

## THE IMPACT OF MISE EN SCÈNE IN THE HORROR MOVIE 'SWEET HOME'

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### ABSTRACT

*A movie's design can have a lot of power, and by power it means that said designs may immensely affect how a movie is delivered. By using the Sweet Home film series as a study case, this paper aims to identify and analyze the use of mise en scène in the movie and how it affects the plot, the audience, and the general mood of the movie, which would help the audience to decipher what exactly happened off screen and make them guess what will happen next. Our studies in this paper have deduced that mise en scène plays an important role in presenting this movie's identity, which is horror, through its visual depiction of the plot. As such, it is very curious how this movie's mise en scène has impacted the series in such a way that it successfully achieved its main objective. Therefore through literary studies, we will break down how mise en scène, specifically in lighting, decor/props and costumes may shape and control the mood of this movie, how and why its portrayal of the survival apocalypse, body horror and other components of the plot has proven effective to heighten the ambience of a horror movie and highlighted the frightening parts of the plot even more. As a conclusion, we hope that the studies we have done and wrote on this paper can give a proper, valid and clear, yet interesting, explanation of how mise en scène greatly affects the Sweet Home film series and its audience.*

**Keywords:** *mise en scène, sweet home, horror, monster apocalypse*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sweet Home is a horror, drama, thriller and fantasy film series aired in Netflix that starred Song Kang as the main character. Originally a webtoon comic under the same name, the series has been adapted into a 10 episodes long, live action format following its massive popularity among fans. The series was directed by Lee Eung Bok, Jang Young Woo and Park So Hyun, and written by Hwang Young Chan. The series portrayed its main character, a young boy named Hyun Soo, as he moved to live alone in an apartment called 'Green Home' after the tragic death of his parents and sibling.

Whilst fighting his own broken mentality from being the only survivor of the tragic incident that killed his family, he was soon forced to face another terrible crisis as news of people turning into monsters started surfacing, signifying the start of a monster apocalypse. Unbeknownst to him, these events will turn his life upside down as the monster apocalypse started. More and more humans started turning into monsters as their inner desires manifested and took on a monster form that completely took over their physical body.

Trapped in the Green Home, Hyun Soo had to fight in order to stay alive and help other people along with the other human residents, fighting the monsters that reside inside the building and fighting his own monster as he struggled not to get consumed by the monster inside of him. So far, this movie has gotten many good reviews and praises regarding its live action depiction of the plot which was formerly a webtoon, receiving a 4 star rating on rotten tomatoes, and that's saying

a lot considering many live action adaptations had failed to meet up to consumer expectations.

Critics have spoken positively about the movie's take on its horror and gory scenes and how it delivered its storyline, effectively building up a sense of tension and dread in its audience that is typical of an apocalyptic horror movie. Therefore, it is very interesting how this movie has used and established its visual design element in order to successfully deliver its plot and leave a lasting impression on its audience.

However, most of the time, an audience finished a movie in a state of unawareness of why they enjoyed a movie. To elaborate, it means that they may only feel the movie's influence on themselves, feeling it affecting their thoughts and emotions, but never actually knowing why it made them think or feel a certain way, oblivious to the world of theory that is applied behind the making of a movie, especially in its design. That is what we as designers sought to unbox in order to deepen the public's and also our own understanding of designs and its meanings behind a movie.

## **2. THEORY**

A movie's ambience is very much impacted by how it was designed. *Mise en scène* as design has been widely implemented in movies and while their impact tends to be subtle and sometimes went unnoticed by the audience, truthfully, they deeply influence movies in ways that could enhance the feel of the plot and even guide a viewer's ideas and emotions towards the narrative that a movie aims to show (Barsam, R., & Monahan, D, 2010). As it is, *mise en scène* plays an important role in movies to portray them in a way that conveys meaning, as it stands for the staging part of a movie that deeply influences how an audience perceives and experiences a movie (Barsam, R., & Monahan, D, 2010). There are nine categories that are considered as elements of *mise en scène*, however we will mainly discuss certain elements in depth such as (1) decor and properties, (2) costume, makeup and hairstyle, and (3) lighting, all of which have their own impact towards movies (Barsam, R., & Monahan, D, 2010). Their implementation seemed to be no less impactful towards the horror movie series, *Sweet Home*, in which critics have given positive reviews about its design and how it influences their thoughts and feelings as written in the previous section of this paper. Therefore, we will be analyzing 'Sweet Home' using the theory of *mise en scène*, which will reveal how and why the movie has proven itself to be a quality horror movie by projecting feelings of fear and intensity on its audience through its emotionally inducing design.

