

some familiar and enduring genres. Mary Ann Caws in “What to Wear in a Vampire Film” indicates in her very title that there are prescriptions for the vampire Look that we can identify and follow from the early silent vampire films to their recent incarnations in television series and films. Caws demonstrates that all vampire costumes are styled for a formal ritual. The vampire dresses in formal attire to honor the blood rite, which emphasizes the hallowed nature of the performance. Whether male or female, a vampire can be known by a Look. Written in high style, Caws’s chapter describes how fashion contributes to the tone of vampire spectacularity that signifies the vampire film as a genre.

Ula Lukszo, in “Noir Fashion and Noir as Fashion,” takes up the enduring mode of film noir to show that it only retrospectively becomes a genre when later films select fashions that then give the later film its “noir” Look. “The development of film noir as a genre is a post-noir phenomenon” she argues, demonstrating her point with films produced in what is generally considered the post-noir period, that is, after the 1930s and ’40s. These later films pick and choose from the fashions of the early noir movement so that eventually the very Look contributes to “the recognition and *creation* of noir as a genre.” In that vital sense, fashion shapes the genre.

Giuliana Bruno culminates the section with an elegant description of fashioning film. In “Surface, Fabric, Weave: The Fashioned World of Wong Kar-wai” she provides a paradigm for the visual language of film. Rather than “fashioning,” Bruno uses the metaphor of “tailoring” powerfully to indicate the very texture and body-forming nature of both fashion and film. The chapter brings the reader into the exquisitely tailored cinematic world of Wong Kar-wai, refreshing Western eyes with its different aesthetic. At the same time, and while focusing on this one director and his carefully fabricated designs, Bruno’s essay opens the eyes to the tailoring of film itself as a supremely aesthetic medium. Her chapter fluidly advances the volume to the next section which focuses on filming fashions.

ONE

Costume Design, or, What Is Fashion in Film?

DRAKE STUTESMAN

Why do we love fabric so much? Why do we love tailoring? A great couturier uses the best material to achieve a garment’s ideal flow, stretch, cling, or billow or any other desired aspect of shape, block, and line. Madeleine Vionnet is famous for her bias cut because it caused the material to fall in a mesmerizing way. Paul Poiret is famous for his draping because it revolutionized women’s clothing. Charles James is famous for his constructions (such as a hard corset that sustains a floating ball gown) because their anomalous balance uniquely eroticized the wearer.¹

Great costume designers are equally ingenious. The most influential, on film and in fashion, is Gilbert Adrian (a.k.a. Adrian), MGM’s Head of Costume (1928–1941) through its golden decade, who is famous for sculpting the padded shoulder and tapering, sleek silhouette that dominated much of twentieth-century dress.² Jean-Louis’s corset-based, strapless gown for Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* (1946) is considered to have anticipated Dior’s 1947 New Look. Many others have also moved the course of fashion by introducing trends—from Edith Head’s flowery bustier for Elizabeth Taylor in *A Place in the Sun* (1951) to Kym Barrett’s sinuous, utilitarian, cleric-inspired long black coats for *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003). This level of comparison raises questions. Are fashion and costume design the same? What do they have in common? Where do they depart?

Fashion is now a public sensibility—it is talked about at every level of society; bookstores have huge “fashion” sections; the red carpet is about

who is wearing what label; names like Armani, Versace, and Chanel are household words; stars like Puff Daddy have their own clothing houses; and, “experts” on fashion such as, of all people, Joan Rivers, have sprouted up everywhere. No one blinks an eye. Despite Baudelaire’s apotheosis of fashion as modern society’s litmus test,³ this attitude toward fashion is relatively recent. In 2000, fashion scholars Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson summed up the discomforts of examining the subject: “Finally fashion’s fundamental dilemma is that it has inevitably been predicated upon change, obsolescence, adornment and, in the so-called First World, it has been inextricably bound up with the commercial; this has led to the assumption that it is therefore superficial, narcissistic and wasteful.”⁴

But a few years later, other fashion scholars could raise the status of their subject. In *Fashion Statements*, Francesca Alfano Miglietti extolled fashion’s role, finding it “a reality that belongs essentially to modernity.”⁵ Christopher Breward shared that sentiment, declaring that “fashion now occupies the centre ground in popular understandings of modern culture. It enjoys unprecedented coverage in the western media and defines the tenor of urban life as no other medium.”⁶ “Modernity” legitimizes fashion, but Breward underestimates today’s preoccupation with it. As early cinema took hold of the public imagination in the early 1910s, costume design and its trendsetting fashions became an implacable and alluring force.

