

Berg Fashion Library

‘Fashion Films’: From Prêt-à-Porter to A Single Man

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Product placement can operate most effectively and in quite new ways within our changed celebrity culture. The case studies that up this chapter consist of films where the fashion presence is central and celebrity-linked in a completely new way. In fact, fashion somehow personified and here walking hand-in-hand, if not hand-in-glove, with the luxury brand, is perhaps the real star of this new so far seemingly unrecognized, cinematic category.

Prêt-à-Porter, directed by Robert Altman, was released in 1994. Its several storylines were set against the background of Paris Fashion Week, while the film was made with the cooperation of many leading figures within the industry, who presumably thought it would benefit them with positive publicity in a way that would guarantee artistic respectability. The late Robert Altman, a talented and maverick director who operated for more than a decade outside the American studio system, had recognized art-house credentials and acclaimed a similar status, particularly in France. Furthermore, the film’s cast included a small number of well-established Hollywood stars, including Julia Roberts, the best-paid actress of the early 1990s. Also involved were old-style European stars Sophia Loren, Marcello Mastroianni and Anouk Aimée, together with Richard E. Grant from *Withnail and I* (1987, dir. Bruce Robison). Finally, given Altman’s reputation for casting choices, the American country singer Lyle Lovett also appeared as a Texan boot manufacturer and millionaire (also see [Berg 1997: 31–33](#)).

Lastly, the script involved the on-screen presence of various leading couturiers as *themselves*, plus the extra promotional opportunity provided by the garments they provided for the *fictional* Paris designers of Altman’s story to show, as if their own, on the catwalk. Notable were the Vivienne Westwood clothes shown on the catwalk and ‘designed’ by Richard E. Grant’s character, English designer Cort Romney, who is himself dressed in full Westwood regalia throughout, his look completed by bright red lipstick, heavily gelled hair and a kiss curl.

The film failed dismally at the box office, grossing \$5,860,483 in the United States and £1,120,302 in the UK (IMBD, imdb.com). This would suggest, is because it was in fact ahead of its time in a commercial sense and thus it was only cineastes, those who were aware of Altman as auteur, who liked the film. Yet recently we have seen the commercial success, worldwide, of what are arguably interesting and innovative American films, but which similarly both showcase and rely upon both the fashion industry and top luxury brands. The first ten years of the new millennium have seen *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006, dir. David Frankel), *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (2009, dir. PJ Hogan) and *Sex and the City: The Movie* (2008, dir. Michael Patrick King), together with its sequel, *Sex and the City 2*, released in 2010 and also directed by King. *Confessions of a Shopaholic* met with quite respectable box-office returns (US \$44,277,350), but the other three films earned enormous sums of money across the world. *The Devil Wears Prada* grossed \$124,732,962 at the US box office and *Sex and the City: The Movie* still more—\$152,647,258, in fact (see IMDB). The impressive financial rewards meant that the first feature-length film of *Sex and the City* was followed by the second, rather less successful, film gross according to IMDB: \$95,328,937).

It seemed that *Prêt-à-Porter* had unwittingly set up a series of tropes which would come to characterize these later films: the appearance of real designers as themselves, the shots of their runway shows within the cinematic narrative, the appearance of recognizable supermodels and other fashion-friendly celebrities, the use of fashionable locations and settings, the interiors of well-styled shops and finally the centrality of luxury brand names and their now-recognizable logos as reference points, even as characters in their own right. The only thing which *Prêt-à-Porter* lacked was the presence of Patricia Field, who organized the costuming of all the other fashion films.

The real designers who participated in *Prêt-à-Porter* are interviewed on camera after each show, as are the film’s fictional couturier and the film’s equally fictional television reporter, Kitty Potter (Kim Basinger). But this first film was made rather too soon to attract large audiences; it appeared just before the ballooning of celebrity culture and the linked growth of designer literacy. Were it to be remade today, with fashion once again as the leading lady and luxury brands in the same supporting roles, but with younger Hollywood stars in the parts then played by Julia Roberts and Tim Robbins, it might fare quite differently at the box office. Today, there would be no need to change the title to *Ready to Wear* in order not to confuse American audiences; it was, however, thought necessary in 1994.

In 1994, anxious to garner publicity, the leading fashion houses and luxury brands were very happy to participate. To read the credits they scroll endlessly up the screen in the closing moments of the film, to the strains of *La vie en rose*, sung by Edith Piaf, is, in fact, to read a ‘Who’s Who’ of contemporary fashion designers and desirable brand names, most of which would be acquired in the next decade by the mega-conglomerates LVMH and PPR. The credits of all the later, Field-styled films work in exactly the same way, with a list funnelling up the screen of those whose fashionable products and locations have been shown; *Sex and the City 2* is the only exception.

In *Prêt-à-Porter*, the fictional fashion editors from New York and London, together with leading American buyers, arrive at the Ritz

sets of Louis Vuitton luggage, while within the narrative, carrier bags proudly show off the names of well-known designers, and the up endlessly within the dialogue. One seminal scene involves a Bulgari jewellery show as backdrop to a disastrous dinner party.

The world of fashion we see here is perhaps slightly demented; certainly intrigue and treachery dominate—but it is also, through its on-screen presence under the direction of a very skilled filmmaker, both alluring and visually fascinating. Kitty Potter eventually works out, saying she has ‘had it with this fucking fruitcake scene’, and hands both her job and microphone to Chiara Mastroianni’s ingénue journalist. This reaction is prompted by the last fashion show of the film: the fictional designer, Simone Lo (Anouk Aimée), whose father has sold her business behind her back to the Texan boot manufacturer, sends a host of naked models down the runway in review with a pregnant, naked bride wearing only a veil to round off the show. Yes, the silly fashion flock stand up to applaud this ‘Emperor New Clothes’ moment; but this image is not the most resonant of the closing shots. For they include the stunning sight of Sophia Loren wearing vintage Dior, as she does for much of the latter half of the film, while the very last image is that of a spinning dancer, a mime artiste with painted face and top hat, who, as the fashion-loaded credits scroll up the screen, twirls across the catwalk to the closing song, which for many of the fashion literate might evoke the Paris of Audrey Hepburn.