## **3. RESEARCH METODOLOGY**

This paper use self observation and literature studies to discuss how *mise en scène* has impacted the movie 'Sweet Home' and its audience. Before discussing its *mise en scène*, we essentially studied what kind of movie it is, starting from who it is directed and written by, what the plot is trying to communicate, and the basic structure and form of the film. We will then collect people's reviews on the movie to gain insight on how the movie has impacted its audience. Following that process, we will then begin to analyze, using the theory of *mise en scène*, of how the movie's *mise en scène* has been applied to the movie and why it has resulted in such an impact towards the audience.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

Being an apocalyptic movie, it is natural that *Sweet Home*'s creators would want to focus on portraying its apocalyptic environment. Since the whole movie is set in an apocalypse, and is about an apocalypse, needless to say, portraying an apocalyptic environment of adequate quality should be one of their main focuses for this series, and they delivered it spectacularly.

### **Decor and Properties**



Figure 1. Scene for Décor & Properties  
Source: Author, 2022

As shown in the picture above, taken from episode 1, one could clearly see how the apocalyptic atmosphere radiated from the chaotic, gloomy, ominous and mysterious aura that the setting portrays (fig. 1). Blood splatters scattered across the wall. Items and furniture were stacked, serving as a barricade against the gory monster creatures. Weary survivors were shown with blood, sweat and tears dusting their lousy clothes. All of these elements played an important role in portraying the ambiance of a destroyed reality, providing the audience with realistic details of what an apocalypse would have looked like in reality.

This proves to be an excellent method of controlling how an audience reacts to the situation, seeing as through accurate and realistic portrayal of its world, the audience may perceive a first hand experience of the charm and horrors that the film was trying to express (Egan, 2021). Even without knowledge or experience of the storyline, viewers may very well understand that the apartment had been through a massive disaster that had come to perish the lives of its residents.

### Costume, Makeup and Hairstyle



Figure 2. Make up & Costume  
Source: Author, 2022

Additionally, the make-up artists did a superb job at making the actors look worn out by giving them filthy and messy hair, torn out and dusty shirts, and gore prosthetics (fig. 2). Details like this provide more information, letting the viewers know what had happened to the characters while they weren't on screen and

allowing the audience to perceive that they had been through a lot and were fighting off death. Another point worth mentioning is their portrayal of body horror, which induced chills through its realistic proportion, detail, and fear factor as shown below (fig 3&4).



Figure 3. Sample of Costume  
Source: Author, 2022



Figure 4. Monster Costume & Make up  
Source: Author, 2022

### Lighting

The next point to discuss is the way lighting is conveyed in this film. Lighting itself is an important aspect of this movie, as lighting supplies a scene with more meaning in both emotional and psychological aspects (Hellerman, 2019). The dark lighting they portrayed in lots of scenes provided high contrast between light and dark that creates the mysterious atmosphere of a horror movie (Barsam, R., & Monahan, D, 2010), particularly during the revealing of monsters in order to heighten their creepiness and draw attention towards them, such as the big-eyed monster.



Figure 5. Sample of Lighting  
Source: Author, 2022

In the picture above (fig.5) , the big-eyed monster was shown to be peeping through the window to spy on people. In that scene, we could see how light filters in through the small gap of the window where the monster resided while its overall surroundings remained dark as it was covered by the curtain. This type of contrast in value allows the audience's eyes to focus on the light among the darkness (Kliever, 2022) and therefore allowing them to notice the monster who was lurking around. Seeing as the monster was supposed to be inconspicuous, viewers might miss the monster's appearance on screen under bad handling of mise en scène. Another specific use of lighting can be seen from the example below (fig. 6).



