

# *The Ideographic Function and Aesthetic Changes of Women's Clothing in American Film Waves*

Kexuan Qian

*Nanjing Hexi Foreign Language School, Nanjing, China*  
2724529953@qq.com

**Abstract.** American movies are essential in global film art because of their mature industry and wide cultural influence. As a form of art, film clothing doesn't just shape characters' looks—it's also a key way to show cultural meanings, feelings, and identities. From the early 1900s to now, American films have gone through the Silent Film Era, the Golden Age of Hollywood, the New Hollywood Movement, and modern diverse development. Each period's social and cultural features left marks on films, making female images and clothing change significantly. Women's clothing in films has more functions than decoration. It can show a character's personality, social class, and emotions and reflect a particular time's social thoughts and cultural values. At the same time, its aesthetic style has changed along with film development and social changes, from the early fancy style that showed women's softness to a modern style that values personality and self-expression. This shows how women's social status has improved, aesthetics have changed, and film art has developed. This study examines how women's clothing has changed in different periods of American films, and analyzes its functions and aesthetic changes. It helps us understand American film art, culture, and society through clothing, and provides new ways to study films and fashion.

**Keywords:** American films, women's clothing, ideographic function, aesthetic changes, social culture

## 1. Introduction

As film art research deepens, clothing in films has become a focus of study. However, most existing studies only look at clothing in one film or period, and few studies have examined how women's clothing functions and changes aesthetically in American films from the early 1900s to the present. Understanding this evolution not only helps us know more about American film art, but also shows how society, culture, and gender ideas have changed through clothing. It can give new ideas to filmmaking and fashion studies. This study uses both literature analysis and text analysis. Reading books on American film history, clothing culture, and gender studies sorts out different periods' social backgrounds and film industry features. It also chooses classic films from each time to analyze women's clothing's symbolic meanings and aesthetic features. The research follows the timeline of American film development, discusses clothing functions and styles in different periods, analyzes the reasons behind the changes, and ends with conclusions and future research directions.

## **2. Overview of American film waves**

### **2.1. Early American films (1900s–1920s): the start of silent films**

The silent film era that emerged in the early 20th century marked the beginning of American film [1]. Limited by the technical conditions at the time, the film images were mainly black and white, and the narrative was mainly advanced by exaggerated movements and expressions. The themes were mostly focused on relatively simple stories such as comedy and adventure. For example, Chaplin's series of short films, through the iconic clothing elements such as broken hats and baggy pants, combined with his unique humorous movements, vividly showed the living conditions of the little people at the bottom of society, and used simple images and basic clothing to complete effective character creation, laying the foundation for the development of subsequent films.

### **2.2. Golden age of Hollywood (1930s–1950s): mature industry and genres**

From the 1930s to the 1950s, Hollywood entered its golden age [2]. The film industry system was mature and complete, and various types of films such as musicals, westerns, and romances flourished. The female images created during this period were mostly "vase" roles or good wives and mothers who depended on love or marriage. For example, in romance films, female characters often wore gorgeous dresses, which highlighted their body curves and noble temperament to strengthen their "subordinate" status. Clothing design mainly served the traditional gender role positioning.

### **2.3. New Hollywood movement (1960s–1980s): breaking traditions**

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the rise of the New Hollywood movement launched an impact on the traditional film model, and film themes and styles began to seek breakthroughs. The image of women was no longer limited to the docile and subordinate types, and characters with independent consciousness and rebellious spirit began to appear. For example, in films such as *The Graduate* and *Midnight Cowboy*, women's clothing gradually moved away from a single gorgeous style and changed to a direction that was more in line with the complex inner world and personality characteristics of the characters, laying the foundation for the subsequent diversified shaping of female images.

### **2.4. Contemporary American films (1990s–now): diverse development**

Since the 1990s, contemporary American films have shown a thoroughly diversified pattern of themes, with a large number of science fiction, fantasy, superhero and other genres emerging. The image of women has achieved a comprehensive breakthrough, and the role of "female protagonist" has become the norm. From Ripley in the *Alien* series to Diana in *Wonder Woman*, they are independent, powerful and charming. Film creation incorporates global multicultural elements, and costume design is more personalized, which not only serves the needs of character creation, but also fits the overall style of films of different themes, deeply reflecting the significant change in society's perception of women's roles.

### **3. Functions of women's clothing in different periods**

#### **3.1. Shaping characters and emotions**

In the silent film era of the early 20th century, women's clothing often used fluffy skirts, [3] corsets and other elements to highlight the soft and gentle characteristics of the characters, helping to create innocent or fragile images, so that the audience can quickly perceive the basic personality of the characters. In the Golden Age of Hollywood, gorgeous evening gowns and exquisite suits became important carriers for shaping the elegant and charming image of women, effectively conveying the romantic and affectionate emotional atmosphere. For example, the change of Scarlett's clothing in *Gone with the Wind* strongly supported the presentation of her complex personality and emotional entanglements. During the New Hollywood movement, women's clothing began to break through the gorgeous paradigm of the Golden Age, and showed the inner contradictions, conflicts and struggles of the characters through simple or retro design language. In contemporary movies, simple professional attire and personalized street clothing are widely used to shape the image of independent, confident or rebellious women. Taking *The Devil Wears Prada* as an example, the evolution of the heroine's clothing clearly reflects her emotional growth and role transformation from youth to maturity.