As the newly chic, Givenchy-clad chauffeur’s daughter in *Sabrina Fair* (1954, dir. Billy Wilder), Hepburn sits at a desk on her last night in the city, writing a letter which she reads aloud. Behind her, the open window is a frame for the silhouette of the cathedral of Sacré-Coeur and we can hear the accordion music from the street below. She explains that the unseen busker is playing *La vie en rose*; this, slightly rather liberally translated to us, the audience, is ‘a song that means we should always look at life through rose-coloured spectacles’. Today, to use a Hepburn reference of any kind, however indirect, is always to invoke the ultra-fashionable. But at the time of *Prêt-à-Porter*’s release in 1994, the public weren’t as designer-aware, or as fashion-hungry, as they now seem to be—or as they were when the next ‘fashion film’ came along, *The Devil Wears Prada* in 2006. It seems ironic that Altman, always proud of his outsider status, should have unknowingly created what could be described as a new genre, and one far more commercial than any of its predecessors. It was before the second film was made; we do not know whether or not he would have agreed with this hypothesis.

The Devil Wears Prada was an adaptation of the novel of the same name by [Lauren Weisberger \(2003\)](#), who had been a personal assistant to Anna Wintour at US *Vogue*: although denied by the author, it has been speculated widely that the central character was modelled on the author’s experiences of her former employer (also see [Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2008](#): 230). For the film, however, a number of significant changes were made to make the portrait of the fashion world more seductive—or, as Patricia Field says in the DVD feature, ‘more respectful to fashion’.

Field, once a marginal player who owned and ran two shops in New York, had become a household name with *Sex and the City*, the HBO series (see [Bruzzi and Church Gibson 2004](#)), which ran for eight years and made Sarah Jessica Parker into both a fashion icon and a celebrity; we will examine the franchise, so central to the fashion-celebrity alliance, in the following chapter. Field and Parker together helped to make a whole generation aware of luxury brand names and so created a demand for these new fashion films, partly to fill the void left by the demise of the television series.

The director of *The Devil Wears Prada*, David Frankel, had worked on multiple episodes of the *Sex and the City* series; the camerawork was Florian Bauhaus, whose characteristic style, developed on the series and marked by mid-shots of young women criss-crossing the streets of Manhattan, now instantly evokes that television show. It also rekindles the relationship between fashion and the city of New York first created in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961, dir. Blake Edwards). The brownstone in which Carrie lives evokes that of Audrey Hepburn’s character, Holly Golightly, while the sidewalks she strolls, and the yellow cabs she hails, were first made visually memorable by Hepburn in the opening moments of that film. Very soon, they were as much in demand for international fashion shoots as Paris boulevards or Italian squares ([Church Gibson 2006b](#)). The camera, in both the *Sex and the City* series and *The Devil Wears Prada*, also moves down the female body to show off designer shoes; Frankel calls this movement the ‘Florien tilt’ in the DVD feature ‘NY Fashion’.

When this particular film was first screened on British TV, in February 2010, it was instantly followed by the very first television screening of the behind-the-scenes documentary made at US *Vogue* in 2009, *The September Issue*.

In the fictional world of *Runway* magazine, Meryl Streep plays the fashion editor referred to by her staff as the Dragon Lady or the Queen. Here, Streep, like Wintour, has a trademark bob and dark glasses, a clipped manner and a slight interrogative inflection to her speech. Her white office, crisply modern and full of black-and-white photographs, seems deliberately designed to evoke the real office which we see in *The September Issue*.

The casting of Meryl Streep was central to the commercial and critical success of *The Devil Wears Prada*, not only because of her unparalleled acting ability but also because of her particular form of celebrity status. Streep is not usually associated with off-screen glamour, but rather with excellent performances, and so she bestowed upon this mythical fashion editor the cultural capital accrued across her long career, thus giving the fictional Miranda Priestly a gravitas that might otherwise have been absent. Her on-screen image and voice have changed radically from film to film, so as to inform and inhabit each of the parts she has played over the last twenty years.

However, not only does her unquestionable talent give a serious edge to any project with which she is involved; it is also significant that she had already managed to make two very different commodities instantly desirable. After her performance in *Out of Africa* (1985, dir. Sydney Pollack), the sales of that year’s ‘safari look’ fashions were guaranteed (also see [Mayer 2002](#)), while in a completely different commercial sphere, Kenyan tourism suddenly boomed quite dramatically. This phenomenon was intensified after the commercial critical success of *The Devil Wears Prada*. The Greek island of Skopelos used as the location for *Mamma Mia!* (2008, dir. Phyllida

instantly became a popular holiday destination; the mountaintop church where the film's wedding takes place received endless referrals from couples anxious to marry there (also see [Moir 2008](#); [Brabant 2009](#)). Finally, a repackaged Julia Child cookbook ([Child 2001](#)) entered the American bestseller charts after Streep played the 1950s chef in *Julie and Julia* (2009).

With Streep as the villainess, Field as costume supervisor and a clever screenplay that made the rather irritating self-pity of the novel more palatable, the film seemed destined to trump the book. Frankel's clever direction ensured this by making sure that, in every way, the visual allure of the fashion world was emphasized from start to finish. The film may pretend, as it shows us the havoc wrought on the heroine's life by her new job, that it disapproves of *Runway* magazine, of its terrified stick-thin assistants, their tyrannical editors, and the overall ethics of the fashion world. However, all this is completely undercut by the visual style: the way the camera lingers on and even caresses the beauty of both heroine and supporting cast, the endless parading and voyeuristic glimpses of desirable clothes and glamour of the settings throughout and finally their slick, stylish, highly polished portrayal through clever camerawork and cinematography. The film's narrative does depict all the problems created for the heroine by her new job in this alien environment, but also emphasizes through the seductive work of the camera the splendid changes wrought in her appearance. Already a very pretty woman when she starts her job at *Runway*, though padded out and wearing what seems to be a tousled wig, the star looks completely stunning once the fashion world has transformed her (see [Jeffers McDonald 2010](#): 166–197; [Sheridan 2010](#): 2).