Fashion as a focus has evolved prodigiously in the last ten years (with or without the true homage its creativity deserves) but film fashion, or what is actually *costume design*, has not. It is marginalized, if not ignored, in the way that fashion, as Bruzzi and Church Gibson defined its dismissal, was written off not long ago. Costume design is not only a phenomenal element of the filmic process, it is a phenomenon that has changed international economies. Lenin recognized film as “the most important” of the arts in part because it is the most persuasive.⁷ Film spreads a Look or a message faster than any other medium except the internet. This power has allowed costume design, often unsung, to outdo couture’s influence.

Film costume design started at the lowest end of the taste scale, Hollywood, and was pitted ultimately against the highest end, Parisian

couture, which had dominated the garment trade since the seventeenth century. By the 1930s, this inequality had leveled and the scales began to tip toward the U.S. film industry and its groundbreaking popular costumes. At that time, American film costume design had so great an impact on the world of fashion that the important surrealist couturière Elsa Schiaparelli announced, without irony: “What Hollywood designs today you will be wearing tomorrow.”⁸

With this kind of primacy, it could be said that film costume design not only boosted U.S. success in an international economy but, I would argue, went further. It helped to define an American identity, which to this day is still linked with the same adjectives that describe American design generally—inventive, straightforward, streamlined, practical, dynamic, pioneering, and explosive. By the early to mid-twentieth century, costume design had developed a significant connection to the American fashion empires, which began in earnest in the 1930s and 1940s with houses like Hattie Carnegie (who fostered many great costume design and couture talents),⁹ John-Frederics, Traina-Norell, Mainbocher, Claire McCardell, and more. As these began to infiltrate the global fashion market and establish a style that was associated with an American Look, the European garment trade realized it was in conflict with a strong rival. Once the U.S. controlled cinema distribution (from the late ‘10s and early ‘20s onwards) the extraordinary costume design of American films reached and astonished audiences by the millions. Initial costume designers, such as Clare West and Adrian, recognized costume design as a great force in twentieth-century *haute couture*. Their work, crucial to the establishment of American style as a world competitor, was the first to outstrip the French, who until then had ruled fashion both commercially and artistically. It’s arguable that West and Adrian were key figures in laying the groundwork for what is internationally known as the “American Look.” They also were extremely vocal in their defense of U.S. fashion over Parisian alternatives and influenced the public to rethink which continent to imitate. Adrian bitterly commented that his designs went to Paris on film and French couturiers stole his ideas and returned them to the States as their own invention.¹⁰ This was so common, he stated, that “every Hollywood designer has had the experience of seeing one of his designs ignored when first flashed on the screen and

then a season or two later become the vogue because it had the stamp of approval from Paris.”¹¹

There have been some partnerships. In the Studio days, such couturiers as Schiaparelli, Chanel, Lucile, Givenchy, Dior, Hartnell, Balmain, Molyneux, Lanvin, Erté, Norell, and Reville designed for films, often in tandem with an in-house costume designer, and today it is not unheard of to see a film credit for Giorgio Armani or Jean-Paul Gaultier. But these were not, and still are not, strong relationships. The cinema costume design world and the couture world are linked but also very separate.

With these intense connections, it is obvious that the costume designer and couturier share a great deal. They each have an intimate knowledge, if not a deep love, of fabric, tailoring, line, and style, and they typically can claim an invaluable imagination and innovative, even wild, aesthetic. But there are many differences. The key one is that costume design is a working craft whose purpose is not to serve or even expand a style but to serve a film. It must express something far beyond the outfit: the costume designer must use clothes to create basic movie elements. They have to meet extreme demands such as coping with the cinematographer's lighting, the dimensions of an actor's body, the story's character, and that unique cinematic feature—the close up—all without being obtrusive. It is a complex task but it succeeds because the audience is well prepared. How so?

What does not seem to have changed in the course of some forty thousand-plus years of human society is the impact of clothing on the psyche. Costume design plays on our deepest responses to clothes and all their aspects (shape, color, texture), aspects which augment, indeed almost stand in for, our perceptions of sex, authority, comfort/discomfort, and stature. Nakedness is eroticized by clothing. Power, class, and wealth are recognized by what is worn. Fashion plays on the same responses and is as old as clothing itself. In 2009, twisted flax fibers, thirty thousand years old and dyed into pinks, blues, and grays, were found in the Republic of Georgia. Elizabeth Barber, an expert on prehistoric textiles, surmised that these threads were not for functional wear but rather for “fashion,” as she put it, because, even then, status was beginning to be revealed through cloth.¹² What, then, are , clothes, fashion, and costume design? In a sense, clothes are what one sweats in (a life), fashion is the

sweep of a Look (a lifestyle), and costume design is an industrial illusion of both (a desire for a life).

