

Maureen Lenker

Designing Hollywood:

An Analysis of the Work of William Cameron Menzies

University of Southern California

Abstract

This essay examines William Cameron Menzies and his impact on film-making as the father of production design. Focusing on his work on *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Kings Row* (1942), the paper traces how Menzies, expanded the role of those in the art department beyond studio technician to that of visual auteur. With his detailed continuity designs, Menzies merged the responsibilities of art director and director, installing the production designer as the link between the film on the page and on screen, and established a new type of auteur and creative force within the industry.

Though film is an enormously collaborative process, frequently films are heralded as representing the distinct vision of a director, writer, or producer. Though the production designer is responsible for the overall look and visualization of the film -- determining color, spacing, and influencing staging through set design -- the position is often overlooked by those outside the industry. William Cameron Menzies, the first man to hold the title of production designer, exemplified throughout his lengthy career as an art director, director, and designer that the role of production designer was a necessary link between the script and shooting stages. Most notably in his work on *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Kings Row* (1942), Menzies redefined and expanded the role of the art department forever altering the process of the visualization of films, while simultaneously presenting the designer as a valuable resource for continuity of vision.

In one of David O. Selznick's many lengthy memos composed during the production of *Gone with the Wind* (GWTW), Selznick laid the basis for William Cameron Menzies' career and coined the term for what would become one of the occupations most invaluable to the creation of a film's visual design – the production designer:

I hope to have "Gone with the Wind" prepared almost down to the last camera angle before we start shooting, because on this picture really thorough preparation will save hundreds of dollars . . . When he [Menzies] gets the complete script, he can then do all the sets, set sketches and plans . . . and can start on what I want on this picture and what has only been done a few times in picture history (and these times mostly by Menzies) – a complete script in sketch form, showing actual camera set-ups, lighting, etc. . . . Menzies may turn out to be one of the most valuable factors in properly producing this picture . . . his work on this picture, as I see it, will be a lot greater in scope than is normally associated with the term "art direction." Accordingly, I would probably give him some such credit as "Production Designed by William Cameron Menzies."
(Belhmer 167-168)

Through his design of each shot and conceptualization of the visual tone and flow of the film, Menzies redefined the role of the art department. What Selznick wanted from Menzies went far

beyond the normal work load of an art director, and the above memo touches on many responsibilities unique to Menzies' working style that would come to define the job of production designer. Such responsibilities reinforce Menzies' role as the father of production design, and the designer as the unifier and upholder of a film's artistic vision. Furthermore, Menzies was one of the first to fully complete his own artistic vision rather than claiming credit for the creativity of others.

One of the primary reasons he is considered the first production designer was his personal commitment to the visualization of a cinematic design. The famous studio designers under long-term contracts to a studio, specifically MGM's Cedric Gibbons and RKO's Van Nest Polglase, did not actually design any of the dozens of films for which they were credited each year. Rather, they organized the art departments for each studio and supervised individual productions (Sylbert 6), taking credit for the work of unrecognized craftsmen. Menzies, however, was contracted independently for each film, and, beginning with *GWTW*, hand-produced thousands of drawings that served as a "complete script in sketch form" (Belhmer 167), an unprecedented task resulting in the creation of the new credit of "production designer."

It is this commitment to creating his own designs as a hands-on craftsman that separates Menzies from the other noted art directors/production designers of the time, who were continually rewarded for work that was not their own. Menzies broke the mold of the studio designer, championing the work of individual craftsmen and only taking credit for his personal designs. Not only did Menzies deviate from the standard role of studio designer, but his influence as an independent contractor with a distinct artistic voice paved the way for modern auteurs in all fields as he diverged from the assembly-line approach of the "movie factories." Rather than signing with a studio to work as one cog in a well-oiled machine, he sought out

projects that would complement his talents, marking each work with his influence, and asserting his own individual contributions, as well as those of other members of the creative team.

Beginning his career as an illustrator for children's magazines, Menzies had a strong artistic background that would lend his work a distinctively visual approach. Furthermore, Menzies' work also benefitted from his early recognition that a designer be a "jack of all trades," writing:

He [the designer] must have a knowledge of architecture of all periods and nationalities. He must be able to picturize and make interesting a tenement, or a prison. He must be a cartoonist, a costumer, a marine painter, a designer of ships, an interior decorator, a landscape painter, a dramatist, an inventor, an historical, and now, an acoustical expert. (Menzies 179).

