

# Costume Design and Identity

Costuming as it is Used to Construct Societal Barriers

By Will Lorenzo



Fashion Film: The Cultures of Fashion  
Prof. Eugenia Paulicelli

## Introduction

One of the most important elements of mise-en-scene is the sartorial code. A viewer gets a chance to see into a character through his/her clothing. Costume design in film has many uses in addition to just dressing and describing a character. “Costume design is not just about the clothes: in film, it has both a narrative and a visual mandate. Designers serve the script and the director by creating authentic characters and by using colour, texture and silhouette to provide balance within the composition of the frame. The costume designer must first know *who* the character is before approaching this challenge” (Landis 48). Costuming can be used to create societal/class structures in film. Costuming has the power to place a specific character from a film in his/her respective class or social group. In many films, this specific type of costume design is obvious, but most of the time, it is very subtly done.

One of the films which use costuming to construct barriers is Vittorio De Sica’s *Ieri, Oggi, Domani* (1963). This film is broken up into three separate parts. In all three parts, Sophia Loren and Marcello Mastroianni play the lead characters, yet they are different characters in each section of the film. The three distinct characters which the pair play each belong to a different social class and societal group. Not only can one examine the costume design between the three parts, and show how costuming directly relates to the placement of a character in his/her respective class structure, but one can also treat each part separately and examine the fashion of each individual sequence of the film.

In *Ieri, Oggi, Domani* (1963), we are given the unique opportunity to examine costume design across three storylines. In each storyline, Loren’s and Mastroianni’s characters both belong to the same societal groups, and also belong to the same social class (or at least similar social classes in the case of the third part of the film). Costuming is used in a variety of ways

and techniques to separate these classes from each other across all three parts. But another important use of costuming is creating a barrier between two (or more) characters due to their respective classes. In *Ieri, Oggi, Domani* (1963), we do not get a chance to see this as the characters in each part all belong to similar classes. There are many other filmic examples which illustrate the notion that costuming can be used to separate two characters in a film by their societal groups.

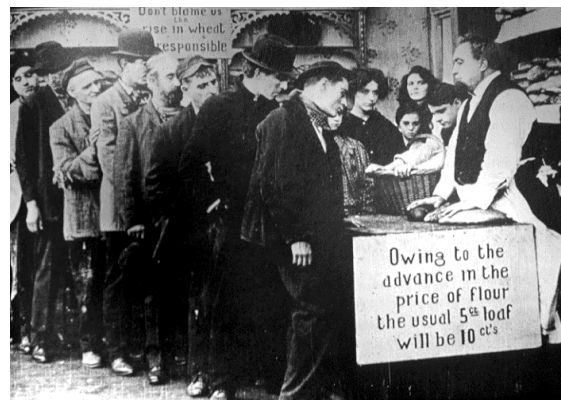
One specific film that does this is *On the Waterfront* (1954). This film uses costuming (among other elements) to separate the impoverished workers from the mobsters and union leaders. In addition to this film, many films use costuming to separate the rich from the poor – the most notable of which is probably *It Happened One Night* (1934). Since the gap between the rich and the poor is one of the defining elements of the screwball comedy, many films from this genre will also feature varying costume designs, such as *My Man Godfrey* (1936), for one.

There is one film in particular which offers a unique perspective on costume design in relation to the difference between two classes. This film is Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). This film is about a director who wants to make a socially conscious movie, so he decides to go undercover as a tramp in order to get an insider's look into the lower class. In this film, we get a chance to see costuming for all the rich Hollywood characters, costuming for all the poor lower class characters, and most importantly, costuming for the two main characters which is a sort of medium between the two. The costume design for this film exceptionally creates costumes for the main characters (who are rich and pretending to be poor), such that the costumes are a rich person's interpretation of a poor person's clothing. Examining the costume design in each of these and other films, we can establish a connection between clothing/fashion

and society. The costuming in these films places the characters in their respective class structures and societal groups.

