

A Study on the Role of Costumes in Driving Narrative Progression in Cinematic Character Construction

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Abstract. In cinematic storytelling, costumes not only serve superficial functional purposes but also act as critical visual language that drives narrative progression and character development. With the growing intersection of visual culture and identity politics, costume design in film has evolved into a mediating symbol connecting characters' inner worlds with external contexts. This study examines two culturally distinct films - *In the Mood for Love* (2000) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) - to investigate how costumes function in externalizing psychological states, advancing plotlines, and conveying cultural symbolism, thereby revealing their narrative significance in character construction. The research methodology combines textual with visual semiotic analysis, conducting a comparative study of how costumes interact with narrative pacing, emotional dynamics, and social contexts in both films. Key findings demonstrate that Maggie Cheung's cheongsam dresses in *In the Mood for Love* not only facilitate the gradual evolution of her relationship with Chow Mo-wan but also visually manifest the tension between emotional repression and traditional ethics. Conversely, Anne Hathaway's wardrobe transformation in *The Devil Wears Prada* systematically maps her identity shift from an "outsider" to a corporate elite, mirroring her reconstructed value system. The research concludes that cinematic costumes serve dual narrative purposes: they provide visual cues for plot advancement while simultaneously externalizing characters' psychological growth and sociocultural identity transitions.

Keywords: Film costumes; Narrative progression; Character development; Visual storytelling; Cultural representation.

1. Introduction

In the art of cinema, costume design has transcended its traditional role as a mere element of "aesthetic styling" and has increasingly become a pivotal component in character narration and plot construction. As a visual language, costumes not only reflect a character's personality, social status, and psychological evolution but also serve as visual cues that guide narrative development. Across diverse cultural contexts and storytelling styles, costumes are imbued with multifaceted meanings, thereby playing complex and profound roles in cinematic narratives.

Exploring the function of costumes in driving plot progression holds significant implications for understanding cinematic language and character-building mechanisms. On one hand, it expands theoretical insights into visual semiotic systems in film studies; On the other, it provides novel perspectives for analyzing character growth trajectories and cultural identity construction. Particularly in films centered on themes such as "coming-of-age", "transformation", "repression", and "liberation", costumes frequently act as visual markers of pivotal shifts in a character's fate.

The study focuses on how costumes, through their visual transformation, contribute to the externalization of psychological states, the demarcation of narrative turning points, and the construction of cultural identities. Two films are selected as case studies: Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000), which employs cheongsam dresses to portray the tension between traditional ethics and emotional desire in an Eastern female protagonist, and the American urban workplace film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), which utilizes contemporary fashion to map a journey of professional growth and value realignment. The analysis will address three dimensions: the structural function of

costumes in advancing plotlines, their symbolic role in expressing psychological states, and their representational capacity within sociocultural contexts.

Methodologically, this research combines literature analysis with close textual reading. The former systematically reviews existing theoretical frameworks and academic discourse to establish a conceptual foundation, while the latter scrutinizes the specific presentation and evolution of costumes in film sequences to uncover their impact on character development and plot dynamics. This dual approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of costumes as multifaceted visual storytelling tools.

The study aims to elucidate how cinematic costumes function as narrative engines and, through a cross-cultural comparison of Eastern and Western films, deepen audiences' understanding of the interplay between character construction, cultural narratives, and visual expression. Ultimately, this research seeks to offer fresh perspectives for visual storytelling theory and cinematic language studies.

2. Literature Review

With advancement in film narratology and visual culture theory, cinematic costumes - as a vital component of film language - have garnered increasing scholarly attention. Scholars generally agree that costumes in film serve not merely as vehicles for aesthetic presentation but also perform multifaceted symbolic roles in character construction, cultural representation, and narrative progression.

Kim and Lee (2014), in their study on costume style evolution in romantic comedy films, argue that clothing functions not only as a visual medium for externalizing character traits but also as a psychological guide to plot development. They emphasize that female characters' transformative journeys in love and self-growth are often visually articulated through deliberate wardrobe shifts. This research laid the groundwork for subsequent explorations into the relationship between costumes and character development.

Bohn (2004), analyzing the connection between clothing and identity construction through the lens of fashion media, posits that costumes serve as a critical tool for shaping women's social status and self-perception, particularly within workplace narratives.

