DESCENT

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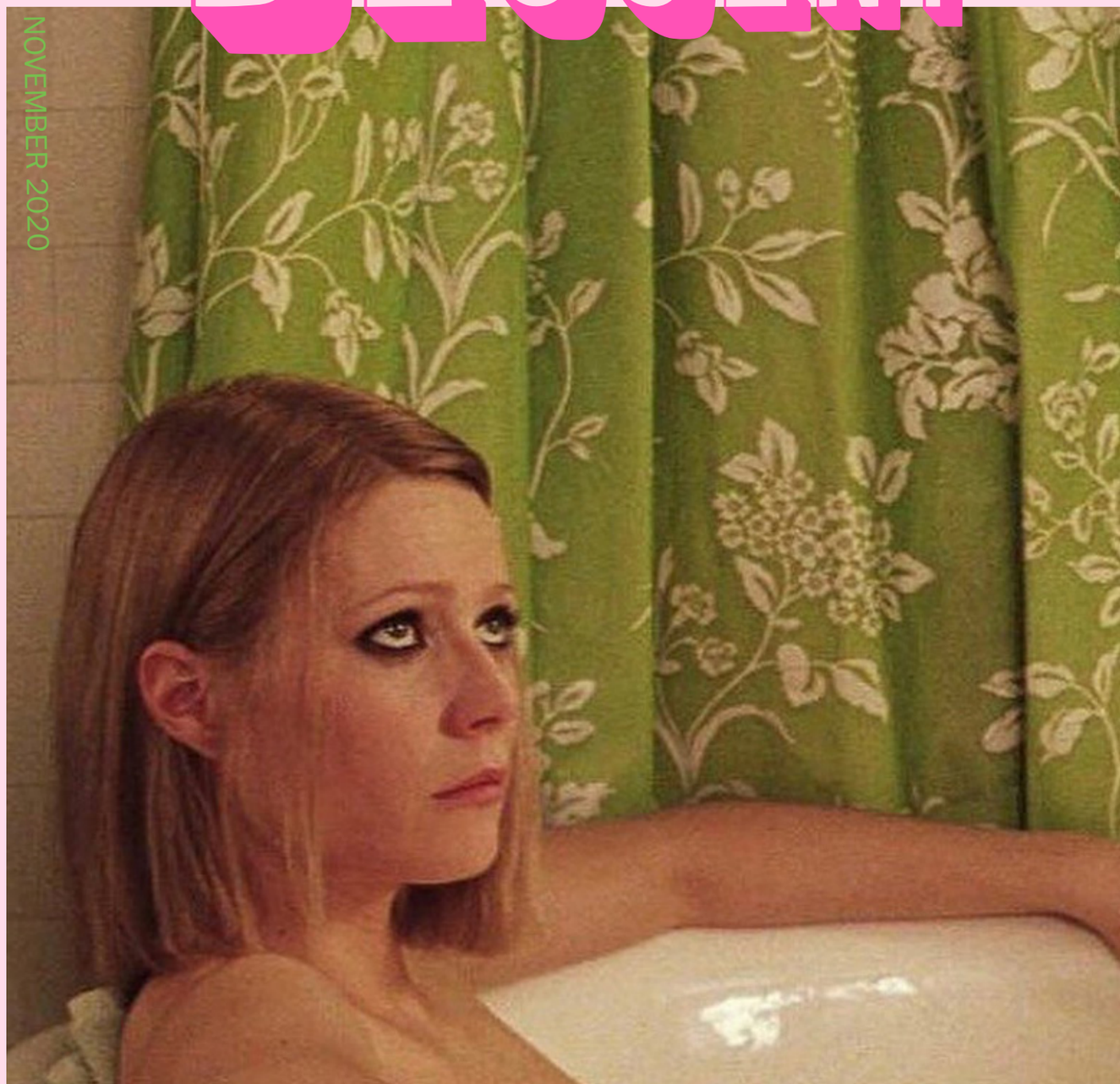

