to see the powerful male gaze as the men dominate the action on screen. It is also useful in theatre in understanding power dynamics between characters onstage. Furthermore, it is beneficial to consider in costume design as the audience maintains a gaze over all the design elements on stage. A power struggle is created between the actors and the audience, or perhaps the characters and the audience, and even possibly the costumes and the audience. Audience members have this power over what happens onstage because they are viewing without being viewed. Audience members get to absorb the images on stage and make decisions about plot points, characters and even the actors without them knowing they are being watched. As a designer, this is important to consider. the decisions being made through his gaze are decisions that a costume designer can control based on what clothes they dress the actors in. Does the costume designer have the ultimate power in this dynamic? Choosing clothes to make audience members think a certain way seems more powerful than audiences believing they are coming to their own conclusions.

Flâneurie

The concept of the *flâneur* comes from 19th century Paris, France. Paris had become known as the city of light when gas lamps made it possible for people to shop around at night, a past time that grew very popular. To accommodate this trend Arcades were created which

allowed customers to come in and shop free of charge. (Mirzoeff 171). Paris became a place

where a person could game cultural power by seeing without being seen. *Flâneurie* became a

commodity. The *flâneur* became the subject of many French poets from the symbolist movement.

Impressionist painters and photographers captured this art of seeing without being seen to gain

powers over the subjects. Viewers of art could be called *flâneurs.* I feel that this is important to

study alongside costume design. The Symbolist movement opened doors in many fields of art

and the *flâneur* is at the heart of many of the young symbolists' works, regardless of the medium.

Flâneurie is a power play that has been present for so long and it is inherent in humans.

Therefore it should be studied and considered when designing costumes for humans. Audience

members are *flâneurs* and costume designers should consider this relationship when choosing

costumes to be viewed by *flâneurs.*

MISTER MAJOR AND THE MINOR WIFE: COSTUME DESIGN PROCESS

Before diving into the creative process of costume design, I will roughly lay out the duties of a

costume designer and the general idea of what it means to costume design a piece of theatre.

Financially, the costume designer is given a budget from the producer (Theatre TCU), with

which the designer must make a plan of how to create the costume elements of the show.

Artistically, the costume designer must ensure that the director approves all of the designs, and

must work collaboratively with the director and the other members of the production team (i.e.

lighting designer, scenic designer, and sound designer) to ensure my design choices match the

creative goals of the director in creating a cohesive work of theatre. Once design choices are

decided upon, the costume designer creates renderings with general instructions which the

costume studio employees then create either buy shopping, building, or pulling from a costume stock as directed by the designer.

Initial Concept Discussions

As with many creative processes, before we could do anything we had to talk about doing it. Before weekly production meetings commenced, I had a meeting with the playwright—Devin Berg— and the director—Carroll Herring. I did not know it at the time, but Herring would soon be replaced by Hannah Wright as the director for unknown reasons. Because of this change in directors, I had two different sets of initial concept discussions. In these discussions, I realized how important my knowledge of visual culture would be in communicating and justifying my ideas and understanding those of others. Herring and Wright each had unique and starkly contrasting ideas of how the play should be represented visually. Herring used words like "despair," "bleak," "gloomy," and "eerie," while Wright used words such as "vibrant," "decadent," "glorious," and "exciting." Not only did these women have very different ideas, but they also had a very different way of communicating. As the costume designer, I had to use my visual knowledge to decipher what they want to communicate and then create my own language to communicate those ideas to the audiences through clothing. In these meetings, both directors spoke in broad general terms. In both cases, I had to guide the conversation toward what the director specifically want to communicate to the audience with respect to individual characters and plot points. Being able to understand this form of unspoken communication through a person's outward appearance is vital in costume designing. In this step of the design process, I tried to introduce principles of visual culture to the director. Specifically, I related Mirzoeff's concept of 'the selfie,' and how these characters—whether real or fanciful— are wearing clothes

that were chosen to make some sort of statement. It is collaboratively our job decide what that statement is, how that character would make that statement, and how the audience will most accurately perceive that statement.

