

Spike Lee and Ruth E. Carter

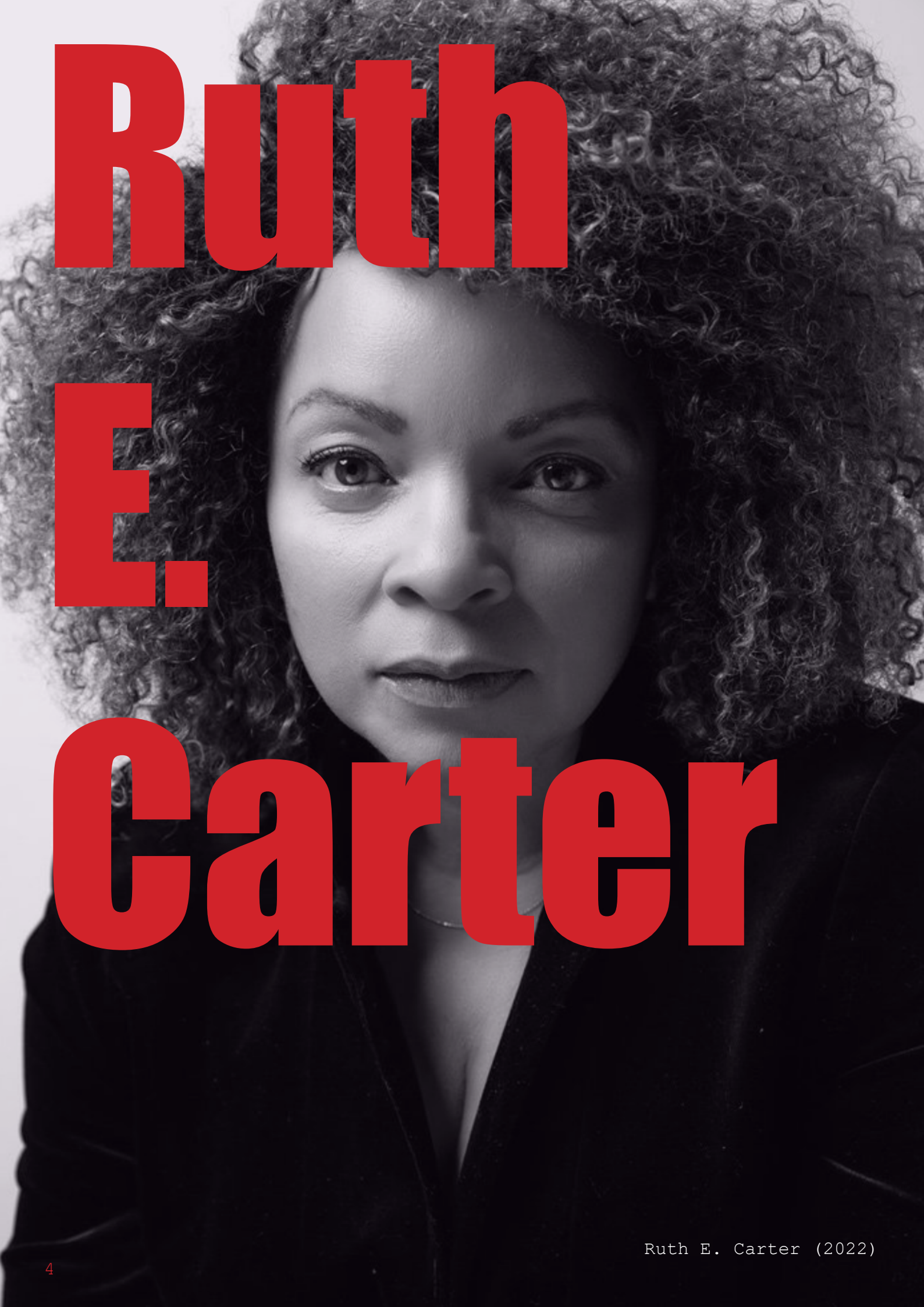


An Analysis on Fashion and Film

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Ruth E. Carter (2022)

Ruth E. Carter, a two-time Oscar-winning costume designer, has led the costume department on various films ranging from *Do The Right Thing* in 1989 to *Black Panther* in 2018.