Pauliceli (2016), in her monograph *Italian Style: Fashion and Film from Early Cinema to the Digital Age*, thoroughly examines the cultural identity function of costumes in cinema. She argues that film costumes carry visual expressions of national identity, gender discourses, and class hierarchies. However, her analysis provides insufficient attention to how costumes are embedded within specific plot structures to drive pivotal character transformations.

Özdil (n.d.), analyzing the identity-marking role of clothing from a sociological perspective, proposes that costumes act as a key medium for characters' self-perception and reflection within cultural and social identities. Yet, her research focuses predominantly on broader societal contexts and fails to address how costumes interact with cinematic techniques (e.g., framing, lighting), character arcs, and plot developments to collectively shape narrative pacing.

In summary, while existing research has yielded substantial insights into "costumes and character portrayal" and "costumes and cultural identity", systematic exploration of "the structural function of costumes in cinematic plot progression" remains insufficient. Current studies often overlook the analysis of how costumes operate as narrative nodes, plot cues, and tools for psychological externalization within specific filmic contexts.

Therefore, this study employs *In the Mood for Love* and *The Devil Wears Prada* as case studies to investigate costumes' functional roles in narrative propulsion, integrating perspectives of psychological externalization and cultural representation. By analyzing how costumes operate as key narrative devices across distinct storytelling traditions and cultural frameworks, the research aims to address existing gaps in structural narrative design and visual cue construction within current

scholarship. By incorporating costumes into the analytical framework of narrative pacing, this study not only expands the theoretical scope of costume studies but also proposes new pathways for systemizing the visual analysis of cinematic language. Specifically, it demonstrates how sartorial choices interact with plot dynamics to reinforce narrative coherence while offering fresh insights into the interplay between visual symbolism and storytelling mechanics.

3. The Multifaceted Functions of Costumes in Cinematic Narratives

3.1. Narrative Progression Function

Costume transformations in film not only reflect characters' appearances but also serve as critical visual elements that drive plot development. These transformations are intrinsically linked to characters' identities, emotions, and personal values [1]. Through meticulously designed wardrobe changes, audiences can visually perceive shifts in a character's inner world and emotional fluctuations, thereby gaining deeper insight into narrative turning points. As key plot devices, costumes often undergo dramatic transformations at key moments, effectively driving the story forward.

In *In the Mood for Love* (2000), directed by Wong kar-wai, the film depicts a restrained yet profound love story between the female protagonist Su Li-zhen (played by Maggie Cheung) and male protagonist Chow Mo-wan (played by Tony Leung) in 1960s Hong Kong. The complexity of their inner worlds and subtle emotional evolution are intricately mirrored through their costumes. At the film's outset, Su's cheongsam dresses predominantly feature subdued tones, reflecting her reserved demeanor as a traditional woman and her repressed existence within the social constraints of 1960s Hong Kong [2]. As the narrative progresses, Su's suppressed emotions gradually awaken through her interactions with Chow, marked by the increasingly vibrant hues of her cheongsam. This chromatic evolution visually signals her emotional liberation and burgeoning desires. The costumes go beyond mapping psychological complexity to demarcate key narrative milestones through deliberate color palettes and design details [3]. Notably, as the protagonists' relationship deepens, Su's cheongsam designs increasingly reveal her internal conflict between emotional longing and moral restraint. The iconic crimson cheongsam, for instance, becomes a symbolic representation of her emotional catharsis.

In stark contrast to the subtle costume design in *In the Mood for Love*, the sartorial transformations in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) are more direct and visually impactful. The professional evolution of the female protagonist Andy Sachs (played by Anne Hathaway) is inextricably intertwined with her wardrobe evolution, which essentially functions as a visual timeline of her personal growth. At the beginning of the film, Andy is dressed in loose and casual wear. This ill-fitting and unrefined style of dress symbolizes her ignorance and lack of confidence in this field in the early stage, as well as her unfamiliarity and rejection of the high-end fashion industry she is in. As the narrative unfolds, her gradual acclimatization to the fashion world's codes is mirrored by increasingly sophisticated wardrobe choices [4]. From the initial disorder to the later designer fashion, Andy's clothing style has undergone significant changes, and this change is closely related to the transformation of her career identity. Especially at the peak of her career, Andy wore exquisite and decent clothes, demonstrating that she was no longer the person who felt lost and at a loss when she first entered the workplace, but a confident and elegant fashionable professional woman. The costume changes in the film visually present the rapid growth of the character Andy. Her wardrobe evolution operates as a visual rhetoric of empowerment, transcending superficial aesthetics to externalize her psychological maturation and burgeoning confidence [5]. This trajectory demonstrates the constructivist principle of "form follows function" - her sartorial choices systematically reconstruct her identity from an "outsider" to a "power broker", rendering abstract social mobility into tangible visual discourse [6].