A countdown of the most fashionable moments in film

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Letter from the Editor

What weird times. It's been month after month of quarantining while acquainting myself with new shows, movies, and things I never quite got around to pre-COVID. The homepage of any and all streaming services went from being a mindless safehaven to a new source of pressure and frustration. What to watch when you've seen it all? My solution has been to revert back to old classics, to comfort watch. It's been a worthy and stimulating exercise when done through the lens of this magazine. As you, my dear reader, know, here at Descent magazine we pick a thing, any thing and rank it. As I started to dip my toe back into older movies I hadn't seen in awhile, I couldn't help but study the character's wardrobes, their fashion sensibilities, and to note which movies were that much more successful because of this aspect. It seemed like a no-brainer to center this issue's coundown around the exercise of lining up a few movies that I felt really excelled at utilizing fashion and costume design. The result is this month's offering: A totally arbitrary but hopefully worthy assessment of the most fashionable films, counted down from 5. It was very difficult to narrow down and I'm sure there are many more to be considered, reviewed, and included. That is the beauty of this project. The countdown is intended to start a discourse, provide and invite influence, and ultimately walk away with something to occupy the seemingly unlimited time warp we occupy these days.

Happy viewing,

Muriel

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Contributors

Claire Marie Healy
The Virgin Suicides

Claire Marie Healy is a writer, editor and editorial consultant based in London. She is currently Editor at the agenda-setting bi-monthly title Dazed & Confused. Her articles center on film, photography, fashion and the internet, with a focus on young women's issues. She has profiled notable figures such as Chloë Sevigny, Isabelle Huppert, Sofia Coppola, Tavi Gevinson, and Gregg Araki. Recent clients include Marc Jacobs, The Barbican, Versace and adidas Originals. On occasion you might see her speak on panels about movies and magazines, such as, recently, for the BFI and Elle.

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The Big Lebowski

Robert Armstrong is the FT's US finance editor. Previously, he was chief editorial writer and has also edited the FT's Lex Column. Before becoming a journalist, he worked in finance and studied philosophy.

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Annie Hall

Ada is a cinephile and book lover, photography enthusiast, seeker of genuine style, passionate about tennis and mountain climbing. She is also a contributor to the film magazine The Big Picture, she has written for THE ARTBO magazine, and my fashion in film articles have repeatedly been cited in The New York Times, The Guardian and The Washington Post.

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Breakfast at Tiffany's

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How it Works

We've sifted through our favorite examples of fashion in film and ranked them in descending order — starting on page 10

Keep reading to see which movie landed on top and please share any thoughts, additions, or notes with us at feedback@descent.com

Number

Five

The Virgin Suicides

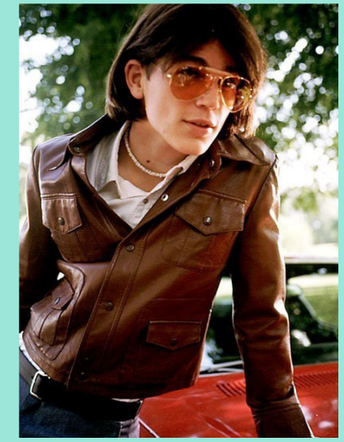
Unpacking the symbolic meaning behind the film's boxy school uniforms and 70s prom dresses

The current state of fashion is backlit by the sunshiny side of the 1970s; in The Virgin Suicides, Sofia Coppola's darkened impression is part hazy nostalgia, part dazzling lens flare. Adapted from Jeffrey Eugenides' book, Coppola's debut film transposes the novel's distinctive first-person-plural prose and filters it through her signature dreamlike aesthetic: here, it washes over a leafy Midwestern suburb, as seen through the eyes of the teenagers who live there. As the title suggests, the film chronicles the short lives of the enigmatic but sheltered Lisbon sisters – Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary and Therese. They are, like any tale of unrequited teen crushes, watched from afar by a group of neighbourhood boys. Now grown up, the boys narrate the girls' story in flashback form: when tragedy strikes, it is them who will try to put the pieces together. In one scene, they have managed to get their hands on a diary belonging to one of the Lisbons. Turning the pages, they – and we – can briefly enter the interiority of 1970s girlhood. "We felt the imprisonment of being a girl, the way it made your mind active and dreamy," the voice-over explains. "And how you ended up knowing which colours went together."