Carter’s interest in costume design started at a young age growing up in Springfield, Massachusetts with her involvement in theater and acting. Although she attended Hampton University and followed the footsteps of her parents, Carter continued her pursuit of performing arts in college (Carter and Gurira, 2023). When she was denied an acting role in a collegiate play, Carter was allowed to design the costumes instead. With her expertise in understanding scripts and sewing, she quickly became the designated “costume designer on campus” (Abstract: The Art of Design, 2019).

Carter’s start in costume design in the film industry began in the mid-1980s as Spike Lee (a rising director at the time) invited her to one of his screenings of *She’s Gotta Have It*. Their 25-year collaboration soon commenced with *Do The Right Thing*--a movie perfectly encapsulating Black culture and streetwear.

Similar to the other films within her career, Carter has constantly paid homage to the Black community and the African Diaspora to “express the heart and soul of Black people, their culture, their nuances, [her] personal experiences as a Black woman, and the character details [she] found the most interesting” (Carter and Gurira, 2023). She continues to place Black culture at the forefront of her designs and foster opportunities for others through the Black Design Collective, co-founded in 2018 (Lewis, n.d.).

Ruth E. Carter (1982)

Ruth onstage in Clare Booth Luce’s *The Women* at Hampton University



Ruth E. Carter (2019)



Overall, her work has been greatly influential within the film industry and created spaces for Black costume designers to explore the world of storytelling through garments.

Spike Lee



Spike Lee (1991)

Lee sits in front of photographers at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991. He presented his film "Jungle Fever" at the event.

Spike Lee, a five-time Oscar-nominated director, has worked in the film industry for over 30 years and heavily contributed to the history of Black filmography since the late 1970s. Growing up in a vibrant, progressive, and creative household in Atlanta, Georgia produced his interest in the arts and, specifically, film (Lee, 2022).



Lee’s work has always consisted of brutally politically aware language and depictions, starting with his first controversial short film, *The Answer*, in response to *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) in 1980 (Spike Lee, n.d.). By 1986, he released his first official film, *She’s Gotta Have It*, garnering lots of attention with the help of presenting it at the Cannes Film Festival (Abstract: The Art of Design, 2019). The film provided Lee with the chance to make movies such as *Do The Right Thing* (1989), *Malcolm X* (1992), and *Cooklynn* (1994), placing a “critical lens on film history, racism, and American culture” (Lee, 2022).

Thus, through many stylistic choices (i.e. double dollies) and influences like *L’Orgia Del Potere* (1969) and “filmmakers like Rossellini and De Sica”, Lee’s work consistently presents the working class and the truth about the world, propelling him into the types of films he has generated throughout his career (Lee, 2022).

Film

Analysis

Fashion goes beyond impeccable garment construction and tailoring. It is about conveying a story, relaying an important message, and presenting one's identity to the world. "[...] clothes are made to be transported and transported mainly by the body" (Di Summa, 2022). Transforming from one version of self to another is the power of clothing and fashion.

Regarding films, clothing allows characters to demonstrate their growth (or descent) as the story progresses. Similar to the real world, characters in a film may dress according to their feelings, beliefs, and other aspects that represent them as fully-fleshed human beings. "[...] it is about the nature of consciousness and its relation to the values that ultimately make persons agents in the world" (Di Summa, 2022). Without this consciousness and deep understanding of identity, the story could lose its value and eliminate all statements made through the presence of its characters. Therefore, costume design (and fashion in films) can reconstruct a two-dimensional idea into a three-dimensional person, illustrating the personality and mental state of each character at stages of their life within the film.

Ruth E. Carter (1982)

Ruth at Hampton University, playing a saleswoman in Clare Boothe Luce's *The Women*





Do The Right Thing

Do The Right Thing (1989) vividly presents a majority Black neighborhood in Brooklyn during a very hot summer day. Arguments between different racial communities eventually explode into brutally violent dispute with a deadly end.

LOVE HATE

Bill Nunn, *Do The Right Thing* (1989)

Radio Raheem showing his infamous 'Love Hate' rings

The characters within the film are visibly based in human personality with exaggerations to depict the juxtaposition between voices and opinions. "There is so much life and personality here, a truthfulness that bursts out of the narrow conventions of realism and turns into something else" (Scott and Dargis, 2020). The basis of the costume design direction began with understanding the essence of a real Brooklyn neighborhood. African-related elements, gold jewelry, and Nike apparel were key characteristics utilized to bring the film to life.