Fashion historian Valerie Steele puts it succinctly, “Fashion is a particular kind of clothing that is ‘in style.’”¹³ The differentiations of fashion (i.e. high fashion/low fashion) are not elaborate. They are found in the cost, the use, and the tailoring expertise of the clothes. High fashion, or *haute couture* (which loosely means “quality stitching”) is only a small part of what is termed the “fashion system.” The rest is boutique, ready-to-wear, and—the most lucrative part of any fashion empire—branding.

Costume, on the other hand, is on another planet or, as it were, a parallel universe. Though often breathtaking, it is really a clever cinematic beast of burden, created for a solely cinematic purpose. The former head of the American Costume Designers Guild, costume designer Deborah Nadoolman Landis, sees costume and fashion as “antithetical.” She maintains that the starstruck public can't believe that the costume the star wears is a cinematic device that is there only, as Landis sees it, to tell a story.¹⁴ This sounds unilateral and certainly there are many overlaps between fashion and costume design, but she is right that the public doesn't grasp costume design as a piece of film architecture.

Costume is a high art. The costume designer uses the word “build” to describe an outfit's construction. The costume is an object, a literal building that the actor enters, “wears,” or inhabits in order to perform. Many actors feel that they understand their character once they have worn the costume. It is a psychic world (it protects the actor's character fantasy) as well as a material one (it must be built to withstand great stresses such as wind, water, fighting, dancing, sweating, tearing, staining, and constant reuse). One even could compare the extremes of costume design, (such as a much toiled-over costume that appears for a few minutes and then is never seen again, like Norma Shearer's ball gown by Adrian in *Marie Antoinette*, 1938), with the extremes of *haute couture*, the original outfits seen on the catwalk. Alexander McQueen, Viktor and Rolf or Hussein Chalayan, to name a few, have often created bizarre clothes for their seasonal collections that are impossible to wear. They are only prototypes and they quickly disappear. In the documentary *The Secret World of Haute Couture* (2007), *haute couture* customers (often requesting anonymity), who have sole access to these original clothes, describe how

they refit the single catwalk article, even completely, at great cost. After these clients' retailing, multiple versions of the clothes emerge until the innovations of the outfit filter into retail mass consumption. Some costumes are unwearable though fans crave their style. For example, Marilyn Monroe's pink gown in the 1953 film *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, which she wears while singing "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," was made of upholstery satin and lined with felt by William Travilla.

Costume designers have to tell a story, and they tap into the same stratagems that the first ancient dyed "fashion" threads tapped. They manipulate through tools such as silhouettes, color nuances, design lines, or fabric textures (is silk right for the character or is burlap better?) but they also create an emotional *feel* in the costume through minute details such as moving a shoulder seam further from or closer to the neck or making a jacket a little too tight, too loose, too short, or too long. They must convey considerable information through imperceptible details. Wonderful use of these seemingly innocuous signals is a costume design staple. In the television sitcom, *Two and A Half Men* (2003–present), a silhouette subtly creates part of the comedy. The show is about two brothers—one an immature forty-something, handsome and a swinging bachelor who has a constant stream of beautiful bed partners, and the other an immature forty-something, homely and deeply repressed. The swinger is always dressed in large, square, knee-length shorts, a box cut, vertically lined rayon sport shirt with an open collar, and loafers with white socks. He looks stylish but also somewhat adolescent, as the clothes make him look boyish, reflecting his inner character. The repressed brother wears a polo shirt tucked into a neatly cinched belt, waist-high. His top shirt collar button is always closed but often the button pulls on the buttonhole, making two taut folds. This, a feature obviously sewn into the costume, makes him look pinched, almost childishly dressed in a different way, and underscores his immaturity and psychic discomfort. If the costume designer, Mary T. Quigley, dressed the brothers in fitting, hip, or debonair clothes, they would both look like well-built, handsome men, and the comedy wouldn't work.

Color too dictates what can work and not work in a film and the costume designer has to deal with a host of possible problems—from art direction to the actor's complexion to the lighting, to name a few.