From *In the Mood for Love* to *The Devil Wears Prada*, these two stylistically distinct films employ costume transformation as critical visual markers within their narratives, enabling audiences to decode characters' emotional fluctuations and identity transitions. Whether through the nuanced

expression of Eastern aesthetics or the explicit approach of Western storytelling, costumes consistently function as narrative anchors in plot development. They successfully drive the story forward and provide visual corroboration of character growth.

3.2. Psychological Externalization Function

Costumes play a vital role in shaping and visually projecting a character's inner world. While psychological shifts in film characters are often complex and subtle, costumes serve as a visual translator, making hidden emotional layers and internal conflicts tangible. Through deliberate choices in color palettes, silhouettes, and styling details, costumes allow audiences to intuitively grasp a character's mental state without relying on dialogue.

In *In the Mood for Love*, Su Li-zhen's cheongsam dresses transcend their role as reflections of era-specific aesthetics, instead functioning as mirrors of her psychological state. The cheongsam's restrictive tailoring inherently symbolizes confinement and self-restraint, while design elements like high collars, form-fitting cuts, and side slits create a paradoxical blend of vulnerability and emotional distance. The stronger her longing for emotional closeness becomes, the more strictly her carefully chosen outfits maintain the appearance of proper social behavior. This clothing-based display of controlled emotions strengthens the film's ideas of hidden desires and unavoidable fate. As Su struggles between her feelings and moral rules, her cheongsam always shows a mix of stiffness and elegance - a visual contrast that highlights how she holds back her desires while following traditional values. Significantly, as emotional tension escalates, the cheongsam's color palette shifts toward emotionally charged hues like crimson, emerald, and violet. These chromatic transitions visually articulate her inner turmoil and intricate layering of conflicted emotions.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andy's clothing clearly shows her changing sense of self. When she starts to "improve her appearance", her outfits become more stylish and confident, with well-fitted designs and carefully chosen accessories that highlight her growing ability to manage her career. Importantly, as she faces moral choices and begins to understand the true cost of success, her clothes shift to simple, neutral styles, indicating a change in her values. Finally, her decision to return to ordinary clothing symbolizes her return to her true self. In Salsh's analysis of the film's portrayal of women, he points out that Andy's outward changes do not just show her adapting to the fashion industry but also reveal her mental and emotional growth as she builds her own identity and decides what truly matters to her. Her clothing becomes a clear symbol of how she constructs her identity and develops her sense of personal power [7].

Therefore, whether expressing emotional restraint or personal transformation, costumes provide visual clues for emotional shifts beyond standard cinematic techniques, allowing the audience to connect deeply with characters on an intuitive level. As Özdil observes, "Clothing acts as an identity marker that reflects individual self-perception within sociocultural contexts while making inner transformation visible" [8].

3.3. Cultural Representation Function

The cultural representational role of costumes in film extends far beyond replicating historical eras or reproducing stylistic trends. Rather, costumes constitute a visual symbolic system that embodies social norms, identity hierarchies, ideologies, and cultural memories. Clothing is not merely material objects but functions as a "language to be decoded." Serving as cultural "visual texts," costumes employ symbolic designs and color schemes to establish shared cultural understanding between audiences and characters, thereby enhancing the film's narrative intensity and artistic expression [9].

In *In the Mood for Love*, director Wong Kar-wai meticulously crafts a symbolic relationship between costumes and cultural atmosphere. Su Li-zhen's cheongsam dresses transcend mere symbols of Eastern aesthetics, functioning instead as visual metaphors rooted in postcolonial Hong Kong's cultural identity crisis. During the 1960s - an era when Western fashion increasingly overshadowed traditional Chinese attire like the cheongsam - Su's daily ritual of changing cheongsams becomes an

act of cultural resistance, preserving traditional femininity and collective memory. The cheongsam itself carries dual symbolism: On one hand, it represents feminine elegance, restraint, and Confucian virtues, embodying a “disciplined” bodily aesthetics shaped by patriarchal norms. On the other hand, it serves as her silent rebellion against societal repression - a medium for self-expression and emotional catharsis. Through shifting color palettes and intricate patterns, she subtly communicates suppressed desires, yet remains confined by the garment’s restrictive structure, mirroring her inability to freely express emotions. Thus, her cheongsams not only trace her aesthetic preferences and emotional journey but also expose the gendered disciplinary mechanisms embedded in traditional social roles. Moreover, the repeated spatial compositions in the film, such as corridors, narrow passageways, and closed spaces like rooms, together with the tight structure of the cheongsam, create a kind of “container of social discipline”. It seems that the audience can catch a glimpse of the identity predicament that women find hard to break free from in an era through a layer of “visual gauze screen”.