Ossie Davis, Martin Lawrence, Christa Rivers, Leonard L. Thomas, and Steve White, *Do The Right Thing* (1989)

Characters in conversation



Bill Nunn, *Do The Right Thing* (1989)

Radio Raheem walking in the street with a large stereo

Not to mention, the colors and styling of each character helped to demonstrate "the layers of socioeconomics, strife, [and] cultural expression" (Carter, 2023). People from the older generation showed less vibrancy in color, referring to more "muted tones" whereas younger characters demonstrated an admiration for color and more youthful styling alongside "massive amounts of gold being worn [...], especially [by] Black inner-city kids" (Carter, 2023).

The characters that emulate the split are Da Mayor and Buggin' Out. Da Mayor's worn-out, beige suit not only describe him as a pillar of his generation--dressing up in the name of respectability politics, but it also establishes his characters as one that constantly struggles financially and with alcoholism. The combination of tears and stains on a suit place more emphasis on his need "to present himself as someone of importance" and his inability to be important (Carter and Gurira, 2023).

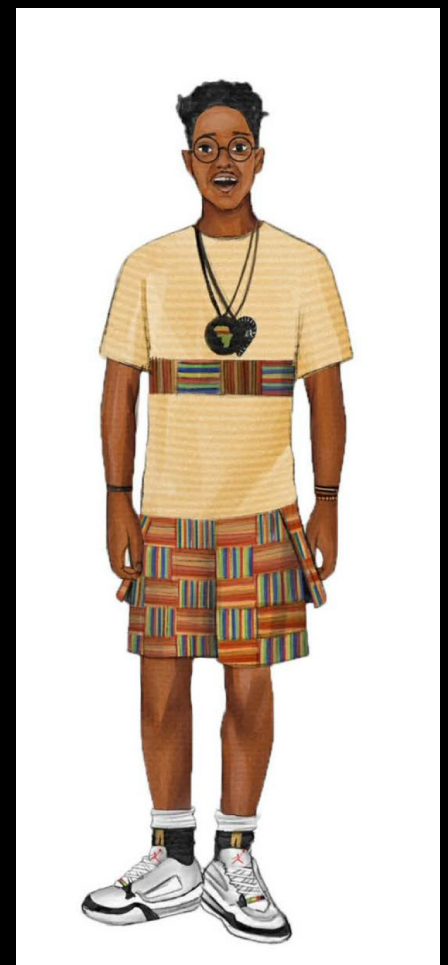


Costume sketch for Da Mayor (1989)



Bill Nunn and
Giancarlo Esposito, *Do The
Right Thing* (1989)
Radio Raheem and Buggin
Out talking

On the other hand, Buggin' Out is "[...] the revolutionary [...] [,] radical boy" on the block (Carter and Gurira, 2023). To accompany his loud voice and strongly political personality, he presents himself in "bright Nigerian Kente cloth [...] [,] cargo shorts [,] and [a] yellow tunic" (Carter and Gurira, 2023). The Kente cloth immediately depicts Buggin' Out as a person who stays true to their culture and stands for what they believe in at all costs, aligning himself with the younger and more expressive generation. The color combinations also demonstrate an entire identity that differs everyone else; there is no need to belong--only an urgency to protest what needs to be changed within the community, making him the instigator of the neighborhood-wide conflict.



Costume sketch for Buggin Out (1989)

From *Malcolm X*, two embroidered kufis for Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X's sometime mentor, and one kufi for an assistant of Muhammad's (1989)

Malcolm X (1992) follows the life of the infamous political and religious leader, Malcolm X as told through the book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley and Malcolm X. The film describes in utter detail Malcolm Little's humble yet racially traumatic beginnings in Omaha, Nebraska in the 20s and 30s to his journey becoming a civil rights activist and avid follower of Islam in the 50s and 60s, ending in his ultimate assassination.