#### **3.2. Showing social status**

In the Golden Age of Hollywood, aristocratic female characters often wore exquisite clothes made of high-end materials such as silk and lace, which formed a strong visual contrast with the coarse linen clothes of ordinary female characters, clearly dividing the social class differences. In contemporary films, whether a character chooses high-end custom clothing or fast fashion brand clothing can also effectively imply their economic strength and social status, and intuitively show the class division in real society.

#### **3.3. Reflecting cultural backgrounds**

Women's clothing in different historical periods bears a distinct cultural imprint of the times. The silent film era in the early 20th century was deeply influenced by the late Victorian culture, and the clothing style tended to be dignified and conservative, emphasizing the constraints of moral norms. The Golden Age of Hollywood was significantly influenced by European fashion trends, pursuing a luxurious and exquisite aesthetic taste, reflecting the society's admiration for elegant tastes at the time. During the New Hollywood movement, with the rise of counterculture, women's clothing showed diversified styles such as hippie style and bohemian style. Contemporary films fully integrate global multicultural elements, and clothing design widely absorbs popular trends from all over the world, reflecting the characteristics of an open and inclusive era [4].

### **4. Aesthetic changes of women's clothing**

#### **4.1. Silent film era (1900s–1920s): fancy and conservative**

From the early 20th century to the 1920s, women's clothing aesthetics tended to be gorgeous and complicated. Lace, pleats, bows and other decorative elements were used extensively, and the colors were mainly soft and light, focusing on highlighting the feminine and romantic qualities. The overall

style tended to be conservative and traditional, which was in line with the society's aesthetic expectations of women's dignified and gentle temperament at that time.

#### **4.2. Golden age (1930s–1950s): elegant and refined**

From the 1930s to the 1950s, women's clothing aesthetics pursued the ultimate elegance and refinement. Fitted suits and long skirts became the mainstream choices, made of high-end fabrics and exquisite craftsmanship, emphasizing the beauty of women's body curves and highlighting luxurious and noble temperament. For example, the little black dress worn by Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* has become an immortal classic, representing the ultimate admiration for elegance and fashion in that era.

#### **4.3. New Hollywood (1960s–1980s): breaking rules**

From the 1960s to the 1980s, women's clothing aesthetics changed significantly, breaking through the traditional framework. Deeply influenced by the anti-mainstream cultural trend, hippie-style loose long skirts and bohemian-style printed clothing appeared, emphasizing the spirit of freedom and rebellious attitude. At the same time, professional women's clothing began to focus on simplicity and competence, providing a prototype for the shaping of the female workplace image in contemporary films.

#### **4.4. Contemporary (1990s–now): diverse and personal**

Since the 1990s, women's clothing aesthetics have shown a highly diversified trend, with minimalist style and street fashion style coexisting. Designs pay more attention to comfort and practicality, and incorporate a lot of popular culture elements to encourage women to show their unique personality through clothing. For example, in superhero movies, the clothing design of female heroes takes into account functionality and visual beauty, embodying the fusion of power and fashion trends, and reflecting the current aesthetic concept of diversity, tolerance and emphasis on individual self-expression.

### **5. Reasons for changes**

#### **5.1. Social and cultural factors**

In the early 20th century, social movements such as women's suffrage promoted the improvement of women's status, and women's clothing in movies also began to try to break through the conservative style [5]. From the 1960s to the 1980s, the rise of the second wave of feminism prompted movies to create more independent female images, and their clothing styles gradually shifted from emphasizing softness to highlighting personality and strength. The in-depth development of contemporary feminist thought has further promoted the diversified shaping of female images, and clothing design has also integrated elements of different cultures around the world, showing stronger tolerance and individual characteristics. The global integration of multiculturalism has provided a rich source of inspiration for film costume design and promoted the continuous renewal of aesthetic concepts [6]. Clothing elements from different cultural backgrounds have borrowed from each other, making women's clothing in movies show unprecedented diversity and tolerance.

## 5.2. Film industry factors

The advancement of film technology, from early black-and-white silent films to color films and even today's mature special effects technology, has provided a broader visual expression space for clothing design, which can present richer colors, material details and unique shapes. In addition, the intensified competition in the film market has prompted creators to pay more attention to using unique and expressive clothing designs to shape distinct characters and assist narratives in order to attract audiences [7], thus promoting the continuous innovation of women's clothing in terms of expressive function and aesthetic presentation to meet the increasingly diversified aesthetic needs of the audience.

## 6. Conclusion

This article systematically combs through the female costumes in different development stages of American films from the early 20th century to the present, revealing that their expressive functions are rich and diverse, which are not only effective tools for shaping characters, but also important carriers for reflecting social and cultural changes. With the development of the times, their aesthetic style has undergone a significant change from gorgeous and conservative to diversified personality. This process profoundly reflects the improvement of women's social status, the innovation of the overall aesthetic concept of society, and the continuous enrichment of the concept of film art creation, fully demonstrating the close interactive relationship between film art and social culture. Future research can further expand the scope of case selection, cover more film types and representative works of historical periods, and try to combine interdisciplinary theories such as sociology and psychology to explore in depth the complex relationship between clothing design and social and cultural background and the psychological state of characters. Subsequent research can focus on the cross-cultural comparative perspective, compare and analyze the expressive functions and aesthetic differences of women's clothing in films from different countries; or deeply explore the transformative impact of emerging film technologies (such as virtual production technology) on the design conception and screen presentation of women's clothing, and look forward to new directions and new possibilities for the future development of film costumes.

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