The Virgin Suicides aesthetic has influenced an entire generation of bored teenage girls with their heads in the clouds. Tavi Gevinson is a self-admitted devotee of its dream world, and ritualistically returns to the book and film every summer. Coppola worked with costume designer Nancy Steiner to achieve a genuinely thrifted 70s look that didn't appear deliberately retro – you need only look at the film's late 90s contemporary, *Boogie Nights*, for a very different take on that style. Coppola, admittedly "struck by the beauty of banal details", populates her suburban universe with the quiet fashions of authentic 70s girlhood: delicate lace dresses, bandeau tops, tiered maxis in dusky florals. The influence on the fashion world since has been seen in the whimsical style of Rodarte, as well as Coppola collaborator Marc Jacobs (the Daisy campaigns, as directed by Coppola, are clearly part of the Lisbon sisters' world). Just like the other ephemera of the sisters' everyday lives that the boy-narrators collect – Virgin Mary cards, pink lipsticks, whatever else they can rescue from the trash – the clothes of the Lisbon girls offer their own clues. Their outfits demonstrate the extreme poles of dress that defined the choice of teenage fashion in the 70s: demureness versus skimpiness, or the fabric of innocence against emerging sexuality – see the pink bra draped over a crucifix. In a contemporary culture that still has a problem with the handling and portrayal of young female sexuality, it's a tension that still chimes with adolescents today.

As the boys astutely point out, the Lisbon sisters' imprisonment is that they are girls. More than this, they are subject to their Catholic parents' strict rules, curfews, and, eventually, house arrest. The sense of entrapment extends to their clothing. Their daily wear consists of boxy, traditional school uniforms. For prom, their mother is so distraught at her daughters' growing up that she adds swathes of fabric to their already dowdy dresses – they emerge in "four identical sacks". The long, pale dresses, dotted with barely-there florals, resemble the Gunne Sax dresses popular amongst teenage girls and their worried mothers in the seventies. Typically multi-tiered and high-necked, the dresses evoked nostalgia for 19th century prairie living. The name derives from "gunny sack", the material used for potato sacks as well as the lining of early versions of the dresses – the polar opposite of s-e-x. But as much as their mother tries, the girls aren't identical, and it's 14-year-old Lux who provides the film's narratorial and stylistic focus. Her relationship with Trip Fontaine – who, in his aviators and flares, is the universalised 70s heartthrob – anchors the film's tragic momentum. It's a denouement spoken through clothing: what it hides, and what it uncovers. Played by Kirsten Dunst, Lux is the most attractive and effervescent of the sisters – all said, a "stone fox" – with an in-bloom sexuality that's expressed in the details. Early on, she sits on the front lawn in the baggy clothing of her sibling – only her tee falls off her shoulder, just so. During a family supper at the Lisbon house, Lux is lectured to cover her chest while her bare toes caress an unwitting male guest under the table. As Trip pins her corsage on for prom, the camera reveals what lies underneath Lux's sack dress: she's written his name on her underwear, a heart dotting the I. When Lux misses curfew, the parent's lockdown goes from bad to worse. Abandoned by Trip, Lux has sex on the roof, limply lifting layers of cloth for strange men. All the sisters wear the baggy nightdresses of Victorian children. "I can't breathe in here," says Lux, trapped in the wrong century.

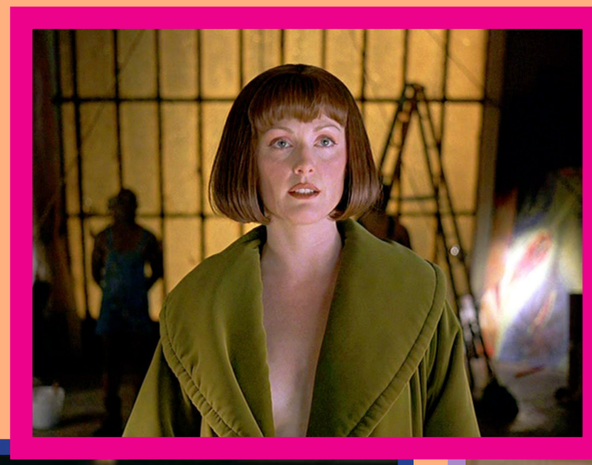
The Virgin Suicides is Coppola's first and most tragic elegy to youth, in a cinematic career that continues to chronicle lonely girls on the brink of womanhood: Scarlett Johannson's Tokyo drifter in Lost in Translation, Marie Antoinette's partying princess. In many ways, the Lisbon sisters are precursors to these women, who are later freed from the (albeit sympathetic) male gaze that necessarily filters *The Virgin Suicides*. The film begins with the youngest sister, Cecilia's first suicide attempt (she slits her wrists). Her elder sisters cover the bandages with piles of multi-coloured, plastic bangles. It is The Virgin Suicides' most complete image of the clash of childhood innocence and the disillusionment of experience – something that will always define the anxiety of girlhood, and the clothes that locate it in time.