When it comes to developing costumes for a real political figure, research of their life's work and the decades they experienced illustrate the person as a true human being. *Malcolm X* is no different from other figures with notable biopics. Ruth Carter utilized his autobiography as the basis for her understanding of who Malcolm X is, not as an unreachable leader we see him as but as a person who has experienced many stages of life similar to those around him.

"Carter's costumes give insight into Malcolm's emotional and philosophical shifts that accompany his various life stages." (Carter, n.d.) The periods involved the "early forties Roseland Ballroom, late forties Detroit Red, fifties Satan, sixties Malcolm X, [and] sixties El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz" (Carter and Gurira, 2023). X's most recognizable fashion eras involved his zoot suit period in 40s Harlem and his iconic, classic suit period in the 60s.

Malcolm X

Zoot suits include “full, balloon-like pleated trousers that [are] pegged and a jacket with exaggerated, padded shoulders [--] [...] completed with a porkpie hat or a fedora, a long watch chain, thin belt, and matching shoes” (Carter, n.d.). As the United States (alongside the entire world) was experiencing World War II, many rationing laws were put in place to reserve resources for the military, including fabrics such as wool (Onion, 2023). “[...] young men in the Black, Mexican American, and other minority communities” wore the ostentatious suits mainly in Los Angeles and New York (Onion, 2023).



Reference image for zoot suit research (1930-40s)



sketch for Malcolm X and Shorty (1992)



Denzel Washington and Spike Lee, *Malcolm X* (1992)
Malcolm X and Shorty walking in New York

Their White counterparts viewed the disregard of such regulations on fabrics as unpatriotic and added the notion to the list of ‘reasoning’ behind their discrimination towards minorities. Black young men, however, perhaps wore the suits as a form of expression and to present themselves as the best looking in a sea of boringness. Especially considering Malcolm X’s experience with the Ku Klux Klan at a young age, his rebellion against the country and the White man, as a whole, aligns with the state of physical and mental segregation between White people and minorities. Lastly, the styling and colors of the zoot suits worn in the film highlight his playfulness and pure interest in presenting his identity for all to see.



sketch for *Malcolm X* (1992)

Towards the end of his life, Malcolm X presented himself among the strict guidelines of leadership as a follower of Islam and an activist for civil rights. This transition from street hustler to political and religious leader began with his experience in prison. The young man who had no understanding of the world around him, especially concerning the full scope of racial segregation and oppression, established his formal education in the Nation of Islam and Black history. This dramatic shift in character is illustrated through the use of classic tailoring and suits. "[...] black, white, and grey notes [are used] for his clean, strict, and unwavering devotion to the nation of Islam" (Carter, n.d.).

Denzel Washington, *Malcolm X* (1992)
Malcolm X giving a speech



Especially considering the tradition of gender roles and heavily gender-labeled clothing, X's suits are a full representation of his loyalty and respect for something beyond himself. He became a more selfless human being who strived for the rights of others, standing prominently in front of injustice with an army of supporters. The suit, itself, can also be seen as a metaphor for armor; the cleanliness and geometric shapes that entail present Malcolm X's strength and power as well as traditional masculinity, leading to the creation of his final form and the person we remember him as today.



Summer of Sam

Summer of Sam (1999) is a retelling of the Son of Sam murders that occurred in the summer of 1977 in New York City. The film depicts a south Bronx neighborhood of mainly Italian-American characters that seek to find the killer in a sea of paranoia while highlighting how two friends, Vinny and Richie, grow apart in their differences.

Another aspect of costume design is to illustrate the mental state of a character and how their personality changes with their mentality. Considering the movie revolves around serial murder in a close-knit neighborhood, Ruth Carter establishes the characters as simple people living a good life at the beginning of the film, only to demonstrate their downfalls and change in character as the movie progresses. Two clear examples of this major shift are within Vinny and Richie.

John Leguizamo, Andrien Brody, Ken Garito, Al Palagonia, and Michael Rispoli, *Summer of Sam* (1999)

Characters hanging out by the Dead End



John Leguizamo, *Summer of Sam* (1999)
Vinny at the hair salon

John Leguizamo, *Summer of Sam* (1999)
Vinny smoking



John Leguizamo, *Summer of Sam* (1999)
Vinny looking at the newspaper

Vinny is a clear representation of his community. The film begins with him and his wife dancing in a disco club, presenting their relationship as a role model for others as they ooze with intimacy and infatuation. Vinny's suit attire is representative of the disco era involving large lapels on a slim-fitted jacket and matching pants. However, he is also "a serial adulterer trying to save his marriage with Dionna", displaying an underlying issue of his personality. Although his attire typically stays within the 70s period guidelines (slim and bell-bottom pants alongside tank tops and deep-v silky button-downs with gold cross chains), the difference lies in the presentation of the combination (Little White Lies, 2019).