In his recognition of the necessity that a designer be able to fulfill all of these roles so as to fully understand all visual aspects of the picture, Menzies tapped into the basic responsibilities of the production designer. He understood that the overall look of the film and the set's ability to convey thematic meaning were dependent upon the designer's ability to bridge the gap between the film on the page and its visualization.

Before embarking on his life's defining work, *GWTW*, Menzies garnered attention for his fanciful designs and attention to detail as art director on *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), and his visually masterful work as the director of *Things to Come* (1936). His work on these films "demonstrate[d] an evolution from background design and set construction to responsibility for determining compositions, content, and continuity of shots" (Vertrees 57). As a director, Menzies began to consider the implications of uniting set design and composition to complete a unified visual product. Transitioning from art direction and directing, Menzies would eventually unify components of both fields -- background design/set constructions and composition/continuity of shots -- in the field of production design.

In his professional profile in a 1945 issue of *American Cinematographer*, “Menzie defines his own job as a kind of ‘pre-staging’ . . . [remarking that] there is a spot between the scenario and the direction that an artist trained in film fundamentals can fulfill. His production designs are, in that sense, an intermediate process between the printed word and its visualization on celluloid” (Vertrees 182). Thus, he believed that sets should be designed and tailored for specific camera set-ups. While we traditionally think of the director and cinematographer as the ones determining framing and the composition of an image, Menzie interpreted this as the responsibility of the designer. His storyboard drawings were not only produced to create an idea of the spaces needed for filming, but as a way to lay out staging, camera angles, and overall compositions long before cameras starting rolling. Thus, he carried “the function of art direction beyond the creation of sets and scenery to responsibility for the entire visualization of a motion picture” (Vertrees 55).

Beginning with his work on Goldwyn’s *Bulldog Drummond* (1929), Menzie began to produce his trademark continuity sketches when designing a film: “In some instances, William Cameron Menzie [pictured] every fluctuation of light, every movement of characters in a scene, to the point where his sketches transferred to celluloid and strung together Disney-fashion, might be run as an animated picturization, in themselves” (“The Picture in Motion” 14). He essentially created his own complete vision of the film in his drawings, which were comparable to a shot-by-shot analysis of a director’s work. Thus, Menzie carried the role and artistic influence of the production designer/art department beyond mere support for another’s vision, delineating a space for designers as auteurs in their own right.

Aware of his reputation, Selznick expected Menzie to produce a storyboard so extensive and thorough that every shot of *GWTW* would be planned and pre-cut before the cameras starting

rolling. Given the storied production history behind the making of *GWTW*, which included the involvement of nearly eleven different screenwriters and the identifiable contributions of three separate directors, Selznick was wise in selecting one person to seemingly plan out the entire film. Menzies' continuity sketches provided "detailed work [that] incorporated color and style, structured each scene, and encompassed framing, composition and camera movement for each shot in the film" (Vertrees 55), to essentially direct the visual component of the film, leaving whomever Selznick hired to direct to focus on the actors.

Ultimately, however, because *GWTW* was directed by two men that were temperamentally polar opposites and its script underwent such extensive revision, the continuity designs were more a tentative experiment – ideal in theory, but impossible to unerringly adhere to in practice given the constant changes to the script and production team. This "blue-printing" of the film provided the necessary groundwork for set construction and special-effects cinematography, but Selznick's dream of having the final version of the film align perfectly with Menzies' continuity sketches was never realized. Selznick's penchant for continually revising, removing, and adding scenes, as well as the directors' disregard for composition in the interest of performance, erased the possibility of using many of Menzies' designs within the film.

However, this is not to say that Menzies did not still leave a vital imprint on the film. When comparing continuity sketches with the middle drafts of the script, the drawings seem to correspond to the scenes intended to be shot. Furthermore, in the midst of such continual chaos and upheaval, it's truly a wonder that *GWTW* managed to preserve any form of visual continuity, much less the visual mastery often associated with the film. This continuity and visual prowess, particularly in composition and "command of color and lighting" (Vertrees 55) must be attributed to Menzies. He and Selznick were the only constants throughout the production of the

film, and thus, it is their vision, not George Cukor's or Victor Fleming's, that is most clearly delineated on-screen.