This can range from knowing what not to dress an actor in (if a wall is green, then an actor in a green suit could be lost against it) to knowing the limitations of a color within the context of the film. In *Shaft* (2000), costume designer Ruth Carter was determined to dress the lead character, Shaft, in black, though the cinematographer was against it, concerned black would be lost in the film's many night scenes. Carter had to find a material that flattered actor Samuel L. Jackson's complexion but refracted enough light to offset it *and* would withstand the darkness of the shots. After many tests, she settled on a coal-colored suede whose upright fibers uniquely threw off light as the body moved.¹⁵ Piero Tosi, one of the world's greatest costume designers, who costumed most of Luchino Visconti's films and is known for his perfectionism and historical faithfulness, nevertheless changed the blue of the military uniform in *Ludwig* (1972) because he felt it was not a "believable" color.¹⁶ This nuanced judgment is crucial. The costume designer must know how to convince a modern audience and therefore must not only know the true attire, textiles, patterns, and colors that someone in a given period would have worn—from a cave dweller to a barfly in '60s Hong Kong to a Victorian nun—but be able to deviate from any of it.

Costume designers approach the character not just from the perspective of what suits the storyline (for example, is it a western, a noir, a romance, or a sci-fi?) but from the perspective of what suits the actor. They must, at times, make an actor's character emerge against body type. In the international hit HBO series *The Sopranos*, which ran for eight years (1999–2007), James Gandolfini portrayed domineering, sexual, violent mafia head Tony Soprano. Soprano's clothes had to reflect an unsophisticated New Jersey twenty-first-century mafia look (realism was part of the show's attraction). At the same time, Gandolfini was an overweight, round-faced, balding man and not an obvious seductive lead. Thus costume designer Juliet Polska had a conflict. She couldn't rely on the ubiquitous Armani suit to glamorize him, as that would be out of character, so she artfully dressed Gandolfini in solid tones of greys, browns, blacks, and tans, and in diamond and striped patterns. The fabric was of good quality and the color tones were elegant, lending him urbanity while the simple, polished lines sexualized his bulk. Though it might be considered a trick Look, Polska set new styles.¹⁷



1.1. Moss Mabry cleverly juxtaposed the delicate garments of the middle-aged women who signify vulnerable life against the brainwashed, deadened soldiers' dark, heavy combat uniforms in a recurring nightmare in *The Manchurian Candidate*. Courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger's *Movie Material Store*.

The beautiful Grace Kelly, in her Academy Award-winning performance in *The Country Girl* (1954), had to play against type as a dowdy, downtrodden woman married to an older, alcoholic man. In charge of Paramount's Costume Department at the time, Edith Head dressed her in loose, high-collared white blouses, long A-line skirts with little emphasis on her waistline, and flat shoes. Her shapely body was disguised and her character made to seem stifled. In the 1939 romantic comedy, *Ninotchka*, about a Russian commissar, played by Greta Garbo, who comes to Paris and gradually succumbs to the joys of western decadence, the costume fabrics as well as the costume designs revealed her route from disciplinarian to lover. Adrian dressed her for the entrance scene in a stiff wool suit, cut close to her body and tightly buttoned, but, as the film progressed, each time her garment changed, he softened the fabric, until finally she was dancing in an off-the-shoulder chiffon gown.

Costume designer Moss Mabry also used fabric to subliminally underlie the 1962 Cold War thriller, *The Manchurian Candidate*, a film about brainwashed American POWs from the Korean War. A key motif appears in a recurring nightmare where soldiers sit among middle-aged, well-dressed women at a ladies' suburban garden party and the dream women slowly are revealed to be Communist officials watching the POWs commit murder as a test. The dream's atmosphere is both gentle and sardonic. The soldiers are polite, almost bored. When, on command, a soldier, in a detached state, strangles his friend, nothing changes, and the soldiers show no emotion.

Throughout, the camera pans across the women's heads and shoulders and, though they all wear hats, it is their décolletage that stands out. The dresses are made of flowered or patterned silk or cotton, with modest but revealing scoop or V-neck collars (some plain, some flounced). Most of the women wear sparkling, at times gaudy, but tasteful necklaces. Through such details, the audience is unconsciously drawn to their throats. The vulnerable throat (the place where the soldier is killed) stands in for the naturalness that the brainwashed soldiers have suppressed. When the dream portrays the men as apathetic and cold, the talkative, delicately dressed women evoke, in the viewer, what the dream does not reveal—the soldiers' humanity.

A single outfit can also speak volumes. One of cinema's most iconic and most shrewd is Lucinda Ballard's costume for Marlon Brando in the 1951 film based on the 1947 play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, about two sisters in working-class New Orleans—one married to, and desperately in love with, a crude, stunning, virile man played by Brando, and the other, unmarried, who is trying to hide her sexual past. Sex, and its compulsions, is one of the narrative's driving forces. As such, it played a major role in the costumes.

