

Fashion and Cinematic Menswear: A Conversation between an Anthropologist and a Costume Designer

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Ornella K. Pistilli Clothes are the fabric of history, the texture of time. And this time, right now, belongs to Armani. This is the opening of a Time Magazine article published in 1982: “Giorgio Armani defines the new shape of style. [...] The unstructured jacket. An easeful elegance without stricture. Tailoring of a kind thought possible only when done by hand. The layering of fabrics by pattern, texture, and colour so that clothing takes on for a second the quiet shimmer of a 17th century Japanese print. Surprising combinations of garments — leather pants as part of a suit, a long jacket over foreshortened slacks, a vest worn over a coat — that scramble clichés and conventions into a new and effortless redefinition of style. A functional celebration of fabric. A reshaping of traditional geometry with witty contours, sudden symmetries, and startling vectors. A new sort of freedom in clothes. An ease, the Armani ease. [...] Armani has made a huge splash reshaping and restructuring the way people dress — not only the people who wear Armani designs but those who wear the myriad clothes influenced by him and those whose very ideas about clothing are colored, in some cases unconsciously, by the Armani attitude.”¹

These lines highlight the interplay between fashion and broader social and cultural processes. With the political and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s that opposed and challenged bourgeois and traditional values, the classic suit for men — consisting of a jacket, a tie and often a waistcoat — had lost its importance in menswear. New freedom in dressing was craved, the need for change was radical. Evoked by need, imagined by desire, designed by project: Armani’s new tailoring asserted himself, rewriting the rules of tradition while remaining elegant.

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1. Jay Cordero, “Giorgio Armani: Suiting Up For Easy Street,” *Time Magazine*, April 05, 1982.

Contemporary with the Time Magazine article, in a book published by Franco Maria Ricci, the Italian art historian, critic, and academic Arturo Carlo Quintavalle² writes about Giorgio Armani's design philosophy. According to Quintavalle, Armani's approach to design diverges from conventional norms and responds to a different way of conceiving people, individuals' aspect, but above all, to a semi-otic revolution. Rather than merely integrating male and female fashion traditions, Armani's vision acknowledges the narrative functions of both genders within society. He recognizes that adhering to rigid clothing norms is incompatible with the dynamic reality portrayed in TV series, films, and everyday life. Quintavalle's assertions underline the close alignment of Armani's work with the prevailing context and its contemporaneity. Armani adeptly blends generational concepts and transcends traditional gender boundaries, offering a new tailoring that incorporates with an authentic anthropological depth the social and cultural transformation of the Sixty-eight era.

Isabelle Caillaud When discussing contemporary men's fashion in cinema, it is impossible to overlook the ground-breaking influence of Giorgio Armani. In 1980, Armani designed the costumes for the film *American Gigolo*, directed by Paul Schrader, a fundamental moment that documented the designer's fresh perspective on global men's fashion. Central to this transformation was the introduction of the unstructured suit, which was showcased in all its intricate details. Armani's innovative approach emphasized comfort, material selection, colour palettes, and the interplay of opacity and sheen in the new male wardrobe. These elements became integral co-stars in *American Gigolo*. The film marked a turning point, foreshadowing the genderless aesthetic prevalent today. Notably, *American Gigolo* redefined the male body by boldly presenting frontal nudity (courtesy of actor Richard Gere) in an art-house film. Amidst the hedonistic aesthetics of the era, there also emerged a liberation from past formalities, encapsulated by what we now term "casual chic." Armani's legacy remains inseparable from discussions of contemporary men's attire. As costume designers, we continue to dress male characters in films and series that capture diverse aspects of modern life. Even after more than four decades since the film's release, Armani's impact endures — a revolution that reshaped paradigms and embodies a nonchalant, effortlessly "cool" masculinity.

