



Costume design by Thomas Oláh for the main female protagonist Eliza Graves in the movie *Stonehearst Asylum*; essay by Katharina Enzinger.

Thinking through Value Transformations of Movie Costumes

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The value of costumes is not stable, it changes over time depending on many factors, for instance depending on the production stage of a given movie production. The value of most costume designs decreases or is lost when they are no longer useful to the movie producers, but this does not mean they cannot regain formerly lost value. These value transformations concern us here. Furthermore, we shall look at how different actors attribute diverse values to these costumes and what part they have in defining what is waste or worthless and what is valuable. While the same applies more or less for costumes used in other productions, be that in TV, theatre, musical and so on, we shall focus on movie costumes. The work of a costume designer is important to any movie production. Costume designers help to visualize the story which has previously existed only as a text. As such, they work closely not only with the director but also with the hair and make-up department, the art director responsible for the sets, and with the visual effects department and the camera crew, who influence the colouring and lighting of the movie. As Patrizia Calefato points out every sign on a body can have a precise meaning in costume design (Calefato 2005, 91). Costume and its inherent signs are of importance in the construction of a character and his or her identity. Moreover, changes in the costume can materialize changes in the personality, feeling or development of a character. Thomas Oláh, a successful Viennese costume designer, noted that costumes can be of great importance in recognizing characters or different venues within a movie, and thus help the viewers keep track of the story.

In the making of the costumes, it is of great importance how big the budget for the costume design department is, as it helps to determine the percentage of costumes that can be made from scratch. Most costume designers prefer being able to make their costumes from scratch, as it allows the clothes to be tailored to fit the character. However, often enough they cannot make all the costumes from scratch and have to rely on clothes bought off the rack. For instance, if the movie plays in the present or not so distant past. If it is a historical movie, they tend to reuse old costumes that were stored after the wrap-up of former productions. These costumes lose value with time spent in storage, as the need for adjusting that has to be done to fit the aesthetic of the public increases over time. Even in historical or fantasy movies, the design of the costume is adjusted to fit the cultural idea of fashion, in order to appeal to a wider public. This is not only done, when a costume is reworked, but also if they are made from scratch and can be observed if one watches movies produced in different decades. This becomes even more apparent when movies that play in the same historical era but were shot in different decades, are compared. Hence, differences in make-up, hairstyle and clothing, influenced by the current fashions are revealed.

Daniel Devoucoux calls this ethnocentric retrospection, as the clothing is always seen from the current cultural standpoint (Devoucoux 2007, 126). An example of the influence of fashion in costume design are bell bottoms that were popular in the 1960s and 70s or the puffed sleeves of the 80s. These can also be found in historical movies made during these eras, even if that particular cut was not used in the period the movie



is set in. These costumes would not appeal to the eye of the cinema goers in the 21st century and therefore have to be adjusted to the current, cultural specific idea of what is considered natural even in historical (!) clothing. These aged costumes used in previous productions thus have to be reworked and adjusted, by being dyed, re sewn, cut, layered, combined or otherwise changed to fit their new use and to appear natural in the setting of the new movie. In this way, costumes that had previously lost most of their value are being reused and can regain value, at least for the duration of the filming.

Although costumes are of great importance for the movie, they lose value with the wrap-up of the filming. This then leads to the costumes being resold or stored away, in hopes of a future usage. As the making of costumes can be quite expensive, this is a way for the directors try to get part of the costs back. This is especially true for movies, where special costumes need to be made, that cannot be bought off the rack and cannot be acquired by adjusting and reusing old costumes. For example, Thomas Oláh mentioned that the Austrian TV Production *Maximillian*, for which he was the costume designer, required all costumes to be made from scratch, as there were practically no costumes available for a period drama set in the 15th century. Having costumes which resemble the common silhouette of the period the movie or TV production is set in, is of great importance to give an accurate depiction of the time, and in order for the costumes appear natural. This does not mean that adjustments are not made to the costumes to present well on screen, to work within a cinematographic setting – for instance, the traditional weight, stiffness and material of the clothing could pose a problem (Devoucoux 2015, 126-127). Last but not least, movie costumes are adjusted to appeal to a modern audience, as has been explained above. Such adjustments are always made in a dialogue between the historical accuracy, the current cultural perceptions and the required practical adjustments for the clothes to work on a movie set.

These dresses also have the purpose of aiding the actors and actresses to take on a certain *habitus* and get into their role (Bourdieu 1984). Period costumes are normally cut in a certain way and are enforced and stabilized, in compliance with historical references, to give an accurate silhouette and enhance the typical way of moving in order to bring out characteristic features and peculiarities of a historical period (Devoucoux 2015: 128). Thomas Oláh explained that costumes can be of great value for the actors and actresses in helping them to get into their role and to adjust their gestures and posture, but the first costume try-on can lead to problems. Sometimes the actor or actress has to be convinced of his or her costume - with the idea in mind, as to what kind of effect the costume shall produce in terms of forming the character or explaining parts of their identity or situation. In some instances, a costume has to be adjusted, or in the worst case, whether it is because the actor or actress refuses to wear it, the costume does not look well on the screen, or because the director decides against it, a costume might be rejected. In this case, the costume has no value for the production.

Let us now recapture the changing value of value for movie costumes. During the reproduction of a movie, a costume designer is normally asked to design the costumes for the movie. Depending on the value that is placed on the costumes and the negotiation skills of the costume designer and the budget of the movie as a whole, a certain budget is decided upon for the production of the costumes. The costumes are

then made and are valuable for the production team as long as the filming goes on. They can also be valuable for the actors and actresses by helping them get into their roles and acquire an accurate habitus. This only applies if a costume is used in the movie; otherwise, it has no apparent value for the movie. Therefore, some might consider it waste, and the director will try to resell it to decrease his monetary loss. This does not mean, however, that this costume is garbage, but only that it is of no immediate use in the current production. In the opinion of Thomas Oláh, the only garbage that arises in the making of costumes are leftovers that arise when cutting the fabric, everything else may lose value to certain persons, especially if the costumes are no longer needed in on production, but may regain it later on under different circumstances. After the wrap-up of the filming, the costumes that were used also lose their value for the director as he has no longer any need for them. This leads to them being sold to reduce the costs of the production or in large production companies to them being stored away. If they are stored away by the production company or in a warehouse of a company that specializes in storing and reselling used costumes, they have no immediate value or rather their value exists only in the possibility of being resold or reused and thus regain some of their former value. If they are going to be reused, they, more likely than not, will be adjusted to fit the new production and the new actor or actress, who is going to wear them. In this way, these costumes return to the beginning of the circle of costume design and might end up being reused again and again.

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