Ballard dressed Brando in an undershirt and trousers. Figure 1.2 shows a studio shot of Brando, as Stanley, in the costume he wears through some of the film's opening scenes. Casting Brando as Stanley is an obvious choice. His effortless, irresistible, insouciant sexiness is obvious in his pose, but a close look shows that many devices also promote it.



Brando wears an ordinary undershirt and belted trousers, but the clothes are not haphazard. Ballard created this outfit to *seem* as if his clothes are filthy from work, wrinkled from the sweltering New Orleans' heat, and clinging to Brando's flesh. The clothes are so plausible, it's as if he lives in them. But they just have been lifted from a wardrobe rack and, to complicate the job further, since Brando wears these clothes in many scenes, more than one set, exactly alike, would have had to be made.

Though this type of Look had been seen in French and American 1930s films and in the 1940s wartime male, Brando's fame raised it to new heights and it is likely that Ballard took care to perfect the overall eroticism.¹⁸ The undershirt is fairly tight. The sleeves hug the round shoulders and Ballard would have sewn them into caps to snugly fit Brando's muscles, placed the seams to flatter his neck and shoulders, and cut the sleeves to do the same, giving him the most compelling lines possible. The sweat is necessary to the narrative, but where it is placed and how it appears are costume design choices. This sweat enhances Brando's shape. The dark, seemingly wet (though it is oil), stain sits in the middle of his chest, revealing its muscular curves and so making his body accessible and real. The armpit creases are placed so that their V-lines visibly show how active Brando is and how strong. The undershirt's wrinkles cross his tapering body, outlining his contours as if hand drawn, taking our eyes with them, one long fold rolling straight into the front of his pants. His shirt and trousers would have been beaten, washed, or worn to make them appear used, and the edges of the pants' pockets pulled on to give the impression that he would hook his thumbs there often. The fabric is not denim but something softer, hanging off his hips to underscore his build.

As real as this looks, the purpose of the costume is not realism. It is, as Landis argues, to tell a story and, in this case, to make Brando look like a working class stud, his character and key to the plot's progress. Without his sexiness (for his attractiveness is the critical difference between the two sisters) the story fails. Ballard could have dressed Brando in heavier,

1.2. Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* smolders in a carefully constructed costume of an undershirt and belted trousers.

Courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger's *Movie Material Store*.

baggier pants and a squarer shirt that was dirty to the point of repulsion. But she revamps the semi-dressed 1930s and '40s male persona enough to anticipate a late '50s style. This is an amazing feat—balancing realism, eroticism, and period accuracy (the postwar '40s) with an appeal to the vanguard (1950s audience).

On top of displaying this level of dexterity, psychological awareness, and historical knowledge, and on top of dealing with all the cinematic constraints (lighting, plot, body, etc.), and on top of (sometimes) having to make ugly costumes, costume designers must, just as Juliet Polska did, satisfy the public's "monstrous" need for "beauty and romance" as Nathaniel West described a fan's hunger in his novella about Hollywood, *The Day of the Locust*.¹⁹ No matter what, costume designers have to fascinate their audience—and satisfy them.

This is a display of talent that leaves couture, for all its qualities, behind. But who *knows* these costume designers' names? Or the name of William Travilla, whose white, halter-top, pleated dress for Marilyn Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) is perhaps cinema's most famed garment; or Theadora van Runkle, whose *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) costumes launched major trends in the '60s and '70s; or Patrizia Von Brandenstein, whose off-the-rack white three-piece suit for John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) is recognized (and copied) worldwide; or Eiko Ishioka, once a designer of fabrics for Issey Miyake, whose exquisite, extreme costumes for *Mishima* (1985), *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1991), and *The Cell* (2000) are legendary?

These names represent some of the extraordinary trendsetters in the history of costume design. But Clare West²⁰ and Adrian are in a category of their own. It was their marvelous imaginations that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, helped to place a recognized American design ideal on the map. However, this took time. At its inception, the U.S. film world still looked to Europe for artistic leads and for a glamorous cinema Look from Europe's *haute couture* but, by the mid- to late teens, this dependence fizzled and a well-financed tradition of in-studio American costume design began.²¹

In 1911, the year of his famous Orientalist "A Thousand and Second Night" party, Paul Poiret ruled world couture with his hobble skirts, huge sleeves, and fluid, unrestricting, non-waisted gowns. He costumed Sarah

