

University of Theater and Film

# **MOTION PICTURE DRESSED UP**

The aspects of costume designing in feature films

**THESIS**

Ildikó Rita Tihanyi

Tutor: Géza M. Tóth

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## Thesis

For costume designers it is of primary importance while designing to ask the question: what are the effects that make the costume work. What makes us think that certain characters are lifelike and real? What are the factors that contribute to invoking an era or a world of creation in us? Does the intention to be realistic help visualizing an era as an illusion or on the contrary: is it stylization that serves intentions of filmmakers better? Therefore as a costume designer I believe it is of great importance to interpret the costumes' resemblance to reality, since the purpose is not to present the style of an era as it was by all means, but to create the most authentic reality possible for the viewer - regardless from the fact that it takes place in a fictional or real universe. "The image is real, even if it's untrue/fake" - says Umberto Eco in his essay, *Critique of the Image*<sup>1</sup>, so we can state that "in their own system of context even the untrue/fake images of the feature film are real, as they bear the reality of the specific reality."<sup>2</sup>

The spectacle in the case of the feature film is based on the viewer's ability to accept and interpret the system of signs seen on screen and to learn how to read them. Thereby, for the duration of the film a consensus is formed between the audience and the movie: what the viewer sees on screen in a given context is accepted as real. Depiction in motion pictures therefore assume a high degree of abstraction, that relies on the viewer's mental complementary ability. Based on this idea I examine how costume designing in feature films serve the concept of the director. The concept that lets the audience acknowledge the world created by the film as reality.

The goal of my research was to find professional answers to these questions examining the creative process of costume designing, to help the work of future and already practicing designers with the process of motion picture costume designing. In my dissertation I attempt to interpret costumes as representations of reality in relation to the history of attire. As a hypothesis I stated that we can effectively examine the different stylizational levels of how costumes are represented visually, in relation to attire history. The characteristics and physical features of the garments reflect the mentality of that certain age according to the creators' intentions. My method is the analysis of feature films shot in different ages: as the axis of time I took the time of the shooting for the given

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<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco: *Critique of the Image*. 1967. (Ford. John Mathews) In Thinking Photography (Szerk. Victor Burgin) Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and London, MACMILLAN PRESS LTD, 1982. p.34.

<sup>2</sup> Gelencsér Gábor: *Képtelen képek - A médiarealizmusról* In *Mozgóképkultúra és médiaismeret szöveggyűjtemény*, <http://mek.niif.hu/00100/00125/00125.pdf> p.27, 2016.11.15.

film, since the main aspect from the perspective of costume designs is when the story takes place compared to its own era. I defined costume designing methods by this: I examined costumes with reference to time and the timelessness of past-present-future, and I identified correlations and rules regarding designing. Analysis is not limited strictly to feature films, tv shows are also the subject of the study for a few illustrative examples. The practical usage and experience of theoretical theses are an important part of mindful creative process of the designer. To prove this I present my own designing work in the last chapter of the dissertation to point out the realization of costume designing systems.

## **I. The basic questions of costume designing in feature films**

**In the first chapter of my paper I list the characteristics and tools of costume designing in feature films, I structure the standpoints that interpret costumes primarily as the representation of reality.**

During the reception of the film the viewer interprets the visual information, builds up a world that ideally agrees with the concept of the filmmakers. While placing the story in time and space it is inevitable to search for the background of the related attire history and fashion sociology, for this can serve as important alignment during the designing work. Even in the case of creating a totally abstract scenery, as the following chapters will show. Costume is often beyond its own aesthetics and acts as a sign in the visual system of the film, so it is necessary to study and describe its role in communications. What proves to be helpful from the relevant disciplines in this approach is semiotics that translates attire as a cultural sign. We can describe the dress by its three key characteristics: its colour, its form and the choice of material define fundamentally the visual image of the attire, so I continue my paper with analysing these aspects.