Preliminary Illustrations

Illustrations are imperative to costume design considering it is purely a visual form of art. For this reason, I began generating preliminary illustrations from the initial concept meetings. After getting a feel for the concept, I reread the script and made doodles as I went along. The first time I did this was for Herring's concept (Director 1). For her darker concept, my drawings were more abstract, bulbous, deformed and bleak looking. I played with shapes and altered scales to create the eerie feeling she had spoken to me about. I even began doing so imagery research for this concept before the new director joined the process. When Wright stepped in she was blunt about the fact that she was frankly scared of Herring's original concept for the play. After realizing that a new director meant a completely new method of communicating and thinking about the play, I began doodling and researching images that were more in line with Wrights proposed concept. The images I began to create were colorful, more clear and recognizable, fun, classic, and edgy. We began having weekly production staff meeting in order to touch base with all other designers and make sure we were all on track in creating a cohesive version of the play that followed the director's vision. In these meetings, I utilized many visual culture ideas. I spoke about how I wanted to create real characters by dressing them as if they chose their clothes and understanding why they chose those clothes. As there are four fanciful imaginary characters in the show, I also discussed how I wanted the clothes of these characters to be more indicative of the roles they would play in telling our story. The play was rather abstract

and making the purpose of these four imaginary characters clear was something all of the designers had to work on perfecting. This duty especially fell on my shoulders as my designs would be the ones to make each character a separate unique design element. Color became an important topic of conversation. We all paid close attention to matching costume colors to stage and prop painting as to not have a clashing design. Color would also be an important factor in outlining the roles of the four imaginary circus characters and separating them from our two realistic characters. After presenting research to the production team and making some artistic decisions, I created some rendering that had basically the final silhouette of each character with a preliminary idea of how the colors should be carried out. Color and pattern were my main storytellers. We decided that the ringmaster and her "sidekick," the clown, would be tied together by a bold red with black and grey/silver accents. The director

Fig. 1: Costume illustration by Rhett Warner for *Mister Major and the Minor Wife* Produced by Theatre TCU.

really wanted to use the red for these to characters to demonstrate their power over the "hallucination" portions of the story. Not pictured in Fig. 1, The ringmaster has a large swirl on her leotard that serves as the pattern to distinguish her from her cohorts. The swirl, we decided would communicate this idea of causing the chaos present whenever she is on stage. Similarly, we chose polka-dots for the clown to relate to the circular shape of the ringmaster's swirl and communicate a sense of randomness to the audience. We wanted to use the classic idea of blue for boys and pink for girls for the characters Mister Major and the Minor Wife in order to really support the commentary on stereotypical gender roles that are heavily present in the script. With

red and pink for the Minor Wife and purple and blue for Mister Major, we were able to utilize

this pink and blue imagery that is engrained in our culture. We also liked this initial color scheme

because it linked all the circus performers together with shades of red, while the realistic human

characters were in neutrals and bleak colors with a general lack of patterns. These ideas were

presented to the production team and met with a general agreement.

Color Disagreements

 After getting my rendering approved by the director and production staff I began making plans

to move forward with creating these costumes. Before I got too far, I began to question the color

scheme. I realized that we had spent so much time discussing an idea of muted vibrancy that

would distinguish the circus characters from the two realistic characters that there was no need to

tie them all together through color. We were missing such a huge opportunity to really utilize the

color wheel in ways far more intricate than just separating two groups of characters.

Furthermore, the silhouettes were so distinctive and theatrical that regardless of the colors these

characters stood far apart from the others. This is all without even mentioning the use of staging,

light, and sound, to create the imaginary world in which these circus characters reside. I finally

realized that there was so much more than we could be communicating to the audience through

my costumes. For this reason, I went back to my sketches and tried some new color and pattern ideas until landed on the one that I felt truly told the story of the play. In reworking my color palette, I began with the ringmaster. The woman cast in this

Fig. 2: Costume illustration by Rhett Warner for *Mister Major and the Minor Wife* Produced by Theatre TCU.

role had a beautiful chestnut skin tone that would not be flattered by a black leotard and black accents. Clinging to my director's phrase of "muted vibrancy," I realized there really was no need for any black in this fanciful world. The circus characters were meant to exist in a sort of memory that takes place during the peek of circus performing. I kept in the classic ringmaster red but I gave her white accents that would look so lovely again her skin tone and make her character pop against the background of our stage. Similarly, with the clown, I threw out the black, simplified the pattern and added some white. The white added so much vibrancy to the world that these characters stood out from all of the rest. I also decided he should be an eerie shade of chartreuse. Several times in the action of the play he portrays the real character of "Joseph" who is a troubled teen dealing with a mentally unstable other and depression of his own. I wanted to use this sickly green color to show the agony and sickness underlying Joe's character and his past. I also made it a priority to give each character their own color. The individuality of these characters became increasingly intriguing to me. The more I worked to make them individualized, the more they seemed to work together as a unit.