The film begins with a montage of the *Runway* girls dressing for work, intercut throughout with shots of the heroine's rather more modest toilette, which Jeffers McDonald discusses in some detail (2010: 178). I would suggest that the shots of the *Runway* staff, in which we see glimpses of black lace underwear, sheer black stockings, leopard-print knickers, and where eyelash curlers are wielded with extraordinary efficiency, are in fact crafted so as to resemble a commercial for some fashion-related product. The interwoven footage of our heroine, by contrast, is seemingly intended to look like French New Wave footage, even cinéma-vérité. Andy, played by Anne Hathaway, is seen carelessly pulling on a thick woolly jumper, picking up a nondescript satchel, chomping inelegantly on a bagel. The cleverly adapted screenplay has a number of in-jokes and fashion references that are actually missing from the original novel, including the casting of supermodel Gisele as editorial assistant Serena. It also now includes a French fashion editor, whose style of dress and self-presentation are obviously intended to suggest, to the initiated, Carine Roitfeld, then the fashion-celebrity editor of French *Vogue*. For Jacqueline Follet (Stephanie Szostak), the fictional editor of French *Runway* and part of this new plot strand developed specifically for the film, is in appearance and dress seemingly modelled on Roitfeld—funky, punky, slightly rock-chick—completely opposed to the classic elegance of Streep's Priestly. And the Manhattan writer and columnist who pursues our heroine, threatening her relationship with her long-term boyfriend, here has his name emblazoned along the side of a bus, just as Carrie Bradshaw/Candace Bushnell's name is displayed in the opening credits of the *Sex and the City* television series.

In the film, Anne Hathaway as Andy is beautiful but basically good-natured, put-upon and largely silent. However, the narrator with the novel tends to forfeit our sympathy by constantly reminding us that what she really deserves is a job on a 'proper' publication, the *Yorker*, where she would actually write, rather than run endless errands for her boss. Weisberger's wish was granted—she did, in fact, land the post she coveted. But the critics of the *New Yorker* hated the book, calling it 'trivially self-dramatizing fiction'; they went on to praise the film:

Bright, crisp and funny, the movie turns dish into art—or if not quite into art, then at least into the kind of dazzling commercial entertainment that Hollywood, in the days of George Cukor or Stanley Donen, used to turn out. ([Denby 2006](#))

In the film, Andy eventually instigates her own fashion makeover, asking the art director Nigel (Stanley Tucci) to help her fit in, which he takes. She is told at her interview with Miranda: 'You don't read *Runway*—you have no style or sense of fashion—no, that isn't a question'. She did not, luckily, hear what Nigel had to say when she first appeared in the office: 'Who is that sad little person? Are you running a before and after piece that I don't know about?' But at first she doesn't care, thinking herself superior to the rules of fashion and quite able to function through her talent alone. Her supercilious giggle of derision during a lengthy staff deliberation about the best use in a shoot prompts a caustic but informative lecture from Streep's character—again, not in the book—about the way in which the fashion system actually works. It has, in fact, dictated the very colour of the cerulean-blue jersey she is herself wearing, 'no doubt fished out of some clearance bin'. But finally, chided for her seeming incompetence, she is driven to seek help and asks Nigel what he must do. The answer, of course, is to adapt and conform.

Nigel marches her through 'the Closet', and, as they walk through this Aladdin's Cave, where the clothes called in for shoots are kept, he enunciates the names of the designers clearly and carefully—for the audience as well as for Andy—as he selects garments and accessories from the treasure trove (for a very detailed description of this makeover see [Jeffers McDonald 2010](#): 181–3). The camera and the audience—can follow her awed, newly reverent gaze as she studies the luxury brands with new interest. Nigel's very last pronouncement before he hands her over to the beauty department is, 'Chanel—you're in dire need of Chanel.' When we see her both she and the cameraman display their delight in the work that has been done; she swishes her newly cut hair proudly, even struts as she strides back into her office in her over-the-knee Chanel boots. But the most significant moment is perhaps that when the best-paid model—Gisele, of all people, masquerading here as Serena—tells her approvingly and truthfully, 'You look good', as she appraises the boots, the Chanel jacket and jewellery, the transformed hair and expertly applied makeup.

However, in the original novel, the heroine clings stubbornly to her own clothes. Finally, the embarrassed young man who looks after 'the Closet' surreptitiously hands her a bag of clothes and shoes. This is an ultimatum, as he explains: 'Um—people, like, aren't very happy with this *Gap* thing you've got going on' ([Weisberger 2003](#): 132; italics added). In the film, the best friend of the novel is turned from a white 'grad student' into a black artist, who grows to distrust her friend, finally berating her for her new indifference: 'I don't know why you're this *glamazon* you've become.' Earlier, however, she has squealed with pleasure, naming and prizing the Marc Jacobs handbag from 'the Closet' that Andy gives her. In the novel, this same best friend ends up in a coma and so brings the heroine to her senses; here, the

young journalist simply decides to leave Paris and to abandon the job.

The cinematic montage that marks the editor's arrival in the office every morning, as she throws a variety of coats across Andy's car to be hung up (the credits thank Dries van Noten, Prada, Oscar de la Renta, Bill Blass and Calvin Klein among others), not only marks the passage of time; it also shows off these garments to great advantage. A similar montage is again used to suggest Andy's new life over a period of time, through a display of different designer outfits, all equally becoming to the heroine and shown off as she moves through and across the streets: the sidewalk-as-catwalk concept so familiar from *Sex and the City* is here reworked to great effect.

Here, there is a new celebrity ingredient in the 'fashion film' recipe, for we hear a member of the *Runway* team mention 'Gwyneth's second cover' and we see all those staples originally, inadvertently created by Altman and arguably reinforced within the television series of *Sex and the City*: the verbal designer namechecking, the surfeit of visual product placement, the authentic fashion locations of the city and catwalk. At Valentino's show, Valentino appears as *himself*; he was the only real designer to do so.

