

## **Scene II. Creative Contexts**

All Hollywood feature films are the product of creative teamwork. Production designers define the 'where' – the place and setting of the story. Cinematographers create the visual mood and tone of the narrative. Directors tell the story, making the final decision about everything that appears on-screen. Together with the costume designer, this creative team makes a world – and the people in it – come alive.

Scene Two of Hollywood Costume examines creative collaborations between costume designers, directors and actors. In this gallery, you will also see how costume designers work within specific contexts of production: cinematic genres, new technologies and censorship. The first gallery of the exhibition explored the perspective of the costume designer. This gallery is about the situations in which costume designers do their work.

## Collaborating with Directors

The creative relationship between director and costume designer is an essential part of film-making. The four partnerships featured here are among the greatest collaborations in the history of Hollywood.

Edith Head is the most famous costume designer of all time. Her career spanned the entire history of the Hollywood studio system, from her first film *Wings* in 1929 through 11 films designed for Alfred Hitchcock between 1946 and 1976.

London-based Sandy Powell began her career working with Derek Jarman before going on to design costumes for such Hollywood directors as Martin Scorsese. Ann Roth has forged a creative partnership with director Mike Nichols over four decades, on both stage and screen. Colleen Atwood has been instrumental in realising Tim Burton's artistic vision, creating costumes for Johnny Depp in *Edward Scissorhands*, *Ed Wood* and *Sweeney Todd*.

## Changing Contexts

Movies mirror society. Changing cultural norms have significantly influenced how costumes are designed and how they look on-screen, as have advances in technology. The seismic shifts from silent to sound, from black-and-white to colour, and from film to digital have also had an enormous impact on the art of costume design.

Yet in every important way, the role of the designer has remained constant: conducting research, visualising characters, contributing to the director's vision and serving the story.

## Epics

Epics are stories told on a very large canvas. Whether the movie is a recreation of ancient Egypt or the American Civil War, the only practical difference to the costume designer is one of scale.

Before computer crowd replication, the designer was responsible for clothing thousands of extras. For research, costume designers relied on surviving statues and murals from antiquity and more modern interpretations by Victorian painters such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema. His influence is clearly seen in the silent and sound versions of *Ben-Hur* (1925, 1959).

Director Cecil B. DeMille was famous for big-budget epic productions. Actor Charlton Heston specialised in playing epic heroes in many of the extravaganzas of the 1950s.

## Westerns

Actor John Wayne said, 'Westerns are the best vehicle to tell a story in our medium.' Wayne modelled his plain-dressed heroes on the silent Western star Harry Carey: denim jeans, shirts with bib fronts, and a moderately brimmed cowboy hat.

The pre-eminent costume house in Hollywood, Western Costume Company (founded 1912), began as a vast warehouse of authentic cowboy gear from which countless films were dressed.

Pronouncements on the death of the Western have been premature. While preparing *Stagecoach* (1939), director John Ford said, 'After the studio heads read it, they said, "But this is a Western! People don't make Westerns anymore!"' In fact, the genre accounted for over fifty percent of all Hollywood films made prior to the 1970s.

## Science Fiction

Predicting what clothing will be worn in the future is an impossible task. Even Stanley Kubrick's scientifically researched flight attendants in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) now look dated.

When costume designers draw on familiar archetypes, the result is more satisfactory. In *Flash Gordon* (1936), the fiendish Ming the Merciless is based on the 1930s stereotype of the 'Oriental' super-villain, Fu Manchu.

'For Darth Vader,' designer John Mollo said, 'we put on a black motorcycle suit, a Nazi helmet, a gas mask and a monk's cloak that we found in the middle-ages department.' *Star Wars* (1977) explicitly harked back to the serials of the 1930s, when technology was still considered magic. Its opening words – 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away' – prepared the audience for the fantastic rather than the futuristic.

## Period Film

It is no coincidence that film adaptations of classic literature set in the past are often called 'costume dramas'. Dress is the most immediate way to indicate the time in which a story takes place.

Designers may strive to duplicate an authentic period style or silhouette, but their principal role is to create clothes that feel 'right' to the audience. The audience must connect with the characters, which usually means that the clothes must also be attractive to contemporary eyes.

Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* has inspired Belle Époque film gowns worn by Greta Garbo (costume designer Adrian, 1935), Vivien Leigh (Cecil Beaton, 1948), Sophie Marceau (Maurizio Millenotti, 1997) and Keira Knightley (Jacqueline Durran, 2012). Each version captures both the fashion of the 19th century, when the story takes place, and the fashionable conventions of the film's own time.

## Digital Frontiers

‘Motion Capture’, the newest filmmaking tool, allows actors’ bodies to be scanned and their costumes, facial expressions and environments added digitally.