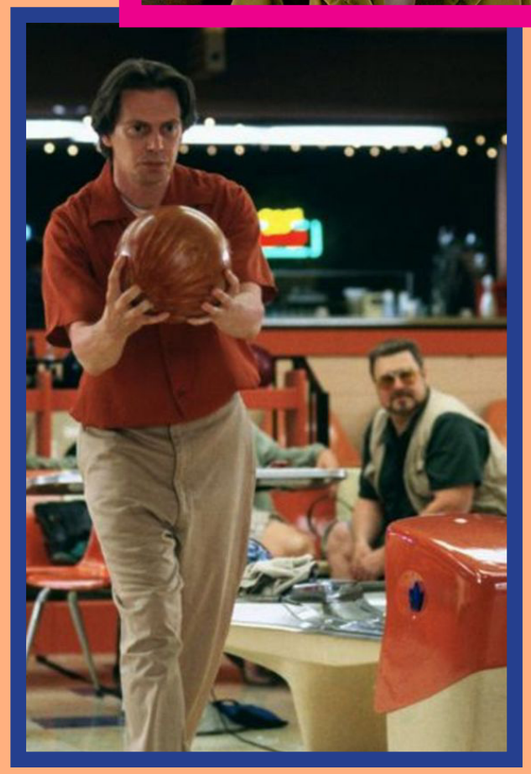


Number

Four

The Big Lebowski





Was it really 1998? It has been two decades since Jeff Bridges first shuffled down the dairy aisle of a Ralph's supermarket in Los Angeles in the opening sequence of The Big Lebowski. It is a testament to the timelessness of the film that it seems both more recent and longer ago.

