

HOW HAS COSTUME DESIGN IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA REFLECTED SHIFTING PORTRAYALS OF FEMININITY AND POWER TODAY?

NAOMI KANU

Fashion Research Project
BSc (Hons) Fashion Marketing



RESEARCH PROBLEM
& GAP

Films have long served as a mirror of society, reflecting ever-changing ideologies, evolving power dynamics, and cultural values (Lynn, 2023). As a visual medium, cinema can transcend geographical, linguistic, and cultural barriers. Similarly, fashion functions as a reflection of its cultural time, responding to economic, political, and societal changes (Aspers and Godart, 2013).

Costume design sit as a fusion of both art forms, playing an important role in moulding a character’s identity. Before contemporary cinema, representations of femininity and power in cinema had been long shaped by dominant cultural narratives that often imprison women to predefined roles or stereotypes (Price, 2024).

These representations commonly aligned femininity with passiveness and submission, reinforcing conventional gender norms. Yet, as cinema has progressed, so too have the ways in which femininity and power are signified (Tipple, 2025).



RESEARCH AIM
& OBJECTIVES

The aim is to examine how these films use costume design to act as visual narratives to convey the complexities of femininity, power, and agency in the modern cinematic landscape. Offering a more nuanced understanding of how fashion impacts the portrayal of women in cinema today.

- RO1:** To analyse how costume design serves as a powerful tool in conveying evolving perceptions of femininity in film.
- RO2:** To explore how costume design in *Juno*, *Black Swan*, and *Marie Antoinette* visually communicates female power and agency.

To examine how costume design reinforces or challenges traditional gender norms in contemporary cinema.



RESEARCH METHOD

This work employed qualitative data from secondary sources, these were mainly from books, periodicals, journals and blogs. Films were also used through case study analysis to acquire deeper knowledge into key areas that support the achievement of all three objectives. For context, *Juno*, *Black Swan*, and *Marie Antoinette* were utilised. *Black Swan* provides perspectives on the duality of femininity. *Juno* offered opportunities into the understanding of non-traditional femininity. *Marie Antionette* provided insight into her personal life and how that shaped her identity and femininity.



FINDINGS
& DISCUSSION

In *Black Swan*, duality of femininity is articulated through costumes which reflect psychological descent and inner conflict. Reflecting current fashion trends that balance contradiction, darkness vs light and softness vs structure, highlighting how identity is often a performance shaped by external expectations and that colours can visually change how an outfit is perceived. For example, the Christian Wijnants SS23 collection has uses contrast in colour in the selected garments to symbolise different emotions and associations.

In *Marie Antionette*, costume behaves as a visual assertion of introspection and resistance. Rather than operating as historical décor, her wardrobe affirms her changing identity and fractured power. The hyper-feminine aesthetics criticises the burdens of performative womanhood. Reflecting coquette fashion today which reclaims and repurposes historical/ hyper feminine aesthetics subverting patriarchal expectations (Aaron, 2023).

Juno conveys a rejection of traditional femininity. Her consistent repetitive thrifted oversized clothing visually aligning her with alterative gender expression. Costume becomes a visual resistance to typical femininity, mirroring early 2000’s shifts where more legislations related to women’s issues were passed, emphasising the progressive demand representation in campaigns.

FUTURE RESEARCH
DIRECTION

While this study thoroughly explores American contemporary cinema, future research should magnify ton include films from non-Western contexts to explore different representations of femininity and costume.

There’s also prospected to examine audience reception studies and how viewers interpret these portrayals across cultures.