Regarding character representation the essential question is how the designer dresses the given character and its social environment in the film. The appearance of a character always informs the viewer about the social and cultural background with the help of visual signs, and also gives information about its current mental state, so the designer has to deal with the interaction between the actor and the role, the state of the character according to the relations in the film and the character arc. This visuality shows not only in the attire but the representation of the body image,

which together with the mask serves the building of the character. The final shape of the dress is formed in many cases by the garment under: on the one hand it adjusts to the rules of social interaction, and on the other it forms the shape of the body adjusting to the beauty standards of the era, defining the actor's movements. In my thesis I argue for these statements through movie examples, and while analyzing I rely on these declarations throughout further chapters.

## **II. Costume designing systems regarding attire history eras**

**While designing costumes we can observe the connection of characterization to reality particularly by analyzing where the dresses are in attire history, since the physical and visual characteristics of certain garments reflect that given era. In the second chapter of my dissertation I point out the distinctive features of costume designing according to time in movies shot in different ages and set in different historical times.**

Dress can not be in itself, separated from time, due to its materiality it always depends on the cloth: the form, texture, how it was technically made, its colour and quality always identifies an era. Depending on time - so whether the story is set in the past, present or future or attempts to conceive timelessness. I stated different costume designing methods, all of which create their own illusion of reality by distinctive terms.

### **1. Past**

In the case of movies set in the past I mainly observed the authenticity of realistic representation or the hypothetical need of it. Through analysed examples I pointed out that hypotheses are not always confirmed by the desire to be realistic. Stylization or the subjective interpretations of being realistic oftentimes proved to be more suitable to create the illusion of reality. As a conclusion I stated that in the course of costume designing the detailed presentation of the dresses evokes the feeling of realness in the viewer, so we acknowledge the attires as authentic and realistic in the movie. In contrast to this, stylization makes way to a unique interpretation of an era: the film will be able to reflect to different ages, along the lines of social context of the dresses, reflected even in fashion.

## 2. Present

While analyzing the designing methods of movies set in the present and not so distant past I stated as a ground rule that costumes are trying to seize the characteristics of an era in the more general marks, since the concrete elements of the era's attire can restrict the movies timeframe and make them visually out-of-date. In this chapter I compared the effect mechanism of costumes in documentary films and fictional feature films. I came to the conclusion that conscious designing enforce the aims of the director and creators more directly than the actors being in their own dresses.

## 3. Future

In the case of films set in the future the creation of worlds in relation to costumes is defined by aspects of fashion trends. Movies can create the sentiment of the future by setting a desing wellknown to the viewer into a new context. According to this costumes can borrow their visuality from the attires of the past or the dressing culture of the present: familiar shapes in a strange scenery will be more familiar for the audience. To create the non-existing, in-progress visuality of the future, filmmakers get inspired by fashion trends that react sensitively and fast to leading and currently unfolding social phenomenons. Through the analysis of the movie examples I linked the working mechanisms of costumes and contemporary fashion, and pointed out the connections between the two areas.

## 4. Timeless

At the end of the chapter I observed the aims to represent timelessness. In this case the costumes used in the film bear characteristics of various periods of time: they depict attires of different eras simultaneously, ripping out the dresses from the chronological context. Visuality formed this way means that the costume doesn't mark a certain age, and it includes each and every time plane and era.

During the analysis I came to the conclusion that costumes create the feeling and illusion of a certain era by willfully using elements that create the impression of familiarity in the audience based on common knowledge, and also establish a coherent unit regardless of the era that the story is set in. The most important element is to visually create a world that can be accepted and understood by the viewer.

### **III. Costume designer thinking in practice (in reference to the film *Hét kis véletlen*)**

For the last one and a half years I've been lucky enough to be a part of the film *Hét kis véletlen* (director: Péter Gothár, 2019) as a costume designer, so the last chapter of the dissertation is a case study that demonstrates the practical angles of the methods of designing in accordance to the representation of reality. The peculiar visual concept of the film that shows various time planes is reflected even in the visual characterization of the roles. The mixture of realistic and abstract imagery seeks a certain timelessness - and the costumes offer a remarkable support to this effect. Connection between story lines are established by the imagery of costumes for the characters. While presenting the costume designing process I analyzed the connection between the creation of illusion and stylization in the given movie, which resulted in various techniques of creating visuality. I analyzed the costumes' relation to reality by the designing methods connected to time, and with this I pointed out the practical usage of the method I created.