The ending is changed to make it cinematically more palatable. Here, Andy has the job she always wanted, but her estranged boyfriend does, in fact, suggest, 'I'm sure we could work something out.' In the book, however, she has her new career as a writer but no chance of any reconciliation with him. In the film, Emily (played by Emily Blunt), Miranda's first assistant, whose longed-for visit to Paris was denied her by our heroine, is slightly mollified; Andy gives her every single garment and accessory she has acquired there. In the end, Andy sells them all to help finance her new, fledgling career.

Interestingly, the outfit Andy puts together for herself at the very end of the film, where we see her start a serious journalistic career, bears no relation *either* to her very first look or her ultra-fashionable *Runway* outfits. There is a parallel here with the costuming at the end of *Pretty Woman* (1990, dir. Garry Marshall), the ultimate transformation-through-shopping film, where Julia Roberts seems to have created for herself her very own look of blazer-over-jeans and crisp white T-shirt, with a possible nod to Princess Diana's off-duty look. Here, Roberts as Vivienne has rejected both her original how-to-attract-the-punters garb of miniskirt and patent boots and has also spurned the chic clothes which Richard Gere's billionaire helped her to select. Andy also has a seemingly original and self-created smart-casual style. But like Julia's final look, it's not anti-fashion. For in this film and others like it, fashion itself has become a star, a celebrity—and so must be placated.

The real Anna Wintour and the real world of the high-fashion magazine will appear in a later chapter, but a line of dialogue might be quoted here to close this critique:

She saw the pictures and she doesn't want Chanel or Hilary. So I think we're done with Chanel *and* Hilary.

This is a snippet of nonfictional conversation from the fly-on-the-wall documentary of 2008 and *not* from the feature film of 2006, so that it can be very difficult, where the fashion industry is concerned, to distinguish between its own hyperbole and fictional attempt at parody. This was another difficulty which Altman faced. But, as I have argued, Altman was ahead of his time; where his film failed, *Devil Wears Prada* triumphed. It can be found towards the end in a list of the two hundred top-grossing films of all time (see IMDB) where Streep was nominated for various rather prestigious awards.

At this juncture, the idea of the fashion film as a safe money-spinner was finally understood by Hollywood power brokers; the next one made, again styled by Field, was *Sex and the City: The Movie* in 2008. The stylist is, of course, still best-known for her work on *Sex and the City*: the television series made her well-known and successful, even a celebrity herself, while the move to the big screen not only made her extremely rich. This transfer I would like to discuss in the following chapter, since *Sex and the City* is not only the best-known fashion franchise, making its four stars into fashion celebrities; more significantly, the franchise in its entirety also affords a chance to look at the different ways in which television and film showcase, or create, fashion and celebrity (also see [Bruzzi and Church Gibson 2](#)).

So here, then, we must move on to the wardrobe Field assembled from the now-always-available pool of designers for *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, directed by P. J. Hogan in 2009. Here, the plotline again involved the world of magazine journalism. But this time, we have the offices of a small, very serious financial magazine whose aim is to guide the consumer and where the heroine, rather like her predecessor in *The Devil Wears Prada*, reluctantly accepts a job just because it may get her closer to her ideal. Here she actually goes to work for the fashion glossy *Alette*, here presented as another *Runway*; she is at her happiest in the cathedrals of consumption, chic stores along New York's Fifth Avenue, spending money she does not have on designer clothes and accessories she does not need.

This film—as the title would suggest—shows us the fashion world from a rather different perspective. It was, again, an adaptation, this time of the 'chick-lit' novels written by Sophie Kinsella ([2001](#), [2002](#), [2004](#), [2009](#)). But as it was directed by Hogan, who achieved fame with *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), it is an equally dark, ambivalent 'comedy'. He employed the indefatigable Field to give the film both credibility and box-office appeal, and although there was no Streep, Hathaway or Emily Blunt, it made quite a respectable showing financially (see IMDB).

This film is peculiarly obnoxious because Becky (Isla Fisher), the shopaholic of the title, has run up several thousand pounds worth of debt on her various credit cards. So, too, have many young women in 'developed' countries, where unsecured personal debt is on the increase; the figures are alarming ([Hickman 2006](#)). This is important within the particular context of this book; it is the new fashion and label-dominated celebrity culture that has worked to speed up change and accelerate *constant*, as well as conspicuous, consumption through its relentless magazine and Internet presentation of fashion stars strutting along in their Louboutins, the new season's Louis Vuitton scarves around their necks, proudly toting the latest Fendi bags.

However, here the humour of the film is actually based on the many situations where the heroine tries to avoid the debt collector v

been assigned the impossible task of collecting all the money she owes. The actor Robert Stanton, who plays the noxiously name Derek Smeath, is styled to look as unappetizing and unattractive as possible. He is not to gain any of our sympathy—that must stay with the spendthrift Becky. Eventually, she does, in fact, pay her debts, but she is seen as somehow the victim during their lengthy cat-and-mouse games. We are, it seems, intended to be firmly on her side as she fabricates yet another ludicrous lie, or scampers down back alleys to avoid him.

Finally, he traps her. But although she loses her job, the man she loves and her long-suffering best friend, in the closing scene even he is magically restored to her. Although briefly penniless, friendless, loveless and unemployed, she finally triumphs—but not, however, within the world of fashion, which she has learned to treat with caution. She is actually offered her ideal job, the opportunity to write a column for *Alette*, by Kristin Thomas's waspish fashion editor, who again has both bobbed hair and frosty manner. However, she backs her down and instead sells all the clothes she owns, so settling all her debts.



Figure 17 The elegant actress Kristin Scott Thomas was cast as the fictional editor of a top fashion magazine in *Confessions of a Shopaholic*. Photograph by Anne-Marie Michel.