Bernhardt in the French 1912 film *Queen Elizabeth*, dressing her against Tudor type in draped, loose, beaded dresses that made her sixty-eight-year-old body appear chic. Adolf Zukor helped fund the film when its French production company, L' Histrionic Film, collapsed, and distributed it in the U.S., after he established his company Famous Players. The film's great success spurred more American producers to bring the clout of refined European "art" to their domestic pictures. They imported top couturiers such as Poiret and Erté and designers such as George Barbier, Paul Iribe, and Joseph Urban to Hollywood. But these artists lasted a short time, typically only months, as the rigors and demands of costume design (so different from those of couture) were too much to handle and not their provenance.²²

It was in this transitional period that the great talent of Clare West arose and with it the origins of the Costume Design department as it is known today. The silent period did not credit costume design on screen, so facts are hard to substantiate. Making the task harder still, many studio records were disposed of in the 1950s. Very little is known now about West and her name is forgotten, but it's thought that she worked on D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1912) and it's certain that West costumed much of his *Intolerance* (1916).²³ She spent two years trying to coordinate historical details on this immense project, which spanned many centuries, and was also the first film to dress extras. Before *Intolerance*, the Costume Design department was known only as "wardrobe" and actors often wore their own clothes, or costumes were rented or thrown together.²⁴ With this film, West was awarded the credit of "Studio Designer" at Griffith's Triangle Studios,²⁵ an unprecedented official title. Her influence was already in play when *Photoplay* declared that *Intolerance's* costumes swayed current fashion.²⁶ And this was just the beginning of her remarkable hard work. She worked on at least ten Cecil B. DeMille blockbusters, designing for settings from the Bible to prehistory to life among the modern, ultra-chic, 1920s smart set. She was lauded both for accuracy and for incredible contemporary styling. DeMille was canny enough to understand that what the producers were looking for in their European "art" experiments could be found in *extravagance*. "I want clothes that will make people gasp when they see them. Don't design anything that anyone could buy in a store," he told

her. He loved what he called “her lavish hand.” DeMille hired West in 1918 to oversee costumes at Famous Players-Lasky, the foremost studio at that time, because he knew her genius could “make people gasp.”²⁷ It did.

Christian Esquevin, in his Adrian biography, locates the era of Hollywood’s greatest pressure on France in the late ’20s when, he argues, a form-fitting gown showing a womanly shape began to glide across the silver screen, simply obliterating Poiret’s boyish, cloaked, semi-asexual figure.²⁸ But this pressure began even earlier with West’s talent, with her popularity and the publicity that her work garnered. Her reputation grew more public as her outré, sexy gowns, barely clinging to the bodies of the superstars of her era—Gloria Swanson, Bebe Daniels, and the Talmadge sisters—appeared on screen, in the fan magazines, and on the backs of screen goddesses at parties. Her fabulous outfits included the patent leather swimsuit in *Saturday Night* (1922) and the octopus dress and cape seen in *The Affairs of Anatol* (1921) (which may be considered a forerunner of Adrian’s infamous Zeppelin Ball gown in *Madam Satan* [1930]). These and many other creations made West famous. She devised personal clothes for special star clients (as did many costume designers after her, including Adrian, Howard Greer, Irene, and, later, Patricia Field; they also opened retail salons). Her opinion counted and she was the first to champion American fashion over European. In 1923, *Screen News* quoted West’s belief, after a trip to Europe, that U.S. motion picture costumes trumped Paris designs and led the couture world.²⁹ Less than a decade later, Adrian voiced this same conviction and ratified it in his line of fashion “firsts.”

These forceful talents and forceful voices were persuasive, but economic failures and political struggle also slowed Europe’s couture lead. By 1915, World War I prevented most French imports from reaching the U.S., and this meant that “American-made” clothing gained prominence and even cachet (campaigns urging buyers to “Buy American” were not uncommon).³⁰ In the 1910s, many European films enjoyed big U.S. audiences, but by the ’20s, as studios, especially Famous Players-Lasky, had



1.3A. The bold Babylonian costumes Clare West designed for *Intolerance* influenced fashion trends. Courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger’s *Movie Material Store*.



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taken corporate control of the industry and of distribution, European films lost favor and were denigrated as old-fashioned or perversely arty. The fashion trades still were under French hegemony, but American cinema costume design, crazy as it could be, began to beat Parisian fashion at its own game because it had the widest public: the wide-eyed moviegoer. In the '30s, seventy-five million Americans went to the movies weekly, but only a few read the couture magazines.³¹

By this time, the prolific Adrian (designing for over ten films a year) was on his way to becoming the true luminary of the American Look, responsible for more fashion firsts than any other U.S. designer in fashion or in film. He advocated simplicity but he also inventively took that quality to new extremes. He perfected a "V-line" silhouette, which enhanced a trim female figure with elegant, hard lines. He used collarless necklines, tie fasteners, slashes, straps that were only decorative, asymmetrical pockets, and asymmetrical balances between large features and small features. His inner work, such as stitching techniques, could be unique and problem-solving. He was daring in mixing textiles and daring in experimenting with complex tailoring, seeing how far he could take a clean line without making it complicated. These are only a few of his hallmarks.