The Armani case is pivotal in understanding the global audio-visual pop culture. This cultural phenomenon has evolved primarily through two significant milestones: the emergence of MTV in the 1980s and the ongoing impact of social media. As a professional in the film industry, I was already passionate about fashion and music during that era, and the television series *Miami Vice*³ played a crucial role. It seamlessly combined all the creative stimuli and visually significant references of the time, creating a unique blend. In *Miami Vice*, we see the convergence of Giorgio Armani's fashion, chart-topping music hits, video clip editing reminiscent of MTV, and the dazzling, amber-hued cityscape of Miami — resembling a high-fashion magazine set. Beyond music, Miami itself emerged as an international protagonist, enriching the project's aesthetics with its Latin influences. This complex and highly innovative endeavour introduced a new masculine look, characterized by the fusion of Armani's elegance with the quintessential casual and iconic element of American attire: the T-shirt. And it could only be the American costume designers who made this synthesis.

The characters' wardrobes were iconic. Lead characters Detective Sonny Crockett (played by Don Johnson) and Detective Ricardo Tubbs (played by Philip Michael Thomas) epitomized the fashion trends of the era. While the character of Tubbs will never forsake double-breasted jackets, also presented as separates, the most exciting meeting ground and reinterpretation is embodied in the invention of the stage costume for the detective character Crockett. The costume designers create an extraordinary wardrobe comprised of pastel-colored T-shirts, lending a Caribbean touch, and Armani jackets, meticulously worn open by Johnson over beltless trousers. Sonny Crockett's shoulder holster thus becomes an accessory whose special design, crafted for scene requirements, would later become highly sought after by real-life police officers, eventually adopting the name of the series itself. It is precisely these nuances that underscore the effectiveness of the costume designers' work on this project. Armani jackets, T-shirts,

2. Carlo Arturo Quintavalle, "Il racconto di Giorgio Armani," in *Armani* (Milano: Franco Maria Ricci, 1982).

3. *Miami Vice* is an American television series that aired from 1984 to 1989. Created by Anthony Yerkovich and produced by Michael Mann.

and, in some cases, jeans seamlessly blend Italian masculine elegance — enjoying extraordinary success in the United States at that time — with American casualwear.

The work of costume designers thrives on close collaboration among various stakeholders, primarily the director and actors. The success of a look, an image associated with a character, invariably results from the harmonious interplay between these figures and the screenplay, seamlessly integrated into its lighting and set design. What truly elevates this series is the reciprocal influence between the costume designers' efforts and the inspiration Armani himself drew from it — an amalgamation of suits and T-shirts, as well as separates and T-shirts — now deeply ingrained in the collective imagination of contemporary men's attire worldwide, spanning different generations.

Miami Vice is the first remarkable case of overtly fashion-oriented characterization in cinematic costume design for male characters. What has always intrigued me when analysing the work of my colleagues is the fact that it pertains to a police series, for which, previously, daring stylistic choices would not have been feasible — choices so audacious, so glam. It is quite evident, for instance, how impractical it would be to chase criminals while wearing loafers, or white linen jackets and trousers with dark sunglasses during nocturnal stakeouts. As the scholar Sara Martin asserts in her essay "L'Abito Necessario",⁴ the approach of us costume designers is always filtered through the imperative of rendering the work credible. The attire serves as a conduit to facilitate the audience's understanding of the character — a *sine qua non* for eliciting affection from the public. As a costume designer and a fervent fashion enthusiast, I perceive this as a challenge, at times nearly impossible, especially when it comes to the male cast: representing everyday life by incorporating contemporary fashion elements into that specific moment. In summary, one could synthesize that the contemporary fashion for cinematic costumes is akin to the Armani of 'American Gigolo, whereas in its more spontaneous and informal incarnation, it aligns with the *Miami Vice* aesthetic embodied by Detective Sonny Crockett. The virtuous fusion between the world of fashion and that of cinema — and then of series — have elevated those styles to essential icons, offering us "only" the possibility of variations, but which do not diminish their essential substance.