She ends the film instead with the love of the hero and the goodwill of her best friend, whose trust she consistently abused and whose bridesmaid's outfit she managed to lose through her wish to wear a St Laurent dress in a television interview. The bridesmaid's dress is recovered, she turns up at her friend's wedding; all is instantly forgiven. As she walks away from the Fifth Avenue church after the service, cured of her addiction, the mannequins in the store windows, who have whispered to her throughout the film, beckoning her to hold up objects with which to entice her, now try for one last time to gain her attention. But sensibly she averts her eyes, and they break into applause as she walks past them without stopping to look or enter the shops, completely reformed. Only then does the boss/boyfriend whom she formerly deceived, played by Hugh Dancy, suddenly appear before her—with a brand-new job to give her

Earlier in the film, she visits a luxury brand shop with him. Finding that he, in fact, understands exactly what is on offer there, and that he can actually afford all these expensive, flattering clothes, she turns to him in surprise: 'You talk Prada?' Yes, he does, he explains, but doesn't want to be defined by labels; she is bemused. But once again, although both heroine and storyline seem finally to reject the temptations of fashion and the lure of the brand name, we have by then seen enough stylish clothes and extravagant outfits to have eaten our fashion cake and so be sated. The film bears all the Field trademarks; the outfits are often quirky, mixing up styles, colours and patterns, combining different designers throughout, sometimes adding a dash of vintage. There is the now familiar dropping of designer names and the endless sightings of their clothes in all the shops she visits. This film follows the patterning set up by the earlier fashion films; however, the precise long-term future of this particular template is rather difficult to predict.

I would like now to move from what I have suggested is a novel, possibly transient genre to a study of the director—the auteur—in a new cinematic landscape, and to examine various developments there, many of which combine fashion and celebrity in new and evolving ways.

Fashion, Celebrity and a New Auteurism?

Tom Ford has a huge loyal following. Any *Vogue* reader, *GQ*, *Elle*, *Vanity Fair* ... they all know who he is, and there's always ho anticipation for the next thing he does. I thought he was very marketable.

Hugo Grumbar, head of Icon Distribution in the United Kingdom ([Clark 2010: 9](#))[Find it in your Library](#)

Before the era when celebrity culture joined forces with fashion, young would-be filmmakers, particularly in England, learned their through the making of television commercials. Ridley Scott was one of these young men; he took what he had learned in the dem field of the two- or three-minute sell and set off on a twenty-year Hollywood career, from *Alien* (1979) to *Gladiator* (2000) and beyc Today, however, with the financial power of the luxury fashion houses, there are new ironies; now, it seems, fashion commands ar dutifully follows. Director David Lynch has some credible art-house credentials; his career began with the extraordinary, surreal ar disturbing low-budget movie *Eraserhead* (1976), and he became much better known with the critical success of his film *Blue Velvet* (1986), which exposed the underbelly of American suburbia long before *Desperate Housewives*. This film opens with the sight of a brightly coloured fire engine moving slowly past a white picket fence. Lynch then went on to make prime-time television both innov and unsettling with the very successful series *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991).

He then returned to making films and was, it seems, gradually seduced by fashion. He worked with his then-partner, the model Isé Rossellini, on *Blue Velvet*; she subsequently accepted a multimillion-dollar contract to be the face of Lançome. She was one of the celebrity faces chosen by a makeup firm to front a major international advertising campaign.

Lynch has since worked with the designer Agnès B. Her clothes were first seen on screen when Quentin Tarantino, without consu designer herself, bought outfits from her shop for his film *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Uma Thurman donned a simple black trouser suit ar classic white shirt for her date with John Travolta in a lurid 1950s-themed diner; discarding the jacket to enter a dance contest, the simplicity of the clothes was visually striking against the extraordinary backdrop and the ice-cream-sundae colours that dominated décor. In Tarantino's next film, *Jackie Brown* (1997), the designer was made an official part of the team, and her name was shown credits. She later worked with Lynch on the film *Mulholland Drive* (2001) and then on his rather less successful *Inland Empire* (2006).

Agnès B was proud of this collaboration, putting blown-up stills from the second film in the interiors of her shops across Europe du the period of its release and distribution—though, unlike the classic Hollywood tie-ins, the pictures were not of striking outfits worn stars. Instead, they showed the giant rabbits who inexplicably haunt the screen throughout.

For whatever reason, Lynch is aware of the power of and willing to accept the rewards promised by fashion. In this new era, he hæ seduced into making scent commercials for Gucci and Dior. He has also worked with the Oscar-winning French film star Marion C and designer John Galliano to publicize the Lady Dior handbag. The Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai—whose sensuous floodir the screen with colour infused in *In the Mood for Love* (2000)—has also been persuaded to make scent commercials for Dior, one which starred Sharon Stone (2005), and another for Lançome in 2007. Kar-Wai is not shackled by puritan scruples; he has also m commercials for cars (BMW), for a flat-screen TV and has directed a mini-film for 'Soft Finance' starring Brad Pitt.

The director Baz Luhrmann followed the success of his 'Red Carpet Trilogy', *Strictly Ballroom* (1992), *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and t musical *Moulin Rouge* (2001), with an extremely expensive commercial for Chanel No. 5. Here, he employed Nicole Kidman, the : his film *Moulin Rouge*, to portray a reluctant celebrity, briefly fleeing the paparazzi to join her lover on the rooftops of Paris. She is clinging to two vast interlinked neon letters atop a building; here, the Chanel logo, rather than the Moulin Rouge windmill, dominat night sky. The House of Chanel obviously believed that this tie-in between feature film and commercial was worth repeating. They employed the director Jean-Pierre Jeunet to make a mini-narrative set on the Orient Express and starring Audrey Tatou, who had become famous in Jeunet's film *Amélie* (2001). Through yet another irony, the making and release of the No. 5 commercial overla with Tatou's role as Chanel herself in the film *Coco avant Chanel* (2009). Meanwhile, the highly avant-garde director Kenneth Ang actually tempted out of retirement to make a commercial; he accepted an invitation to make a short promotional film for Missoni in

But all this is dwarfed by the most recent mode of collaboration between fashion house and film; now the power of celebrity and fæ combined can create between them a new director for feature films, *not* merely for commercials; designer Tom Ford can, it seems change career. He has always been very much a designer-as-celebrity, always pictured in magazine coverage at social events— openings, launches, parties, shows—and has carefully courted publicity. He greatly enjoyed the fuss generated by the Gucci advertisement of 2003 (see [Cozens 2003](#)), in which model Carmen Kass pulls down her pale blue knickers to reveal that her publi shaved into the shape of the Gucci logo. A young, rather androgynous-looking boy kneels on the ground before her, his face bent this logo. Ford claimed that he had not simply come up with both the idea and the final image, but that he had actually shaved the model's hair for the shoot himself. Two years earlier, when working as the creative director for Yves St Laurent, he had quite litera stopped traffic with vast billboards that showed off another provocative image, this time the one he had created for the new and nc campaign for the house scent, Opium. The huge posters showed the alabaster-white, statuesque body of model Sophie Dahl, lyin her back, naked but for silver-strapped high heels and gently caressing her own nipple (see ['Offensive Opium Posters' 2000](#)).