### **Biograph Shorts and Silent Era**

The notion of costume design being used to construct class barriers has been employed by filmmakers as early as the early 1900s. In D.W. Griffith's *The New York Hat* (1912), a poor woman is shunned by her community due to the misconceptions surrounding her wearing an expensive hat, typically associated with high society New Yorkers. Many of Griffith's Biograph Shorts use this technique, the most notable of which is *A Corner in Wheat* (1909). D.W. Griffith's *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) uses costuming to distinguish between the two major classes in the film: the extremely rich and the extremely poor. The short film is about monopolizing the wheat market. We see the man who monopolizes the wheat market is dressed in a tuxedo in the film, and all of his extremely rich socialite friends are dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns with expensive hats. On the other hand, we get to see the workers in the wheat fields and the extremely poor people who can barely afford the bread on the bread lines. These people are dressed in dilapidated clothing that looks as if it were literally falling apart on their bodies. This short film, as early as 1909, was already using costuming to create class barriers and distinguish characters belonging to different social groups.



Aside from Griffith's Biograph shorts, many other films from the silent era also employ this costuming technique. Many of Charlie Chaplin's films (both shorts and features) are centered around costume design (this is fairly evident in his depiction of 'the tramp' in his pictures). One Chaplin film, in particular, which shows a clear distinction between classes is *City Lights* (1931).

Chaplin's tramp character's poverty is made clear from the very beginning of the film, and his costuming obviously reflects that. But in this film in particular, the tramp meets another character who is extremely wealthy. This drunken millionaire (as he is credited) plays a crucial part in the film, and his wealth is the crux of his relationship with the tramp in this film. The drunken millionaire (along with his butler)



is dressed for the part – as a clear opposite of Chaplin's tramp. Although Chaplin's tramp costuming places him in the lower class (often poverty stricken) in just about every film in which he is the star, some of his films, *City Lights* (1931) in particular, also depict a member of the upper class as a juxtaposition to Chaplin's tramp.

These films are evidentiary of the fact that the idea of using costume design as a way of constructing class barriers was used by filmmakers as early as D.W. Griffith's Biograph shorts and all throughout the silent era. During the sound era, the first major use of this idea of costuming can be seen in screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. Since one of the major motifs of the screwball comedy is a major class difference, this costuming technique greatly serves that genre. Using costume design to divide characters into different societal groups has been done since the silent era, and can still be seen in films today.

## **Ieri, Oggi, Domani (1963)**

Ieri, Oggi, Domani (1963) is a film which is truly centered around costume design in the most unique of ways. Employing famed Italian costume designer Piero Tosi, De Sica's film is made up of three separate sections, each section featuring the same actors and actresses. Even if the sound was turned off, a viewer could tell the difference between these parts based on the costume design alone. Although the actors are the same, the costuming is related to each specific character's life, and therefore differs greatly between parts.

The first part of the film is "Adelina of Naples." This part is set in the impoverished post-war Naples and features Sophia Loren as Adelina and Marcello Mastroianni as her husband, Carmine. Carmine is unemployed and the couple resorts to selling contraband black market cigarettes to provide for their family. Italian law at the time stipulated that a woman could not be imprisoned if she was pregnant, so when Adelina is caught, she schemes to continuously remain pregnant in order to avoid going to prison. The costuming in this part of the film is probably the most noteworthy of the three parts. First of all, in this part alone, there are characters who cross class boundaries and societal groups, and their fashion is used as a distinguishing factor.

Adelina and Carmine are always dressed in run down, unflattering clothes due to their lack of



income. Their children are dressed the same way. We also get a chance to see that the police are similarly dressed. Although they have uniforms, these uniforms are dirty and untidy throughout the film, which suggests that they too are impoverished, which offers insight into why they seem to be on Adelina's side when she

is evading jail time. There is also a neighborhood lawyer who advises Carmine throughout the film. On him, we see modest attire, one that is much more flattering than Carmine's, but also one that is not as glamorous as one would typically associate with a lawyer. This places him in a class above that of Adelina and Carmine, but also alerts the audience to the fact that even high paying professions (like lawyers) were affected by the extreme post-war poverty in Naples.

The second part of the film is called "Anna of Milan." In this segment we see Sophia Loren as Anna (wearing Dior), the wife of an extremely rich industrialist, and Marcello Mastroianni as Renzo, her lover. In this segment, Anna is dressed like a princess throughout. The attire that she dons in this segment immediately places her into the upper class. Renzo is also dressed very well, but his costuming is a bit less over the top. His clothing definitely places him in the upper class, but he is most likely in a different societal group than Anna is, based on his fashion. Anna exudes an aura of arrogance, heartlessness, and pomposity throughout the segment, whereas, Renzo seems to be so much less arrogant, etc, which is expressed in his relatively modest clothing.