In contrast, *The Devil Wears Prada* reveals the intertwined dynamics between consumerism and class discourse in modern Western urban culture. The film’s portrayal of “fashion” is not merely about aesthetic pursuit but rather a symbolic system of power, identity, and cultural capital [10]. Within the film’s context, clothing acts as a cultural threshold to elite circles - wearing Chanel or Dior signifies not just stylistic change but a ritualized transformation of social identity and class alignment. Andy’s initial exclusion due to her casual attire underscores how fashion functions as a gatekeeper of privilege. Her subsequent wardrobe evolution, achieved through aesthetic discipline, symbolizes her acceptance into the corporate elite - a “symbolic passage” marked by designer labels. This change in clothing not only demonstrates “personal growth”, but also reflects the simplistic shaping of the standards for women’s success in capitalist society - appearance, brand and function take precedence over personality and inner self. It is worth noting that the film also demonstrates the alienation brought about by this consumer culture: As Andy gradually adapted to and indulged in this fashion system, she began to distance herself from her friends and lose emotional connections. Ultimately, her return to casual wear symbolizes a reflection and negation of this consumer identity. To some extent, it also points out that although clothing is a means of self-expression, under the dominance of capital logic, it may also become a tool for defining and regulating an individual’s identity.

From *In the Mood for Love* to *The Devil Wears Prada*, costumes demonstrate the multilayered nature of cultural representation. In Eastern contexts, clothing primarily reflects cultural legacies, ethical frameworks, and gendered constraints - the cheongsam, for instance, acts as a symbolic confinement of traditional identity. In Western urban settings, however, costumes visibly embody market-driven logic, class hierarchies, and self-commodification, with branded clothing serving as markers of social mobility. This contrast transcends mere differences in aesthetic styles, revealing deeper cultural ideologies: Eastern costume narratives emphasize restraint, subtlety, and the historical continuity of identity, while Western narratives prioritize display, consumption, and instant identity construction.

4. Conclusion

This study examines the multifaceted roles of cinematic costumes in narrative progression, psychological externalization, and cultural representation through case analyses of *In the Mood for Love* and *The Devil Wears Prada*. The findings reveal that costumes in film extend beyond constructing superficial character appearances to actively shaping narrative architecture, serving as critical visual cues for plot advancement. Whether it is the changes in the color and structure of Su Li-zhen’s cheongsam or the transformation trajectory of Andy’s workplace attire, they all play a role in indicating, reinforcing and representing at the key nodes of the character’s growth, thereby further drawing the research conclusion: Clothing is not only a visual installation but also a narrative mechanism. It deeply participates in character shaping and story development through visual language, constituting an indispensable meaning generation system in film narrative.

The research has a positive impact on the future studies of film and visual narrative. On the one hand, it provides a new observation path for understanding the relationship between characters and plots, taking costumes as an important dimension of structured narrative analysis; On the other hand, it also enriches the cross-disciplinary perspective of film aesthetics and cultural studies, emphasizing clothing as an important medium for cultural representation and social identity recognition. Especially in the context where the construction of visual language is increasingly emphasized in contemporary films, this study provides a theoretical basis and practical case for researchers to rethink the function of “non-verbal narrative symbols”.

Future research should focus more on the interaction mechanism between clothing and narrative in multi-type and multi-cultural backgrounds, not only limited to the character growth lines, but also extending to the relationship between clothing and multiple narrative paths in ensemble films. Meanwhile, with the development of digital imaging technology, the application of visual technologies such as virtual costumes and dynamic modeling has also brought new challenges and opportunities to the research of film costumes. Subsequent research can further combine the technical dimension and the audience’s acceptance psychology to expand the multi-level exploration of the role of costumes in film and television narratives, in order to construct a more systematic theoretical system of film costume narratives.

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