Figure 6. Sample Scene on Lighting  
Source: Author, 2022

In the attached pictures, we see Hyun Soo's neighbor who was about to transform into a monster. This is a very tense moment in the movie as it is the first time that the audience will witness a human-monster transformation in front of their very eyes. As such, they emphasized the scene by using lights that shone directly above her head, conveying creepiness. An overhead lighting is commonly used in horror movies as it emphasizes only certain areas of the face including wrinkles and also conceals the eyes, creating a soulless look on its subject (McGregor, 2021). In this scene we see how it emphasizes her wrinkled face as she starts turning into a monster and how her eyes are concealed, giving off gory details and a mysterious feel at the same time.

Aesthetic wise, the overall scenes of this movie used a lot of monochrome and complementary colors, as color itself plays a big role in the mise en scène of a movie. As shown in the example above, we could see how they portrayed the surrounding environment around the girl in cool colors such as blue and green, while the girl herself was wearing a warm color which is red. Red itself may be used to portray a violent tone and intense emotions in a movie due to its powerful and passionate qualities, which is why it's so commonly used in horror movies (Suliveres, 2018).

Their use of complementary colors proved to give a more dramatic effect as the two colors reside across one another on the color wheel (Kliever, 2022). It may also help the audience to focus on the girl as she is solely wearing red in a room full of cool colors. Meanwhile, their use of monochromatic colors may also give a dramatic effect while at the same time providing the sight of something that is harmonious although the contrast capacity level is not that obvious (Hellerman, 2019).

Overall, the mysterious atmosphere portrayed by Sweet Home provided the audience with a fear of the unknown, of what lies beyond what they see. It was what directed the audience to feel like the character in the movie is being watched, even though it's only a perception of their minds. It makes them wonder and even speculate what could be coming next; will there be a jump scare? Will the monster appear from the darkness itself to end the life of our lovely characters? This point provides us with a very interesting functionality of mise en scène, that not only does it give details of the plot towards its audience, but it may also conceal the plot in order to create expressions of mystery and suspense in a movie, therefore possessing full control of what the movie expresses and its influence on the viewers (Kawin, B. F, 2012).

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper, we have looked at the apocalyptic horror movie, 'Sweet Home', through its use of mise en scène, how it conveys meanings in certain scenes and directs our thoughts and attention to certain matters that the movie aimed to express. Through this research, it's easy to conclude that mise en scène plays a heavy role in shaping the movie and controlling the audience. It is so important for a movie to visually portray its plot so that it impacts its audience, and through its use of mise en scène, this movie has done exactly that.

Sweet Home as a movie has strongly impacted its audience through its design, taking up the audience on an emotional roller coaster ride and effectively playing with their hearts so much so that it leaves a memorable impression on them. By its clever usage of mise en scène, this movie had successfully brought out the full potential of its plot, accentuating its scenes so that it gauges out the desired reaction from their audience. Their skillful control of the visual depictions in the movie allows the movie to progress effectively without showing each and every story on screen. As such, it is no wonder that this movie series received such positive reviews on online reviewing sites.

As from the authors' point of view, the movie's design has successfully brought us, as an audience, an experience to look through the characters' point of view that led us to feel for ourselves how the characters felt in the movie. Through its brilliant plot and nerve-wracking scenes, their awe-inducing design provides for a wonderful movie series worth a 4 stars rating. However, this movie may be harder to watch for some people who are unable to watch such violent and brutal scenes colored with blood, especially because it contains suicidal topics that may induce anxiety.

Through creating this paper, we hope to make readers, as well as ourselves, understand the importance and use of mise en scène in movies. In the process of making this, it is important that we understand what a mise en scène is as well as what the movie is trying to portray before using supporting theories from trustworthy sources in order to provide an accurate assessment of the movie.

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