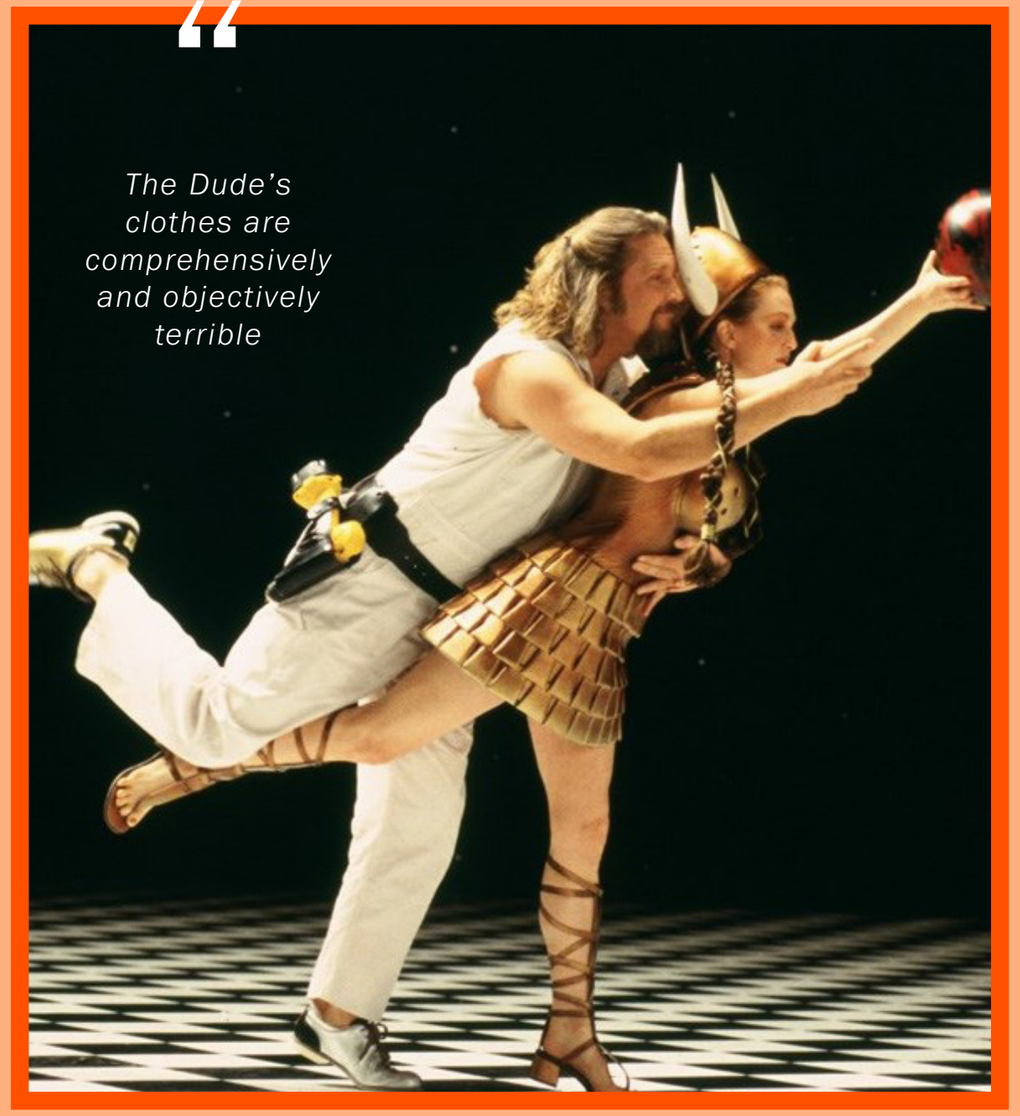
The film is one of those works of art where the main character is somehow bigger and more interesting than the work itself. As with Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, so with Jeffrey "The Dude" Lebowski, as played by Mr. Bridges. If you have not seen the film, stop reading now. Your time is better spent watching it. For those who have, let me pose a question: how does a man who dresses like The Dude manage to look so good?

The Dude's clothes are comprehensively and objectively terrible. He first appears — writing a 69-cent cheque to pay for an already opened pint of half and half — in a brown bathrobe of ribbed velour, or perhaps very tired terry cloth. The robe is worn over a shapeless V-neck T-shirt and plaid, knee-length shorts of indeterminate but nonetheless offensive colors.

The clothing gets worse from there. When he puts his feet up in the back of a limousine owned by the film's antagonist, we discover The Dude is wearing jelly sandals, perhaps the only time in film history when these have been seen on an adult male.Then come baggy pants in hippie-ish Latin American fabrics, cinched at the ankles, and a loose-knit, roll-neck cardigan with Native American-inspired patterns, meant, perhaps, for a suburban mother in Arizona. And on it goes.

The Dude's perfectly integrated style is set off by a set of goofball supporting characters who all doll themselves up as things they transparently are not: a self-made millionaire, a hardened soldier, a conceptual artist. The Dude may be a dope, but he is a genuine item in a world of goofy fakes. He inhabits his clothes as we all wish we could, as a second skin and an expression of his best self.

For those of us who have not managed The Dude's level of enlightenment, the fact that he can wear those terrible clothes and look good has a frightening implication: Style cannot be delivered by a tailor or a personal shopper. At the risk of sounding like one of the Californians The Big Lebowski mocks, it comes from within.



Number

Annie Hall

Annie Hall's charm lies in Diane Keaton. It's in her personality. Her way of talking, dressing, ordering food. “She’s like all very smart people; extremely modest, extremely self-effacing. She’s got that quality,” Woody Allen would say about Keaton. And he let her play herself and captured her persona, her flavour, that rare quality. When the camera hits Keaton, that’s what you want to see. Here was something new: a modern woman, carving out a new identity, insecure, but brainy and self-conscious, a little neurotic and clumsy but endlessly funny, free and original.