This complex technical process requires the talents of costume designers. Their expertise helps animators interpret the texture and behaviour of fabric for a character’s costumes. The designer still designs the clothes, and may or may not create the three-dimensional pattern for the costume to be entered into a computer program.

The outrageous gravity-defying red dress worn by Jessica Rabbit in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988) is a textbook example of such a costume. Designed by Joanna Johnston, it was realised not by seamstresses, but by animators using computers.

## Censorship

The sex and violence of the first Hollywood 'talkies' produced a strong reaction among the self-appointed guardians of public decency. In 1934 the Motion Picture Production Code established under chief censor William Hays imposed strict rules regarding story, dialogue and dress.

'No picture,' said the Hays Code, 'shall lower the moral standards of those who see it.' Cleavage was forbidden, as were women's navels (men's were permitted).

William Hays was followed by the repressive Joseph Breen. His office returned screenplays to the studio with passages deleted, and studios sent censors to the set as enforcers.

This atmosphere gradually waned with the rise of television, the demise of the studio system and the rise of the Swinging Sixties. The Code was abandoned in 1968 and replaced with the modern ratings system.

## Remakes

Some stories are told over and over again. They offer a compelling opportunity for costume designers to put their own interpretation on familiar icons.

The story of Cleopatra has been remade many times in cinema. In 1934, Claudette Colbert's Art Deco gowns were promoted for their supposed authenticity: 'Exhaustive investigation has been made concerning the Egyptian queen's garments.' In 1963, Elizabeth Taylor – who had 60 costume changes in the film – wore plunging necklines, elaborate makeup and a succession of dramatic wigs.

In both cases, the costumes were plausible as ancient Egyptian, but their modern touches also helped a contemporary audience relate to the romantic heroine, bridging 2000 years of history.

## Black-And-White To Colour

Colour dramatically widened the scope of costume design. In black-and-white, designers created visual interest principally through silhouette, pattern, contrast between light and dark, and the reflectivity of satin, beads and sequins. (Mae West's contracts specified that she would be the only actress in a film to wear white.)

Colour required a different approach, and brought a degree of uncertainty. This was partly a practical worry. In early Technicolor what appeared on-screen was quite different from the garment's actual colour.

It was also an artistic question. Designer Travis Banton, who had a long career in black-and-white film, said: 'If we try to dress feminine stars in a kaleidoscopic range of colours, it will surely be distressing to an audience.' But by the time of *Gone with the Wind* (1939), colour was seen as an essential dramatic element.

## Silent to Sound

The arrival of sound to the movies in the 1920s had an effect on virtually every aspect of the industry, including costume design. Partly this was a practical matter. Mark Bridges, costume designer for the recent silent film *The Artist* (2011), has said that ‘the silence was very freeing because you don’t have to worry about microphones rubbing against taffeta, and dangling jewellery.’

The silent era, which bore the strong influence of vaudeville and music hall, was marked by exaggerated conventions of performance. This was matched by costume design which was often intended to convey a strong archetype on first sight.

## **Collaborating with Actors**

Actors often discover their character through costume. When an actor is asked to fully inhabit a different person – ‘Cruella’ or ‘Dorothy’ or ‘Captain Jack Sparrow’ – costume assists this transformation. Once a costume designer gives the clothes to the actor, the actor can give the character to the director, and the director then tells the story.

Clothing and accessories enable actors to shape their role and create a new person. As costume designer Ann Roth says of working with Meryl Streep in the fitting room: ‘We wait for the third person to arrive.’

## Meryl Streep

The ability of Meryl Streep (b.1949) to submerge herself into real people like Karen Silkwood (*Silkwood*, 1983), Danish writer Karen Blixen (*Out of Africa*, 1985) and Margaret Thatcher (*The Iron Lady*, 2011) is the result of her own research and her extraordinary talent, but also her close creative collaborations.

Each time she plays a new character, the starting point remains the same. She says, 'I don't visualise the person: I visualise certain aspects of me that I can enhance to be this person. So I don't see a different person than myself, but I see things about me that I'm going to shift or emphasise or de-emphasise to make this character.'

## Robert De Niro

One of Hollywood's most distinguished actors, Robert De Niro (b.1943) brings an intensity to every role. His complete commitment to his 'people' is legendary.

For his role as Travis Bickle in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), he obtained a New York cab licence and drove around the city. For *Raging Bull* (1980), De Niro gained 60 lbs (27kg) and boxed some 1000 rounds with the fighter Jake LaMotta, the very person he was to play.

When preparing for a role, De Niro says that he looks 'for a real example of a person. I see what they are wearing and sometimes it's not what you'd think it would be... So how do you make it real? What are they doing that makes it real when they wear it?'