

PDF hosted at the Radboud Repository of the Radboud University Nijmegen

The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.

<http://hdl.handle.net/2066/94412>

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2019-12-26 and may be subject to change.

Fashion and media

Anneke Smelik

Fashion and film share a close relationship. Both are commercial industries as well as artistic forms of cultural expression, and both arose with the bourgeoisification and urbanisation of modernity. *Mise-en-scène* featuring lavish sets and costumes is an inextricable part of the Hollywood feature film. In the 1920s and 1930s, the phenomenon of the spectacular in-film fashion show was born. It positions the female viewer as a desiring consumer who gazes at the silver screen as if into a luxury shop window. If films act like seductive storefronts full of clothing and stylish consumer goods, the reverse is also true: department stores, which appeared at the end of the 19th century, showcased the fashion of the cinematic world in their windows. The close relationship between movies and fashion is also reflected in architecture. Department stores and cinemas were true palaces for the new self-conscious consumer – witness how De Bijenkorf in Amsterdam competes with the Royal Palace across Dam Square, and how the Tuschinski cinema, with its extravagant art deco style, rivals them both.

Fashion and commerce were closely linked in Hollywood from the very beginning through advertising, marketing and the sale of clothes seen in movies (product tie-ins). Idealised designs bewitched viewers with the glamour and glitz that characterised Hollywood in its heyday from the 1930s to the 1960s. Throngs of female fans scrutinised the costumes and accessories worn by stars like Joan Crawford, Bette Davis and, later, Grace Kelly and Elizabeth Taylor. Audiences imitated the styles they saw in the movies. Fashion and film have in common the fact that they create illusions, dreams and fantasy images.

Famous couturiers were occasionally brought to Hollywood to design costumes for the movies. Chanel tried it, but the project was not a success. Dior created clothes for a few smaller films. The breakthrough came with Hubert de Givenchy and Audrey Hepburn's successful collaboration on films like *Sabrina* (1954), *Funny Face* (1957) and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). European couturiers tended to design clothes for continental art films, which allowed them to give free rein to their avant-garde style. Thus, Chanel made costumes for the quintessential modernist film, Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961). Yves Saint Laurent designed the outfits for Catherine Deneuve's character, Séverine, in Buñuel's surrealist *Belle de Jour* (1967). And, just as Hepburn maintained close ties to Givenchy for the rest of her life, Deneuve remained Yves Saint Laurent's muse until his death. These are the famous couturier-star relationships; perhaps less well known is the fact that the individualistic designer Jean Paul Gaultier has not only designed costumes for Madonna but also for European art films such as Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1989), Almodóvar's *Kika* (1993), Jeunet's *The City of Lost Children* (1995), and Besson's science-fiction movie *The Fifth Element* (1997).

Film's influence on fashion is waning today, although we still spy the hip influence of designer Agnès B. in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and leather jackets and sunglasses in the *Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003). Even Sofia Coppola's historic costume movie *Marie Antoinette* (2006) influenced a Dolce & Gabbana advertising campaign, though the genre is hardly a fashionable one. But fans no longer follow fashion in film the way they did in the classic Hollywood era. Instead, a new phenomenon has arisen: films about fashion and its world. Fashion is in, and the movie industry is eager to take advantage. One of the first such films was Robert Altman's *Prêt-à-Porter (Ready to Wear)* (1994), which is still enjoyable thanks to an array of big stars, from Sophia Loren and Anouk Aimée to Lauren Bacall and Kim Basinger. But it was *The*

Devil Wears Prada (2006) that really kicked off the trend. The *Sex and the City* movies (2008 and 2010) are basically two-hour fashion shows set atop skimpy storylines. There has been a small wave of films and TV series about Coco Chanel (including a series with Shirley McLaine in 2008 and the French *Coco Avant Chanel* in 2009, with more in the offing). The Dutch daily newspaper *De Volkskrant* has produced a documentary series, *Film & Fashion*, featuring installments such as *The September Issue*, *Viktor & Rolf: Because We're Worth It*, and *Signé Chanel*.

Films like these evidence the public's interest in fashion, but other media have taken over the role the movies once played in influencing clothing and styles of dress. Television series featuring fashionable young women – *Sex and the City*, *Ugly Betty*, *Gossip Girl* – have inspired new generations of fans. The retro look sparked by *Mad Men* occupies its own position here. This nostalgic look back presents an interesting image of femininity: we seek to resurrect the feminine, big-skirted look of the past but not the voluptuous body shapes.

Another change is that television has moved beyond fiction: reality TV has had a huge impact on ideas about fashion and appearance. The boom in makeover shows and weight-loss contests illustrates the overwhelming interest in everything to do with fashion.

But even TV's influence pales beside that of the Internet. Thanks to digital media, today anyone can see the major fashion shows the same day they take place. And many fashionistas have stopped following film, television and magazines altogether in favor of fashion blogs. Since the rise of Web 2.0 in 2003, its pioneers have carved out a space for themselves in fashion journalism. They offer their own "subjective" opinions as a counterpart to the fashion magazines' "objective" perspective. And they have been very successful: some bloggers are now even invited to sit in the front rows of the big fashion shows. The clout of individual bloggers demonstrates the democratisation of fashion and the emancipation of consumers. Fashion and film still create illusions, dreams and fantasies of an idealised feminine image – but now women, with their blogs, are participating too.

Anneke Smelik is a professor of visual culture at Radboud University Nijmegen and a project leader for the research programme Dutch Fashion Identity in a Globalised World.

Looking at fashion as communication medium is looking at value sets. What people wear speaks to what they hold important. What does the red coat say? What does it communicate to the world? In Marx's terms, the coat represents use value, to provide warmth, but also more subjective mystical values, like aesthetics and status. The mystical values may mean one thing to the wearer, and another to the world, but normally there is an unspoken, shared understanding.