Part of Annie’s charm lay in her unusual dress sense. It was very much Diane Keaton’s dress sense. The quirky layering of tailored separates, ties and hats and a man’s jacket over everything was inspired by Keaton’s own personal style. Woody Allen had to fight the costume department over some of the outfits Keaton wanted (and he wanted Keaton) to wear. When Ruth Morley, the costume designer, protested over one of Diane’s outfits on set – the pants, the scarf, the shirt buttoned up to the collar (“Don’t let her wear that. She can’t wear that. It’s so crazy”), Allen intervened. “Leave her. She’s a genius. Let’s just leave her alone, let her wear what she wants. If I really hate something, I’ll tell her. Otherwise she can choose for herself.”

So Diane Keaton wore what she wanted to wear

“or, rather, I stole what I wanted to wear from cool-looking women on the streets of New York,” she wrote in her autobiography, *Then Again*. That’s where Annie’s khaki pants, vests, and tie came from them. And the hat, the finishing-touch on the Annie Hall look, came from Aurore Clément, who had showed up on the set of The Godfather: Part II one day wearing a man’s slouchy bolero pulled down low over her forehead. Men’s hats have been one of Diane’s trademarks ever since.

There has been much attributed to Ralph Lauren regarding Diane Keaton’s wardrobe in the film, and to this day, the brand still benefits from the connection with Annie Hall. Indeed, the tie and vest and a few other clothing items, like the shirts and the tuxedo she wears when performing in the nightclub, as well as some of Woody’s clothes came from the designer, and, truth be told, I have always had an affinity for his designs and style, because I believe nobody has perfected the equal-parts-tomboy-confidence-and-feminine-sensibility look quite like Ralph Lauren.

But when it comes to the look of Annie Hall, Ralph Lauren himself gave much of the credit to Diane: “I knew Woody and Diane. They wore my clothes, and Diane used to come to my fashion shows with Woody when no one knew her. Annie’s style was Diane’s style – very eclectic. Oversized jacket and vests, floppy men’s hats, and cowboy boots. Around the same time, I did a women’s show with Frye boots and oversized jackets and the big hats. We shared a sensibility, but she had a style that was all her own. Annie Hall was pure Diane Keaton.”

Diane Keaton concurred: “Annie Hall was a combined effort really. Woody gave me carte blanche. Ruth and I went shopping. We borrowed and bought from Ralph Lauren because I loved what he did. But in the end it was the way I normally dressed, and we didn’t want to change that,” giving special credit to her own main source of inspiration, “all the street-chic women livening up SoHo in the mid-seventies. They were the real costume designers of Annie Hall.” The look of Annie Hall is so unique, personal, tender and effortless that there is no doubt it is Diane’s own vision behind it. A slice of life.