He went on in March 2006 to guest edit an issue of *Vanity Fair* and to place himself on the cover, seated behind Keira Knightley a prone Scarlett Johansson. Whilst Ford was fully clothed, both women were totally naked, and the tableau was quite clearly design evoke Manet's controversial painting *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* of 1863, banned by the Paris Salon and subsequently exhibited else

His advertising campaigns became still more outrageous. One poster image showed a huge bottle of Tom Ford scent, sandwiched between the large silicone-enhanced breasts of a headless, naked model, as she is somehow managing to hoist the bottle skywai

her own hands. Another showed a similar bottle, this time held tightly between the thighs of yet another headless, naked woman, hiding her own genitals and rising up her stomach to play-act a gender swap.

Ford, who parted company with Gucci in 2004, went on to become the director of his own worldwide group of inordinately expensive menswear shops. Now enormously rich, he decided that he wanted to fulfil his lifelong ambition of being a film director (see [Blank 2009](#)). He therefore secured the rights to Christopher Isherwood's 1960s novel *A Single Man*, which he adapted for the screen. He directed and in every way oversaw the subsequent film, which was quite well-received, for the most part, and which saw his star, Firth, nominated for a slew of awards. The screenplay Ford wrote involved a very liberal interpretation of the original book in order to glamorize the text and to make a fashion film; the novel describes what may, perhaps, be the last day in the life of its protagonist, George, an English professor now living in California and mourning the recent death of Jim, his partner of sixteen years.

For a start, Ford shaved more than a decade from the hero's age in order to cast a much younger man. Also gone from the novel is the long sequence in which George visits a woman in hospital who is dying of cancer. This woman, Doris, once had a brief affair with a dead partner. This scene, where the now-skeletal Doris calls out for morphine, does not suit Ford's purposes; it is replaced by a striking sequence, invented by Ford, involving a Spanish rent boy who looks exactly like a male model.

The film is punctuated throughout by verbal and visual references to the Cuban missile crisis, even though the novel makes it quit that the crisis is now over ([Isherwood 1964/2010](#): 81). Ford adds further drama to the film by introducing George's decision to shoot himself rather than live without Jim; we see him retrieving a handgun from the safety-deposit box of a bank, writing a number of farewell letters to friends and setting out the clothes in which he wishes his own body to be dressed for his funeral. But in the novel, George is proud of the very fact that he is a 'survivor' (83). His regular gym workout, intended to sustain this quality and described in detail, is banished from the film. The last chapter of the novel suggests that, on that night or any other, he will nevertheless fall victim to a heart attack. This we actually see on screen.

The novel has passages of great humour—George's interior monologues as he drives along the freeway to the university, for example. This is banished, though there is instead some gallows humour around the sleeping bag George sets out in preparation for his suicide and his tentative rehearsals in both bag and shower cubicle. But overall, the pathos is enhanced in every way—for example, George is invited to Jim's funeral in the novel but firmly excluded in the film. And the film's George is now firmly fashion-aware, not only in his dress—mentioned perhaps twice in the book and then *en passant*—but in other, new ways. In the film, as he compliments a pretty secretary on her new upswept hairdo, he inhales her scent and asks 'Arpège?'

Of George's own clothes, Isherwood simply tells us that at his lecture, unlike the student audience, he wears 'neat dark clothes, a shirt and tie—the only tie in the room' ([Isherwood 1964/2010](#): 41). In the film, of course, Firth looks incredibly stylish throughout in Tom Ford menswear.

Most significantly, to make the kind of film Ford wants, Charley, the divorced, heavy-drinking Englishwoman who is George's near neighbour, great friend and confidante, has undergone a transformation so total that only her name and her marital status remain unchanged. In the novel, Charley is overweight, with untidy hair and, indeed, an untidy home. Once, George suggests, she must have been 'adequately pretty'; now her 'cheeks are swollen and inflamed' ([Isherwood 1964/2010](#): 96). She has a pronounced limp, the result of chronic arthritis (97). She is also far from rich—she came to America as a GI bride and her husband, Buddy, has abandoned her. She now lives alone in a house George describes as a 'small box' (95). Her home is 'more than somewhat oriental gift shop in décor' ('a small, cluttered, none-too-clean kitchen' (98).

As for Charley's dress sense, George thinks to himself that her ill-fitting peasant skirt and blouse make her look even more plump and solid; nevertheless, they do have 'a grotesque kind of gallantry' (96). But he does despair of her general slovenliness: 'If she must wear sandals with bare feet, why won't she make up her toenails?' (96).

In the film, toenails, fingernails and face are most carefully made up; we see this task being carried out across most of the film's first day. Everything about Charley's much younger, totally transformed cinematic incarnation is polished, buffed and shining. In the film—and her home—are stylish beyond belief. Her prefabricated, that simple rectangular box, becomes a sizeable neocolonial mansion. At the same time, her husband Buddy has also been substantially altered, becoming the very affluent Richard, just as Jim has become a successful architect rather than an amiable man whose main interest was his home menagerie, which includes a mynah bird, a raccoon, some skunks and several king snakes. They, too, have been replaced, in this case by a pair of pedigree English fox terriers.