Vinny presents himself as put-together, never faltering or wavering in his self-expression as a flirtatious man, husband, and provider. He appears to have all facets of his personality aligned, even when he actively cheats on his wife with his boss and wife's cousin, Vinny's mentality does not crack until he is close to being one of the Son of Sam's victims and views the dead bodies in a crime scene. "As the characters begin to mirror the aggressive patterns of the killer at large, they follow the lines of their own bias" (Little White Lies, 2019). He becomes more disheveled as time passes and as the number of victims increases. He wears fewer suits as he feels no longer safe to go out with his wife in fear of being murdered. How he is dressed also changes; more tank tops are introduced throughout as the heat intensifies both physically and as his marriage begins to deteriorate alongside the murders. The use of the gold cross necklace, albeit stereotypical of Italian-American costume, also demonstrates the juxtaposition of his seemingly 'normal' persona and the darkness looming within his character as he becomes more and more paranoid.

John Leguizamo, Mira Sorvino, and extras, *Summer of Sam* (1999)

Vinny and Dionna on the couch at a party



On the other hand, Richie is Vinny's childhood friend who appears to have reinvented himself and dived into the British, punk aesthetic--straying away from his Italian, Catholic roots in search of something different than everyone else. His first introduction with Vinny and his other friends at the Dead End encapsulates his humble beginnings in this new persona. He becomes this simple caricature of British punk by wearing a Union Jack Flag fitted t-shirt and skinny black jeans with silver jewelry, slim black sunglasses, and spiky hair. This is his entry into the aesthetic without any true personality added to depict a three-dimensional character. Even the guys see it as a joke and fail to take his transformation seriously. Nevertheless, as the movie progresses, the styling of the punk outfits becomes more nuanced and dark as he fully ascends into the aesthetic and as Vinny and his friends suspect him of being the Son of Sam killer.

Jennifer Esposito and Adrien Brody, *Summer of Sam* (1999)

Ruby putting a necklace on Richie's neck



John Leguizamo and Adrien Brody, *Summer of Sam* (1999)

Richie and Vinny sitting on the edge of a car



Adrien Brody, *Summer of Sam* (1999)

Richie singing during his band performance



One look in particular shows Richie wearing his typical skinny jeans with silver jewelry and spiky hair; yet, he wears a crisp white t-shirt with a target on the front. Although his outfits from his performances in his punk band with his girlfriend, Ruby (another outcast), illustrate a much darker and rougher representation of the grunge punk scene full of raw, explicit filth, Richie's look with the target stands out even more. The main color of white, alone, alludes to his actual innocence and disregard for the Son of Sam murders while the target literally highlights how some men of the neighborhood view him as the murderer and ultimate mark for revenge. When "the environment around you [...] [succumbs] to growing paranoia" and utilizes their biases to find the answers to their fears, the choice in making a deviant-- aka Richie--the target and reasoning behind all the murders due to his behavior (not only as a punk but as a secret adult male performer and sex worker) is the unfortunate result of using fear as the basis of one's evidence against the behavior. Thus, the ending of the movie with Richie fully embracing his punk and sexual lifestyle quickly conflicts with Vinny's dissent into believing his friend is a killer, leading Vinny and his goons to attack him--failing to see the truth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, costume design and film coincide to transport flat characters from a script into three-dimensional human beings with thoughts, feelings, and motivations. For Ruth Carter, “[...] costumes are supporting a greater story. The story of the times. The story of the person. And [she likes] to feel that they have a breath to them” (Abstract: The Art of Design, 2019). There is no difference between developing a film about a real person or a character; the story holds significant importance and bears the weight of needing assistance through costume and fashion. Without this support, the humanity of the character ceases to exist. Therefore, film and fashion must always align to offer the ultimate story.

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