The third segment of the film is called "Mara of Rome." This part features Sophia Loren as Mara, a prostitute who services high class clients, one of whom is Augusto, played by

Marcello Mastroianni, the son of a Bolognese industrialist. Augusto is a very strange man who utilizes the services of Mara throughout the entire film. We get a chance to see the fashions of both Augusto and Mara in this segment, an interesting juxtaposition. Augusto is extremely rich and he dresses the part. Mara is also a member of the upper class, as she only services the richest possible clientele, yet she often dresses much more modestly. I feel that she may be well off, but she still lives the life of a run-of-the-mill, middle class Italian woman, with nothing extremely lavish even though she can afford it. This choice in costume design makes her character much more loveable.



Both the first and third segments of the film feature prominent uniforms, which are open for discussion in regards to costume design. Uniforms are often very important elements of costume design, since the wearing of a uniform has many implications in film. In the first segment, the most prominent uniform is the police uniform. In the third segment, the prominent uniform is a clerical uniform.

With all three of these segments making up one film, rather than three short films, the audience is forced to look at the fashion and costume design in this film, and the viewers are inherently and subconsciously analyzing the costume design across all three of these segments. We get a chance to see the lower class, the middle class, and the upper class depicted throughout



the three segments, and we can compare one person's class to another's based partly on their clothing. Costuming also placed each of the characters within their respective societal groups (which often overlap with their class), and gave the audience a chance to get a sense of a character's place in society based on their clothing.

### **Costume Design as a Class Barrier**

Although we do not really get a strong sense of this use of costuming in *Ieri, Oggi, Domani* (1963), due to the fact that in each separate section of the film the majority of the characters belonged to similar classes and social groups, there are many filmic examples where costume design is used to construct barriers between the classes.

One of the films where costume design is used in this way is Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954). The audience sees a large number of dockworkers looking for jobs. Many of these dockworkers are homeless, all are out of work. The costuming of these dockworkers reflects their social standing. On the other hand, the mob-connected union bosses and their henchmen are all dressed clean and proper in suits and ties throughout the film. The costuming in this film creates a barrier between two classes and social groups. This type of costuming is a very effective way to distinguish between two classes in any film, *On the Waterfront* (1954) being only one example.



One of the best uses of this kind of costume design is found in Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934). The costuming is much more subtle in this film than others, but still very effective. In this film, Claudette Colbert plays a spoiled daughter who runs away from her unbelievably rich banker father by jumping ship in order to reunite with her husband. Throughout the film, we can see her father dressed in extraordinarily over-the-top clothing. He would be walking around in an everyday three piece suit. There's a scene in the film where



Clark Gable's out-of-work character is undressing. He takes off his shirt and he doesn't have an undershirt on. His character is subtly underdressed while the rich banker is classically overdressed. This juxtaposition between fashions is what creates the barrier between the rich and the poor in this film.

A societal gap between two characters (portraying one rich and the other poor) is a common element of screwball comedies. *It Happened One Night* (1934) is the best example from within the screwball comedy genre. But another great screwball film that employs costume design techniques to create this barrier is *My Man Godfrey* (1936). When we first see Godfrey (William Powell) in the film, he is homeless and living at the city dump. He is dressed in run-down and ragged clothes. Through a series of unlikely events (of the kind which can only be found in a screwball comedy), Godfrey ends up being hired as a butler for the Bullock family, an extremely rich and socialite family. Godfrey is then dressed in a butler's "uniform" throughout

the film, but the biggest difference in costuming is worn by Cornelia Bullock. One of the spiteful, spoiled brats of the family, Cornelia is dressed in the most lavish and extravagant outfits that one could imagine. Even though Godfrey is only



dressed like a “forgotten man” for the first scene of the film, the audience associates him with the lower class throughout because of it, and the differences in fashion allow the viewers to separate Godfrey from the Bullock family’s social standing based on their costumes.