Oleg Cassini, a costume designer and Jacqueline Kennedy's stylist, cited Adrian as "perhaps the only member of our profession powerful enough to impose his taste on a director."³² Adrian was able to stride both worlds as no one else, and he was direct in his intentions, stating in 1931, "[w]hat I am trying to create for the screen are ultra modern clothes which will be adaptable for the street."³³ By the 1930s he became a household name and, like West, had an opinion that counted.

In 1932, Adrian changed the garment industry forever when he converted a cinema costume into a ready-to-wear retail dress. With this feat, he became a triumphant force in both the fabric and the clothing trades, major economies of the time. Adrian's ruffled white organdy gown for Joan Crawford in *Letty Lynton* (1932) was the first cinema costume to be mass-marketed and was described by Edith Head as the single most

1.3B. Clare West's famous stark, outré, and elegant Octopus cape for *The Affairs of Anatol*. Courtesy of Photofest.

important fashion influence in film history.³⁴ This is hardly an exaggeration. The dress became an overnight craze. One Macy's outlet bragged of selling five hundred thousand copies. Whether true or not, the boast indicates the dress's fame. When Adrian began to market his *Letty Lynton* dress, he entered into a swirling maelstrom of radical transformations in the fashion world.

In the 1930s, Paris and New York had been struggling for decades over ready-to-wear, which had eclipsed handmade clothes (previously worn by all parts of the population). Ready-to-wear had been a slowly growing segment of the French industry since the late 1800s, when small dressmaking workrooms, often run by women, and the rich salons for exclusive clients, grouped into larger conglomerates. Men took over the management of these new workrooms. Labor was forced into many strikes. In 1925, though the garment industry (especially *haute couture* patterns and the rights to them, as well as ready-to-wear clothing) was still France's second largest exporter, it was weakening. By the late '20s, ready-to-wear had stormed the U.S. fashion world and was considered a successful base for couturiers such as Hattie Carnegie and Omar Kiam, who were touted in American *Vogue* as creators of "a mode that is definitely American."³⁵ By the 1930s, France's export-import trade, the basic bread and butter of its garment world, and its ready-to-wear market had been drastically changed by the strikes and the war, and its global reach had diminished.

While an American Look and the ascendance of ready-to-wear clothing were already in the making, it was Adrian's move that definitively brought film and its costume design to a new kind of commercial marketing. By seizing this advantage, he changed the course of the American sense of Americanness forever, sealing a fantastically productive bond between basic artisan crafts like costume design and filmmaking with an economic boom that jettisoned the U.S. from Europe's hold. He was part of the early foundations of a rapidly developing American identity. He adamantly defended an American Look that still exists today with all the Adrian earmarks—clean tailoring, practical elegance with an original and extravagant use of fabric, and an urban sophistication that speaks of a woman on the move. He described this as "the natural kind of American grace for which I strive."³⁶ These traits were further developed

as identifiably American over the decades in the work of designers like Claire McCardell, Bonnie Cashin, James Galanos, Halston, Bill Blass, and Calvin Klein.

No designer is isolated. Some of these design motifs also appeared in Chanel, Schiaparelli, and in the *fashionista zeitgeist* of the early century, but Adrian more than anyone diversified and unified these ideas with an American style in mind. He and West, both film costume designers, saw the grace in the American Look long before Americanism and its culture became acceptable internationally. Remarkably, though still an underappreciated profession, the qualities of film costume design—strange mixtures of *declassé*, *classé*, wild style, artisanship, and economic and artistic constraints—are part of the roots of American individuation.

NOTES

1. Richard Martin, *Charles James*, 6–7. Martin argues that James's heavy, highly engineered dresses conveyed an eroticism and empowerment unlike any other in the '40s and '50s and that this anomaly was James's greatest achievement.

2. Christian Esquevin, *Adrian*, 36. Though the question of who invented the woman's shoulder pad silhouette, and when, has been much debated, Esquevin places the debut of Adrian's shoulder pad in 1928 and Schiaparelli's and others' in 1931.

3. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 13. In the 1860 essay, *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire extols the "ephemeral" and "contingent" found in fashion as the real measure of modernity, in part because the vogues of what people wear embody living in modern time and so are the most representative of it.

4. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, "Introduction," 2.