Ford cast Julianne Moore as Charley, and, for their dinner à deux, in her own home, he dressed her in a black-and-white vintage-style dress created with his initial guidance by the costume designer Arianne Phillips. Charley and the black-clad George now stand out against the silks and sofas of her home, where all is taupe, cream and beige, even the piled, subtly patterned cushions. There are framed mirrors, elegant lamps, floor-length curtains of heavy silk and tasteful abstract art on the walls; there is no 'clutter' or 'oriental shop décor' here, only very expensive, rather bland good taste.

Ford makes everything as visually pleasing as possible, even the student Kenny. In the novel we are told that he 'might have been conventionally handsome if he didn't have a beaky nose' (43); here, he is portrayed by the good-looking, even-featured Nicholas Hoult. Kenny's explicit desire to explore his sexuality and even seduce George is also absent from the novel; there is definitely a frisson of flirtation, but the novel's Kenny is not on the same overt mission that Ford creates for him. There is, too, a suggestion in the film that Firth's George and Kenny might have a future together; when George wakes up, he finds Kenny fast asleep on the sofa, clutching a gun he must have secretly confiscated. Seemingly redeemed, George burns his suicide notes and returns, smiling, to bed—only to

struck down by death. The novel's Kenny disappears into the night while George is asleep, and after his romantic and sexual involvement with Lois has been firmly established. Ford has made all these changes so that the film may be not only less distress cancer-ridden patients, no overweight arthritic women, even the glimpse of a positive future—but also infinitely more stylish and adorned in every way, from houses to cars to women to young men. The architect-designed home in which George lives, all amber and golden wood, is Ford's invention: Isherwood's George lives in a small house, 'shaggy with ivy and dark and secret looking' (10 cinematic living room is spacious and has enormous windows; the living room in the novel is 'low, damp, and dark' (9).

Ford set about casting his film with the same piratical abandon he displayed in his successful 'fashion' career. He has been relatively modest about the film's success, saying he owes a huge debt of gratitude to the 'great team' with whom he worked (Pulver 2010; 2009). But he has not been overwhelmed, either, by the fact that the film has been nominated for various prestigious awards; his actor, Colin Firth, won a Golden Globe and was nominated for a Best Actor award at the Oscars. Ford did not seem especially hurried, rather, he congratulated himself on his own foresight in seizing Firth and likened it to 'closing a fashion deal: I just jumped on a plane handshake boom boom—just like fashion—Julianne Moore the same' (Pulver 2010). An alternative narrative has Ford meeting quite by chance, at a party hosted by Madonna, after he had already completed the casting of his film—and instantly changing his (Clark 2010).

In fact, Firth's performance was extraordinary, but what should we make of this overly stylish film? Is it possible for fashion, brand potency and celebrity status to overwhelm all notions of apprenticeship? In fact, the film is so visually sumptuous as to be curiously sterile. Ford's approach seems more akin to that of a stylist; every period detail is accurate, right down to the pink Cocktail Sobran cigarettes smoked by Charley. In interview (Clark 2010), Ford stresses this particular need for exactly the right detail—for example made sure that Firth was wearing Creed's Bois du Portugal aftershave, created in 1957 and apparently favoured by Frank Sinatra that was the scent 'his' George would select. Isherwood's hero seems to eschew such things; he is a traditional academic, rather than a world-famous performer. But when Ford organized George's wardrobe, the jackets he created had sewn inside them 'labels from the right Savile Row tailor, with the date' (Clark 2010).

This kind of elaborate, unseen preparation is also familiar to us from the work of contemporary Method actors, including Daniel De Lewis, Dustin Hoffman and Robert de Niro, who famously rejected the Armani suits worn by the cast of *The Untouchables* (1987, Brian De Palma). For his very brief cameo as Al Capone, he insisted on going to Capone's own tailor to be provided with his pinstriped suit (Bruzzi 1997: 28). And having read in some biography that Capone always wore pure silk underwear, de Niro allegedly went to Bloomingdale's and purchased some for himself in order properly to inhabit the role.

Ford's approach is not, then, that of a traditional film director. The finished film rather resembles a series of commercials; it contains a number of different vignettes, each with a particular visual feel. The sequence with Carlos, the strikingly good-looking Spanish husband with his quiff and immaculate white T-shirt, takes place in the parking lot of a liquor store and looks very like the famous retro-style commercials, made in the mid-1980s but set in a mythical early 1960s America. They increased the sales of the brand by an extraordinary 200 per cent; interestingly, they were not screened in America, only in Europe, but they are certainly known to all with knowledge of the history of fashion-related advertising. Here, Carlos's rolled-up jeans expose black boots, just in case we miss the references to James Dean in the film's dialogue. As the sequence develops, the screen finally becomes suffused with a deep pink sun sets.

The lighting and the colours change from sequence to sequence; the attention to the details of filmmaking is there—but it is Tom Ford's own luxury brand detail. Tom Ford menswear is shown off throughout, while the scent bottles on Julianne Moore's dressing table are vintage Estée Lauder *Youth Dew* bottles of the period; now the brand is owned and has been reinvigorated by Ford (see Turin and Sanchez 2008).

Nicolas Hoult's Kenny is fascinated in a personal rather than in a more detached, intellectual way (as in the novel) by a professor who correctly assumes to be gay. He is very taken with the lecture we see as we move through this day in George's life; Firth/George abandons any attempt to control the rambling discussion around Aldous Huxley's novel *After Many a Summer* and substitutes, as in the novel, his own polemic on 'difference'. But when we first see the cinematic Kenny, before the lecture, the camera and George's eye are on him, sprawled on the grass, next to his blonde friend, Lois. She looks exactly like 1990s supermodel Claudia Schiffer, who herself deliberately recreated as her trademark look the style of the young Brigitte Bardot—just part of the film's knowing visual self-reference. Isherwood's Lois is, in fact, Japanese. And Kenny is wearing a white angora sweater and tight white slacks, definitely gay signifier of the period (Cole 2010), but here part of a Tom Ford range. We notice not only his greenish-blue eyes and youthful good looks, but also the soft texture of this white Tom Ford sweater, just as we later notice the texture of the wooden dashboard and the leather seats in a Mercedes. We have our attention caught throughout by design details and by surfaces. Richard Dyer famously said, in a *Sight and Sound* review of *The Remains of the Day* (1993, dir. Merchant Ivory), that he knew the film was flawed when he found himself more interested in Emma Thompson's patterned teacup than in the words she was saying (1994). But at least Merchant Ivory were not marketing the china seen on screen in the film.