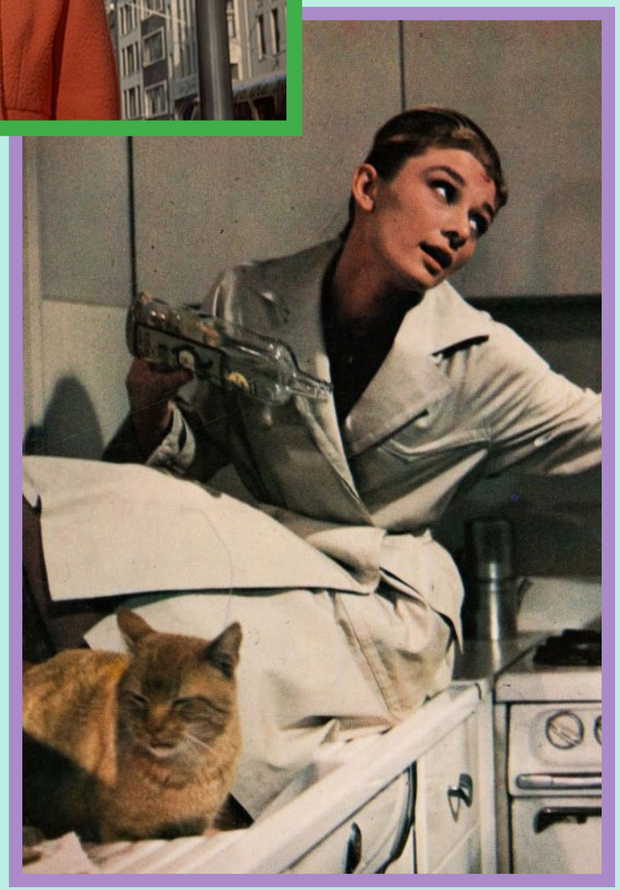
Number

Two

Breakfast at Tiffany's

Holly Golightly gently glides out of a yellow cab, dressed in a slinky black Givenchy dress. Around her neck is a startling stack of pearls. Thick black sunglasses cover her expressive eyes. She sips coffee and nibbles on a Danish, peering at the display window of Tiffany's. In this moment, a sartorial icon is born.

Upon its release in 1961, the Oscar-winning film Breakfast at Tiffany's quickly became a classic, praised particularly for its star (the glamorous, gamine Audrey Hepburn) and her chic, oft-imitated style—guided by the sharp eyes of Hubert de Givenchy and legendary costume designer Edith Head.



I should be a stylish Holly Golightly. Even if that's all I can contribute

— Audrey Hepburn

There are many reasons why the movie holds such a heralded spot in film history, but the one enduring thing is its sense of style. That , coupled with its dazzling star, makes for an irresistable visual feast. She's basically all of us. She's as stylish as she is gullible, as charming as she is lost, and the owner of probably the most classic and totally effortless wardrobe , ever.

Honorable Mention

ALMOST FAMOUS

Thanks largely to the wardrobe, this film transported viewers back into the 1970s with its flared jeans, faded band t-shirts and suede jackets. Such attention to detail was largely down to the fact that costume designer Betsy Heimann (originally trained as a seamstress) designed every single thing in that movie except the blue jeans, which she thrifted from locales as far as Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles. “The entire movie was a labour of love for me and I loved every single person on that movie and every single outfit,” Heimann admits.

Read on for more annecdotes from Betsy, on iconic looks from the film.

“I am very close with Joel Bernstein, the famous rock photographer. He gave me all of the pictures from the 1973 Time Fades Away tour he was on with Neil Young. They were all inspirational – you know, Led Zeppelin on an aeroplane.

We knew that Penny Lane had a coat. There was no picture reference for that at all, I just felt like she was so vulnerable on the inside and so strong on the outside, that this coat was her armour. She could wrap herself up in it and no matter how low or insecure she was feeling, she put on that coat and she became Penny Lane. It was her protection. I immediately felt it had to have a little bit of fur. I actually made that coat out of a rug with the collar and some upholstery fabric that I found and it was inspired by a 1920s opera coat because they were longer in the back than they were at the front.

There was an airline during that time in California called PSA – Pacific Southwest Airlines – and they flew up and down from LA to San Francisco and that was the actual stewardess costume. And my assistant on the film tracked down one of the old PSA flight attendants who still had her stewardess outfit and we had it to look it at and made one for Zooey.”

Number

One

The Royal Tenenbaums

A December 2000 casting advertisement for Wes Anderson's The Royal Tenenbaums in Back Stage magazine specifically called for a "Mexican transvestite prostitute, 30s-50s, with an arresting Diane Arbus look, bad teeth a plus. No experience necessary."

A later advertisement in February 2001 expressly asked for people who could portray "Inuits/Eskimos, tribal natives from Borneo (Thailand), Rastafarians, Chinese, and Japanese, East Village punks (with mohawks), upscale WASPy tennis club-types, men with long hair and sideburns/facial hair (for a 70s sequence), and African-Americans of all ages and types. Also generally seeking people with full current police uniform."

Those background actors who applied were also requested to "bring snapshots of dogs or cats that are available to work with you" to the audition, ensuring to fill out the application only in pencil (not pen).

This should give you a clue as to what kind of world director and cycling suzerain Wes Anderson inhabits. His attention to detail is well documented. He lets the professionals get to work, but Anderson pays conjugal visits long after designs are locked away. The man likes to tinker. "Traditionally, I talk about things with the director, and then I go off and carry out the ideas," production designer David Wasco told Entertainment Design in 2002. "But in Wes' case, even when you've got your actors coming onboard and time is limited, he still would be in the art department every day [...] I'm accustomed to being asked to help create a backdrop, to help tell the story, but this was taken beyond that, into a whole stylized world." The magic lies in the subtleties.

