

Clothes on Film

The rising prominence of **fashion studies** as an academic field of research is a fairly recent phenomenon. While sociologists, philosophers and radical thinkers from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century were interested in the fashion system as a means of expressing aesthetic taste, political ideas and social identity, it was only with the development of cultural studies in the United Kingdom and abroad, and with the growth of mid-century dress history, that the field of fashion studies started to emerge.ⁱ Since the late 1970s, the publication of groundbreaking texts such as Dick Hebdige's *Subculture and the Meaning of Style* (1979), Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985) or Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton's *Women and Fashion: A New Look* (1989) have contributed to widening the scope of and the variety of approaches to the field.ⁱⁱ As a consequence, a great number of fashion studies texts have sprung from a range of disciplines such as history, anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, sociology and film studies, helping to position the field at the juncture of many disciplines.

In 1997, film historian Pam Cooks claimed that 'clothing design [was] one of the least researched areas in film history'—a sentence that clearly reflects the lack of interest, at that time, in the study of costume and fashion in films.ⁱⁱⁱ Noteworthy exceptions in recent years include the seminal work by Gaines and Herzog *Fabrications: Costume and the Female Body* (1990); *Undressing Cinema* by Stella Bruzzi (1997); *Fashion and Celebrity Culture* by Pamela Gibson (2012); and the work of Professor Deborah Landis: *A Century of Hollywood Costume Design* (2007), *Film Craft: Costume Design* (2012), *Hollywood Sketchbook: A Century of Costume Illustration* (2012) and the catalogue for the exhibition *Hollywood Costume* at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Common to all these texts is the belief that costume is an object of serious theoretical study and that 'the study of fashion is an increasingly legitimate route into film and media studies' (Bruzzi, 2006).

Therefore, the first part of the module will be organised as follows:

- Familiarisation with the existing literature on costume in films and its connection with fashion studies.
- Introduction to the key theoretical texts that will be applied during the seminars.
- Understanding methodologies through the analysis of fashion/costume in films.

Key Theoretical Texts

In the inaugural symposium that opened the Centre for Fashion Studies in 2006 in Stockholm, Stella Bruzzi recalled how her text *Undressing Cinema* (1997) was written very much in the wake of the publication of Judith Butler's radical reassessment of gender and femininity, *Gender Trouble* (1990): "Not unlike Butler, I placed *my* reassessments of *costume* and gendered identities within the context of existing theory—in my case, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic film theory [...] To "confess"—thinking of Foucault—that these were my guiding interests is most certainly to place *Undressing Cinema* in a different era, but it seemed essential, when researching an underdeveloped area, to work within an existing, familiar critical framework.'^{iv}

The way, in which Bruzzi revisits her work, encourages us to contextualize and re-think of the use of theory, as well as of the relationship between teaching and research within the growing field of fashion and film. Therefore, theory should work as both support and tool to challenge ideas and methods, as well as to inspire new approaches vital to the development of the discipline.

Thus, during the course, we use fashion studies as starting point of our analysis, in order to introduce the students to the study of this discipline and to its development. A particular attention will be given to theories that pays attention to the materiality of each aspect in film, to the 'texture' revealed in each film, such as the one on the aesthetics of material (*Estetica dos Materiais*) developed by the Portuguese director Antonio Reis' who says: 'forms do not give way to ideas, they are the ideas

themselves'. This vision offers a new method to the study of costuming in film, by highlighting the meaning of costumes in the language of film. In her book *Surface Matters of Aesthetic, Materiality and Media* (2014), Giuliana Bruno introduces the *Sartorial Philosophy*, idea that posits the study of fashion in cinema as different from fashion elsewhere:

It is time to propose a different 'model' for the theorisation of fashion, one that is able to account for the way fashion works as a fabric of the visual in a larger field of spatio-visual fabrication [...] In thinking of fashion in this new way, we need to move beyond issues of spectacle and commodity and elaborate a playful form of sartorial theorisation, concerned less with sociology or the semiotics of clothing and connected more closely to the history of art and the design of space, and to their theorisation. This sartorial theory should be able to address forms of fashioning that include the relationship of clothes to the production of (mental) space; the clothing of space and the layering of time; and the tailoring of visual fabrics and the dressing of surface.^v

For Bruno, fashion goes beyond the realm of costuming and is revealed as part of the architecture of the language of film—as an important feature shaping the aesthetic texture of a film. This direction reinforces the idea that we should be moving forward with a new approach to fashion theory applied to costume, in which fashion is inextricably linked to spatio-visual creation, as Bruno notes.

Methodology

In terms of methodology, I will be referring to the work of the Italian linguist Patrizia Calefato, who developed in the late 1980s a theory of the “clothed body”. She points out that, in film more than in any other media, the clothed body becomes the main subject, since the representation of the body and the way it is dressed is absolutely crucial to the process of filmmaking. Therefore, the clothed body is the physical-cultural territory where the visible and sensible performance of our outer identity is

accomplished. Calefato's body of work furthers an important discourse that pioneering researchers had developed in the mid-1970s with a certain focus on the cinematographic construction of the female body as an object "wholly trapped within a patriarchal vision of human relations and power".^{vi} This is argued by Laura Mulvey in a 1974 essay in which she separates the man from the woman within the cinematographic process by defining the first as the eye that looks and the second as the spectacle or, more specifically, "the performance" to be looked at. According to Patrizia Calefato, this groundbreaking research made it possible to constitute a theoretical basis on which, during the 1980s, an analysis of cinematic corporeality began.

Particular attention will be given to the analysis of the different gender roles represented, which will be studied within the historical, political and social context in which they are produced. As an example, Agnes Varda's films raise important questions that are central to any articulation of the construction of the "feminine" in cinematic discourse; her film *Cleo* is a perceptive cinematic exploration of many of the issues concerning the female image and the "gaze" that helps the student to reflect on the feministic dialectic of the woman seeing and the woman seen.

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ⁱ See: Breward, C. (1995). *The Culture of Fashion*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; Breward, C. (1998). "Cultures, Identities, Histories: Fashioning a Cultural Approach to Dress", *Fashion Theory*, 2: 4, pp. 301–13.; Taylor, L. (2002). *The Study of Dress History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

ⁱⁱ Mora, E., Rocamora, A., Volontè P., (2014), "The Internationalization of Fashion Studies: Rethinking the peer-reviewing process" in *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cook, P. 1996. *Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema*. London: BFI publishing, p.41.

^v Bruno, G. 2014. *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, p.40.

^{vi} Cucinotta, C. 2018. *Viagem ao cinema através do seu vestuário. Percurso de análise em filmes portugueses de etnoficção*. Covilhã: LabCom.IFP