Another example of the screwball comedy being used as a catalyst for costuming that constructs class barriers and separates societal groups is Frank Capra’s *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*



(1936). In this film, which takes place during the Great Depression, a rural farmer named Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper) inherits \$20 million from his uncle and is forced into moving to New York City to live the rich man’s city life. This film more or less explicitly states that it is using costuming to separate classes and social

groups. In an early scene, one of the butlers/tailors from the rich city mansion is talking to Deeds about how his clothes make him look like a poor laborer, and that he needs to have a makeover. Deeds is then redressed in a rich man’s attire and made to fit into the new class which he had just recently been made a part of. But even if it is not explicitly stated as it was in this film, many screwball comedies use costume design to construct class barriers and separate societal groups. Once



these films, along with earlier silent films, made it evident that costume design can be used to accomplish this task, many filmmakers began to employ the technique. And many filmmakers still continue to employ this technique in films today.

## Uniforms

Uniforms can also be used as a distinguishing factor when using costuming to construct class barriers. Even though Godfrey did eventually achieve a higher class status in *My Man Godfrey* (1936), for most of the film he can be seen dressed as a butler, which is effectively his uniform. There were uniformed police in the “Adelina of Naples” segment of *Ieri, Oggi, Domani* (1963) as well, which are used to place them in their own societal group as well. The uniform is a very important element of the sartorial code, and often places a character in a specific class or societal group according to the uniform and the surrounding characters’ costumes as well.



One of the best films that featured uniformed costume design as portraying class barriers was Victor Fleming’s *Gone with the Wind* (1939). The opening scene shows the O’Hara’s at their estate, Tara, having a party. All the young belles were dressed in flourishing gowns, one more elaborate and beautiful than the next, including their slippers and undergarments. In scenes where Scarlett O’Hara (Vivian Leigh) was getting dressed with the help from her nanny, Mammy (Hattie McDaniel), it showed how the lower class maids were also dressed. Throughout the beginning of the film, everyone at the barbeque was speaking out about the inevitable civil war that was sure to arrive in Georgia. The men were also lavishly dressed in

morning suits, courting the women in their morning gowns. When the women were resting, it also showed the fashion of the slaves as they fanned the rich ladies while they slept. They soon



find out that Civil War has broken out and the men all run off to war. Then, we get to see an entire other showcase of fashion – the Union’s and the Confederacy’s uniforms. While the war is in full bloom, we see what a horrible thing war is and understand how it affected even the affluent homes. There are scenes

where we see the male slaves (some of whom worked for the O’Hara family) hovering around in groups and a lot of them are fighting with slave owners. In one particular scene, Big Sam saves Scarlett from renegade former slaves, who are now free but are out to take revenge of their former owners. Scarlett O’Hara and her family have lost all their money and they don’t have any of their usual clothing. In one scene, Scarlett has to resort to making a gown out of velvet drapes from her windows, in her attempts to get money and assistance from Rhett Butler (Clark Gable). It is a complete rich man’s type of fashion show when they have fancy balls to make money for the war effort. After the war, there are scenes where Rhett Butler brings his daughter, Bonnie Blue Butler, to Paris and she is dressed in the latest fashions. It is also quite a wonderful scene when he brings Mammy home a bright red “petticoat” straight from Paris for her. As the residents of Georgia are walking about, you see not only the morning dresses the women are wearing, but they are also using parasols, as they stroll along.

In the movie, *The Help* (2011), it is very evident that the women of the house were all white, society women, having tea parties and lunches, and the help were another social class altogether. They were all African American women, who wore maid uniforms, whereas the



women they worked for wore the latest fashions. Throughout the film it was blatantly shown how the two social classes interacted with each other daily, but there was always that separation of those classes. Even when they showed how some of the maids actually raised the children of the rich folk, there was always that class segregation.

### **A Costume Design Masterpiece**

Of all the films that use costuming to construct class barriers and create societal groups, there is none more effective in this task than Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). The costume designer for this film is Edith Head, arguably the best costume designer in history, and this film is a good case for that argument. The film is about a Hollywood director John "Sully" Sullivan (Joel McCrea) who wants to turn away from making comedies and make a more socially conscious, relevant film. In order to do this, he devises a plan to go undercover as a

tramp, and cut off from his riches, he will spend countless days on the road. Along the way, he meets a failed actress (Veronica Lake) who accompanies him on his journey. After completing his journey and returning to Hollywood, he decides to go back out and give some money to the homeless people that



he encountered along the way. He is knocked unconscious by a man looking to steal the money, and after fighting with a man who refuses to believe who he is, an identity-less Sully is sentenced

to six years in a labor camp. It is there he realizes that comedies are just as important (if not more so) than socially conscious films, just before he confesses to his own murder in order to get his identity and his riches returned to him.