We know where we are. It's the home of the Tenenbaums – a dysfunctional farrago of personalities so definitive, each has his own uniform. For Chas, a real estate magnate, it's an Adidas tracksuit. Champion tennis player and artist Richie lives in a headband and 70s porn star sunglasses. Ninth-grade playwright Margot prefers a Lacoste dress wrapped in a Fendi fur.

In a way, what was done to bring these characters to life strangely echoes the internal struggles they deal with as dislocated, impassioned mortals in Anderson's doll house. There is almost too much information to take in in a single viewing. Too much pink paint. However, watch it again – that confessional scene in the tent with Margot and Richie – and their anxieties play out with a sort of emotional heft despite them hardly conveying any. They sit listening to The Rolling Stones' "She Smiled Sweetly" on vinyl in a canary tent as Richie reveals the bandages on his wrists. "Did you do it because of me?" Margot asks. "Yeah, but it's not your fault," Richie responds. They kiss, but their love remains under wraps.

It's one of many scenes that serves to point out the disappointing realities we all have to face growing up. No, you can't always get what you want. If this film didn't connect with you on a first viewing, it's worth a second look. It's flush with backstory, gorgeously designed and run through with a sardonic, jaded wit.

This was perhaps the film, Anderson's third, no less, on which he cemented his reputation for style. He effectively fused with his quaint aesthetic, unable to shake it off. It's his last writing collaboration with partner and former college roommate Owen Wilson. It trades in unfeeling deadpan surrounded by furniture; it's a dichotomy. Above all, it's a love letter that spools out to reveal essentially everything New York is – beautiful, but with deep-seated issues. And yet, The Royal Tenenbaums is one cinematic love letter that is worth every damn reread. If only to catch that thing you missed.

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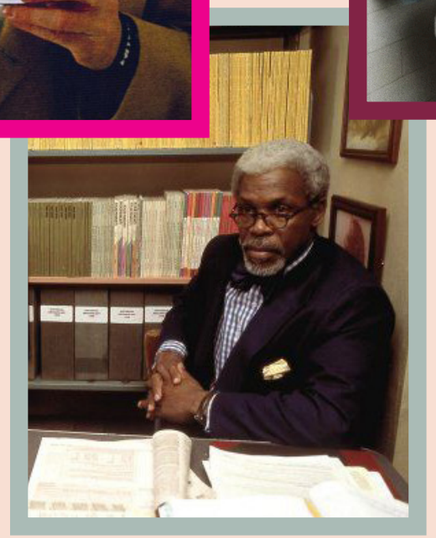
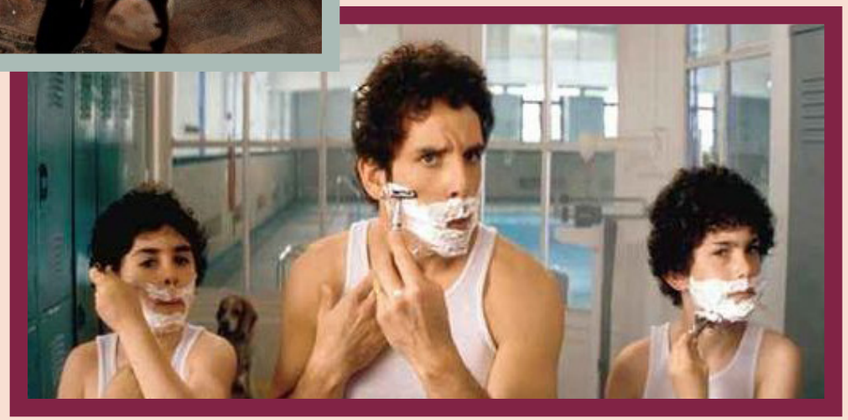


Since The Royal Tenenbaums, I've had other directors say to me, 'I want this to be something that will be worn on Halloween.'

—Karen Patch, Costume Designer

Each character is dressed in the attire that calls back to when they were at their best.

—Wes Anderson, Director



Thank you, I love you.

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