 For the characters, Mister Major and the Minor Wife, I wanted to maintain the gender roles associated with blue and pink. I think that was an important message to communicate to the audience. I wanted to do it in a more nuanced way. I made Mister Major gold with only accents of a cobalt blue. I wanted the gold to add another layer to his dominance over the minor wife. If nothing else I hoped it would help the audience to perceive his financial dominance as well as his physical and relational dominance over the Minor Wife. In contrast, I removed the red from the Minor Wife's colors palette and made her soft pink blouse match a soft pink and gentle magenta color in her skirt with nude tights and heels to accentuate the expected submissive, sexualized

nature of a woman in that time period. Upon expressing these ideas and new colors to the

production staff, I was met with several nods of agreements and understanding and trust in my

abilities to communicate with an audience. However, the director was having a major issue with

the color of the clown. Despite my efforts to explain my specific reasoning behind every color

choice, she insisted that red next to green of any kind would only ever equal Christmas. While

the bright red and deep emerald of Christmas seems worlds away from my menacing crimson

and sickly chartreuse, I had to accept the fact that, as Mirzoeff says, everyone sees differently

based on their experiences. With this understanding, I tried to create an alternative solution.

Unfortunately, I was unable to justify any other color palette. I came up with excellent arguments

Fig.3: Costume illustration by Rhett Warner for *Mister Major and the Minor Wife* Produced by Theatre TCU.

for the great things all the other color combinations would communicate to the audience, but

none of them communicated the message as well. I explained the flaws in every other color

combination and finally, after exhausting every effort, Wright decided she would allow the clown

to be chartreuse next to the red ringmaster. It was finally time to begin creating the costumes.

Designing Fabrics

Because my designs rely so heavily on very specific patterns and colors, I took advantage of the

ability to design my own fabrics to be printed and used for the costumes. After making some

more decisions such as the size of the clown's polka dots, the minor wife's diamonds and mister

major's stripes created images using Adobe Indesign and uploaded them to the web services of

the company that prints fabrics. While it does not seem difficult it was a painstaking process with

a successful payoff. The fabrics arrived and they were exactly what I needed. One major design

element that this processed allowed me to tackle was the skirt of the human character Edith

Major. This character is having some mental breakdowns throughout the show and we see her

hallucinations and flashbacks acted out by the circus performers. In these flashbacks the Minor

Fig. 4: Costume illustration by Rhett Warner for *Mister Major and the Minor Wife* Produced by Theatre TCU.

Wife always portrays Edith. I wanted to really demonstrate this connection and Edith's deteriorating mind and altered reality through their costumes. The Minor Wife, a young Edith Major in her prime, is wearing a harlequin pattern on her short showgirl skirt. I wanted to alter this pattern for Edith's skirt. In Fig. 4 you can how I was able to make a version of the harlequin pattern that brought

a sense of falling away and deteriorating. I achieved this by playing with the transparency of the shapes as well as distorting the shape of the diamonds. I have found through this process that it is important to stay true to creative ideas and ensure that they are carried out in the most effective way. Visual concepts that are meant to convey a message need to be clear and precise. I was able to feel confident that my communication with the audience was clear because I was able to make sure my fabrics were exactly what they needed to be.

<p style="text-align:center">CONCLUSION: COSTUME DESIGN IS VISUAL CULTURE</p>

 I took a class about Visual Culture in my sophomore year, and I did not know why, but I loved it. I soon realized that I loved Costume Designing. Then I realized they are the same. A costume designer does not design without utilizing the ideals of visual culture and someone studying visual culture has to study the clothing people wear in photographs, painting, photographs of paintings, and in the real world. Visual Culture and Costume Design are two fields that focus on the study of humans in a visual world. We are all humans and this is a visual world. In fact, I believe everyone, whether they know it or know, is affected by visual culture and costume design in the same vein. I have seen first hand how the two fields can work hand-in-hand, simultaneously. By studying Mirzoeff's introductory ideals and relating them to my experience in designing costumes for an original play, I have been able to communicate more effectively and design more specifically. To truly understand costume design I believe I needed a course in visual culture.

REFERENCES

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