A correspondence between Menzies' initial color drawings and the color palette of the final Technicolor images cements the notion of Menzies' immense impact on the final version of the film for which he was honored with a special Academy Award for the "masterful employment of color" (Kritzer 55) within the film. Though varying from what Selznick initially hired Menzies to do, because of various other factors in the production process, Menzies still managed to produce a contribution to the film that is "remarkable in terms both of license and of influence on development of imagery and narrative" (Vertrees 178). Through his work on *GWTW*, Menzies was able to more clearly define the role of production designer and begin to understand where a designer could take more control over the visualization of the project.

An unexpected benefit of his work on *GWTW*, Menzies formed a partnership with the director Sam Wood, who took over shooting for an ill Victor Fleming (Harmetz 205). Wood, primarily an actor's director, greatly admired Menzies' skill with visual design. Designing for Wood on *Our Town* (1940), *The Pride of the Yankees* (1942), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943), and most notably, *Kings Row* (1942), Menzies was allowed to fully execute his process of continuity sketching from script to screen, greatly influencing the style of composition in these films. Using his increasingly assured unification of design and composition, Menzies storyboarded *Kings Row* frame-by-frame, delineating the staging and composition of each take in relation to a character's surroundings. Thus, Menzies was able to more firmly implement set design as a thematic expression of the character's inner state. Menzies expertly designed homes and locales for characters that simultaneously give off an air of authenticity and reflect the subjectivity of the characters. For example, Parris' (Robert Cummings) home, which he shares

with his grandmother, is vast and spacious, but it is also tastefully decorated with objects that suggest art and culture. From our initial introduction to Parris as a child, the space he calls home conveys that he will be more broad-minded and open, like the airy space in his home, as well a man of intellect and good taste.

The homes of the Towers, the Gordons, and the Monaghans in Kings Row all present a striking contrast to this, reflecting the disparate natures of the people who live there. The Towers' home is dark and foreboding, full of shadows and closed doors. Additionally, it is the only house in Kings Row with a spiked, wrought-iron gate around its perimeter, rather than the welcoming, white picket fences found throughout the town. These details emphasize the Towers as a mysterious and possibly frightening family, who are deliberately separate from all others in the town. Furthermore, Dr. Tower's (Claude Rains) study is crammed with books, which simultaneously serve to mark the house as a place overflowing with knowledge for Parris and a claustrophobic prison for Cassandra Tower (Betty Field). The ostentatious, sharp angles of the Gordon home reflect this family's righteousness and their tendency to play God, as the house obviously proclaims in its design that these people think they are better than everyone else. Finally, the Monaghan home is simple, yet claustrophobic. While the simplicity of the house reflects Randy's (Ann Sheridan) kind and pure heart as well as the relative poverty of her family, the tight enclosed spaces serve to highlight Drake's (Ronald Reagan) feelings of oppression and claustrophobia in the second half of the film, as he lies trapped in the house, a victim of a double leg amputation.

While the design of the homes represents a distinct contribution to the film, which the lighting and composition of the characters in these spaces further underscores, Menzies' most impressive contribution to the film is the realization of his continuity drawings in the final

version of the film. The production notes state that Menzies “produced 1,500 sketches, some in color, outlining virtually every shot in the script from the various angles from which it was to be filmed” (Warner Bros. Archives). Further highlighting Menzies’ achievement in the visualization of the script and its realization on screen are the comments of the film’s cameraman James Wong Howe: “William Cameron Menzies designed the sets and sketches for the shots; he’d tell you how high the camera should be, he’d even specify the kind of lens he wanted for a particular shot. The set was designed for one specific shot only, if you varied your angle by an inch you’d shoot over the top . . . Menzies created the whole look of the film. I simply followed his orders. Sam Wood just directed the actors; he knew nothing about visuals” (Cowgill 96).

As these comments evince, Menzies was able to achieve with *Kings Row* what he hadn’t been able to with *GWTW*, that is, complete control over the look of the film and the process of visualization from script to screen. Menzies truly felt his role was to be the mediator between the page and the camera. Previously, the studio art department was held responsible for the look of the film, but Menzies expanded the role of the art director to make the complete visualization of the film a key component of the film-making process. Through his work on *Kings Row* and *GWTW*, as well as many other films not touched on in this paper, Menzies brought a new level of artistry to the film industry. Menzies’ contributions established the production designer as the one responsible for the aesthetic value of a film on all levels. Essentially animating scripts, Menzies expanded the role of the art department and laid the ground work for a new type of auteur – the production designer.

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