In my career, I have often found myself researching on those rare occasions when the male character of reference was suitable, a breakthrough, a futuristic evolution of Armani style. Today, I believe that this evolution of informal elegance is embodied in the work of Alessandro Sartori for Zegna. However, it has not yet been firmly established in the collective imagination nor celebrated in a media event that would make it more accessible and, therefore, reproducible. What is needed is the convergence of a character in an epochal film or, more easily, in a series, with the concept of a costume designer.

Ornella K. Pistilli In contemporary cinema, the sprawl of social media has significantly impacted costume design. Characters now draw inspiration from fashion trends observed on social platforms, leading to a shift in aesthetics and character portrayal. This intersection of online influence and storytelling has transformed the way costumes are conceptualized and executed, especially in projects produced directly by online platforms. The challenge lies in striking a balance between character development and staying ahead of fashion trends, resulting in more complex costume choices than those set in historical contexts.

Isabelle Caillaud The social media, particularly Instagram, coupled with the radical shift in audio-visual distribution channels — namely, the advent of online platforms — has ushered in a crucial transformation in the perception of cinematic costume. It is on this new terrain that aesthetic influences from fashion observed on social media intersect and undergo reinterpretation alongside the narrative and depth requirements inherent in screenwriting. These dynamics compel artists to immerse themselves ever more deeply in reality, occasionally redefining the director's role in favour of a more contemporarily informed exploration of dominant visual imaginaries and a profound connection with the global market. Fashion, in this context, increasingly serves as an inspirational tool, drawing upon its rich heritage of communication and guiding costume designers toward a paradigm shift in their approach. The convention of creating characters with a timeless or unremarkable aesthetic — driven by the need for audience identification but also by the desire to avoid becoming passé shortly after a film's release — is particularly challenged in projects directly produced by online platforms, especially within series. To

4. Sara Martin, *L'abito necessario. Fili, trame e costumi nel cinema e nella televisione* (Parma: Edizioni Diabasis, 2022).

strike the right balance between character creation and their evolution throughout the narrative, costume designers now strive to transcend the present moment, seeking an indefinite, potentially distant horizon. They meticulously curate individual pieces, each with its own backstory, and combine them in ways that evoke familiarity while defying predictability in their pairings. In essence, this approach anticipates fashion trends through an emotional styling lens, resulting in contemporary projects that pose even greater complexities than those set in historical contexts.

Ornella K. Pistilli The television series *Miami Vice* is more than just a cop show — it is a cultural phenomenon that has defined an era and continues to resonate with audiences till today. It has influenced fashion, music, and even the way people perceived the city of Miami. The show's success led to a surge in demand for pastel-coloured clothing, boat shoes, and other Miami-inspired fashion trends. For the Spring/Summer 2018 Collection of Cerruti 1881, fashion designer Jason Basmajian took inspiration from the tropical look designed by the Italian entrepreneur and fashion designer Nino Cerruti in 1984 for the series. The collection blends chic and lightness, softening the boundaries between sportswear and tailoring.

Isabelle Caillaud *Miami Vice* has left an indelible mark on the annals of costume design in the contemporary milieu. Its significance lies in the seamless fusion of diverse external elements: the geographical context of Miami, atmospheric nuances through lighting, musical accompaniment from MTV, the creation of a distinct “Latin” criminal aesthetic, and the astute differentiation between the two undercover detectives. These elements were deftly interwoven with Armani's fashion sensibilities, further deconstructing and redefining his sartorial proposition. This innovative endeavour, which I shall define as costume-styling, represents the pinnacle of approach for serial projects of this nature. Notably, this achievement was no happenstance; it emerged from the concerted efforts of American costume designers. Jodie Lynn Tillen, the visionary behind the series' inception, disrupted Armani's legacy with an infusion of American casual wear heritage. Equally decisive was the contribution of Italian costume designer Milena Canonero. The legacy of *Miami Vice* endures as a testament to their creative brilliance and collaborative spirit.

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