As suggested, Ford's careful product placement and, too, his stylist's eye for detail are visible throughout. As a feature film director, however, rather than a fashion designer and a stylist of commercials, he is still finding his own authorial style. In his debut here, there is a good deal of what fashion journalists call 'channelling'. Here, the authorial styles and visual trademarks channelled by Ford are of ones we recognize. The couple who live opposite Firth/George remind us in their presentation of the characters in the television series *Mad Men*. And when their daughter suddenly appears before him in the drab brown-and-grey infused interior of his bank, and the camera pans up her body, from her shoes and white socks up her lurid turquoise dress to her blonde hair, the shot itself and the overall incongruity are reminiscent of the camerawork in Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. A black-and-white flashback to George and Jack sunbathing

rocks silhouetted sharply against the sky evokes the work of fashion photographers Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts. There are, too, motion sequences which call to mind Sofia Coppola's debut, *The Virgin Suicides* (1999).

Above all, Ford seems to be influenced by the later films of director Wong Kar-Wai. In the mise en scène of Kar-Wai's film *In the Mood for Love* (2000), dress and décor seem to seep seamlessly into one another across the frame. The leading actress, Maggie Cheung, dressed throughout the film in cheongsams which Kar-Wai had specially made from bolts of furnishing fabric he found in a warehouse in Hong Kong; they had been stored there since the early 1960s, the precise period when the film was set. He then filmed her, in several scenes, standing against patterned walls or curtains, also seemingly from the same period. In other sequences, he—and his cinematographer—saturate the screen with colour, just as Ford does: the shocking-pink sunset of the car lot sequence, the amber coloured light that suffuses the screen in the flashback sequences in which we see Jack and which also permeates the very last scene with Kenny, in George's home.

Perhaps the loving recreation of period detail—the cars, the clothes, the interiors, the products—rather dominates this film, made by an inexperienced director, at the possible expense of in-depth motivation and portrayal of character. Only Firth, as George, is more successful here; without his strong central performance, the film could be rather slight. But is this perhaps overly puritan, to criticize the fact that a fashion designer has made a film that looks rather like a sequence of commercials? Or is it acceptable, since the designer used the cinema to display many of his own products? The use of film as fashion showcase seems to have reached its logical conclusion; now, rather than put his or her products on screen in a film directed by somebody else, the fashion designer, if sufficiently celebrated, can simply set out to make his very own film-as-showcase. Here, Ford is not just letting us admire 'Tom Ford' style, to which he is also showing off the physical beauty of his cast, the décor and design of the early 1960s and the acting ability of Firth, whose extraordinary performance somehow welds this film together.

Interestingly, there is one historical error—and it concerns menswear. Ford's George sets out his funeral attire carefully and puts a tie on the garments, topped as they are by his tie of choice: 'Tie in a Windsor knot'. This would certainly be in keeping with the character Ford creates here, though not for Isherwood's George. But the stylist-director then makes a faux pas, sending George off to the university wearing a tiepin more in keeping with *Mad Men*'s Don Draper. A man who, in the grip of complete despair, could still be fastidious about the need for a Windsor knot would never, however long he had lived in America, adopt something as transatlantic as a tiepin.

The lasting impression, then, is a memory of the individual sequences and of a style best suited to the display of dress, décor and beauty; Ford is not yet an auteur. Afterwards, we might remember, too, the differing uses of light and colour—in George's grieving present, it's drained away almost to sepia as he dresses, drives to class, clears his office—but this convention is not wholly original. One might recollect the liquor store two-hander, the pinks and violets, the backdrop of the billboard advertising the forthcoming film *Psycho*. But overall there is a sense that Ford is learning, trying things out, making experiments. It seems not to matter, since he can certainly experiment on, in and with film when he himself is paying the bill. Yet he can only meet the costs *because* he is a famous fashion designer, and furthermore one with acknowledged celebrity status. This presumably encouraged those who became involved, in whatever way, with this project. But if undisputed auteur Wong Kar-Wai is happy to make Gucci commercials, can former Gucci stylist Tom Ford not direct a feature film? This would certainly be logical in the new, changed cinematic landscape.

Ford is very happy to link this feature film to his own real-life commercials; his summer 2010 eyewear campaign featured none other than Nicholas Hoult—now familiar to us as Kenny—modelling the new season's designer sunglasses. There are crucial differences, however, between the 'then' and the 'now'. In 1923 (see [chapter 3](#)), shoe designer Salvatore Ferragamo would never have envisaged replacing Cecil B. de Mille behind the camera. What he wanted was a talented director in whose film his shoes might make their appearance; he would never have thought of trying to replace him.

As I have said, film, more than any other medium within contemporary visual culture, is yoked to and reshaped by the different fortunes of celebrity and the new relationship between film and fashion. Ford is now working on another film. While the box office takings for *A Single Man* were modest in comparison to some of the other fashion films discussed in this chapter, sales of Tom Ford Menswear eyewear—have risen. When Ford returned to womenswear design, in October 2010, he could surf the wave of publicity created by his film; there was no runway show in a public venue, rather an intimate, invitation-only show in a luxurious private home, from which the press were banned. He did, however, participate in a photo shoot with Steven Meisel for US *Vogue* which featured the collection. It is surely significant that he chose celebrities to participate, together with well-known models; Julianne Moore was joined on the campaign by Beyoncé and Lauren Hutton (see [Alexander 2010](#)). Ford has created new spheres of opportunity for himself and, it seems, his

It might, therefore, be appropriate to end this chapter with a quotation from Colin Firth's speech when he accepted his BAFTA award.

To encounter Tom Ford is to come away feeling resuscitated, a little more worldly, better groomed, more fragrant—and more nominated—than one has ever been before. (see [Roberts, L. 2010](#))

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