5. Francesca Miglietti, *Fashion Statements*, 15.

6. Christopher Breward, *Fashion*, 9.

7. Mira Leihm, *The Most Important Art*, 34. V. I. Lenin in conversation with A. V. Lunacharsky in 1922 said, "... film, of all the arts, is the most important..."

8. Jane Mulvagh, *Vogue History of Twentieth Century Fashion*, 123.

9. Hattie Carnegie fostered the great couturiers James Galanos, Claire McCardell, Norman Norell, and Pauline Trigère as well as the great costume designers Travis Banton, Howard Greer, and Jean-Louis.

10. Paul Poiret, *King of Fashion*, 154. Conversely, French couturiers also had trans-Atlantic complaints. Poiret, years before, complained that couture clothes were bastardized by "intermediaries" between the continents who were only interested in what they could sell. He maintained that Americans "were condemned to see nothing of the true Parisian mode except what is without personality, without significance..."

11. Esquevin, 19.

12. NPR Radio, *All Things Considered*, September 10, 2009. In response

to reporter Richard Harris's quoting Elizabeth Barber as saying that "woven clothing developed not so much for comfort as for fashion, especially important fashion," Barber answers, "It's not until you start to get haves and have-nots that people start differentiating themselves by, look what I'm wearing as opposed to what you're wearing or not wearing."

13. Valerie Steele, *Fifty Years of Fashion*, 3.

14. Deborah Landis, *Screencraft*, 7. Many other costume designers describe their profession in this way.

15. Mary Ellen Harrington, *Fifty Designers/ Fifty Costumes*, 26. Interview with Ruth Carter.

16. Landis, 84.

17. After another designer briefly worked on three episodes, the actors demanded that Polska return, believing their roles were inextricably tied with the costumes and the Look that she created for them. She completed the entire series, seventy-three episodes. (Interview with Juliet Polska by the author.)

18. In conversation with the author, costume designers Rita Ryack (Academy Award nominee) and Carol Oditz confirmed that Ballard would approach the costume in this manner.

19. Nathaniel West, *Miss Lonelyhearts and Day of the Locust*, 4.

20. Susan Prichard, *Film Costume*, 247. West's first name is variously spelled Clair, Claire or Clare. Prichard claims that "Clare" is correct.

21. By the 1920s, the budgets for costume design could be enormous. In 1922, West spent \$100,000 on furs for one actress in *Manslaughter* (Prichard, 304).

22. One exception is Paul Iribe, graphic artist and designer of theater sets, furniture and more, who had worked for Poiret and Jeanne Paquin. He designed for a number of American films, either solely

or in collaboration with other costume designers. He and West worked on *The Affairs of Anatol*, *Adam's Rib*, *Manslaughter*, and *The Golden Bed*. But, it is difficult to separate out a single costume designer's silent era work in these kind of collaborations. Each costume designer could make outfits for specific actors or work on specific scenes (vignettes were popular in this era) or one could be responsible for the film overall while another costume designer created for a single actor. Costume designers did not necessarily work together. Many sources still conflict over accreditation. In histories written after the silent era, the names of the men in such collaborations, such as Iribe or Mitchell Leisen, have typically been favored over those of the women, such as West or Natacha Rambova. But it's not always the case. Also, many excellent talents came from France to make careers in Hollywood, and some stayed permanently, including Jean-Louis, known as the French Adrian, and René Hubert. (Madeleine Delpierre et al., *French Elegance in the Cinema*, 45-79.)

23. Prichard, 154. Griffith is known to have conceived some of the costume design.

24. David Chierichetti, *Hollywood Costume Design*, 8.

25. This was such an important achievement that nine years later, in 1925, *Motion Picture* still noted it (Prichard, 109).

26. Lillian Howard, "Back to Babylon for New Fashions," 39-40. West's Babylonian costumes were influential.

27. Cecil B. DeMille, *The Autobiography of Cecil B. DeMille*, 261.

28. Esquevin, 22.

29. Prichard summarizes two newspaper articles from the time. "Say Europe's Designers Using Our Film Ideals," *Screen News* 2, no. 10 (March 10, 1920): 14. "Once

Paris . . . Now Los Angeles," *Grauman's Magazine* 5, no. 36 (September 24, 1922).

(Both Prichard, 304.)

30. Mulvagh, 33.

31. Robert McElvaine, *Encyclopedia of the Great Depression*, 576.

32. Oleg Cassini, *In My Own Fashion*, 107.

33. Esquevin, 33.

34. *Ibid.*, 17.

35. Mulvagh, 85-86.

36. Esquevin, 35.

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