Clearly, this intricate plot is so detailed that poor costume design would hurt what little believability this unbelievable story has. Edith Head delivered with one of the greatest uses of costume design in American film.

Without her elaborate costuming, this film would not stand in such high regard as it does today.

Throughout the film, there is a constant shifting of class and social groups. At the start of the film, the audience gets a chance to see all of



the rich Hollywood characters in their mansions, dressed the part. But then when Sully goes undercover, we get a chance not to see him dressed as a tramp, but to see him dressed as a rich man posing as a tramp. This very specific costume depicts a rich man wearing the type of clothing that a tramp would wear, but he is still dressed like a rich man would dress. Later in the film, when Sully and the girl (a nameless Lake) are separated long enough from their riches, we



get a chance to see their costumes evolve into what real tramps' clothing would look like. Piece by piece, their shirts get torn, their shoes get stolen, their socks get ripped, all their clothing gets dirty, etc. And towards the climax of the

film, when Sully is stripped of his identity and condemned to the labor camp, the audience gets a chance to see the costuming of another class, separate from the tramp. Sully as a prisoner is literally wearing the same piece of clothing every day, and that is evident through the costume design. Sully and all the other prisoners get dressed in their best (washed in dirty water) clothes to go to the church and see a Pluto cartoon. In this scene, the costuming of the characters depicts them in a separate class than any other, and they are stripped of belonging to a societal group. All the prisoners are dressed in the same dirty, disgusting clothes.



This film not only uses costuming to separate classes and societal groups, but it also uses costuming to define the outlook and perception of different classes and societal groups. This film is a masterpiece of costume design at the hands of Edith Head. This is not to say that any other aforementioned film is not as important in the discussion of costuming used to construct class barriers, but *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) is certainly at the forefront. "Actors wear clothes that identify their roles – by period, ethnicity, nationality, class, or character" (Robinson 95). Constructing class barriers and societal groups is an effective method of using the sartorial code to depict a character's identity.



## References

Carnes, Mark C. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*. New York: H. Holt, 1995.

Print.

*City Lights*. Dir. Charlie Chaplin. Perf. Charlie Chaplin. United Artists, 1931. Film.

*A Corner in Wheat*. Dir. D. W. Griffith. American Mutoscope and Biograph Company, 1909.

Film.

*Gone With the Wind*. Dir. Victor Fleming. Perf. Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh. MGM, 1939.

Film.

Head, Edith, and Paddy Calistro. *Edith Head's Hollywood*. New York: Dutton, 1983. Print.

*The Help*. Dir. Tate Taylor. DreamWorks Pictures, 2011. Film.

*Ieri, Oggi, Domani*. Dir. Vittorio De Sica. Prod. Carlo Ponti. Perf. Marcello Mastroianni and

Sophia Loren. Embassy Pictures Corporation, 1963. Film.

*It Happened One Night*. Dir. Frank Capra. Perf. Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert. Columbia

Pictures, 1934. Film.

Landis, Deborah Nadoolman. *Hollywood Costume*. London: Victoria & Albert, 2012. Print.

Landis, Deborah Nadoolman. "What is Costume Design?" *Screencraft: Costume Design*.

Burlington, MA: Focal, 2003. 48-55. Print.

Leese, Elizabeth. *Costume Design in the Movies*. Bembridge: BCW Pub., 1976. Print.

Maeder, Edward. *Hollywood and History: Costume Design in Film*. London: Thames and

Hudson, 1987. Print.

*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*. Dir. Frank Capra. Perf. Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur. Columbia

Pictures, 1936. Film.

*My Man Godfrey*. Dir. Gregory La Cava. Perf. William Powell and Carole Lombard. Universal Pictures, 1936. Film.

*On the Waterfront*. Dir. Elia Kazan. Perf. Marlon Brando. Columbia Pictures, 1954. Film.

Robinson, David. "The Costume of Silent Comedy." *Screencraft: Costume Design*. Burlington, MA: Focal, 2003. 94-109. Print.

*Sullivan's Travels*. Dir. Preston Sturges. Perf. Joel McCrea and Veronica Lake. Paramount Pictures, 1941. Film.