Thierry Mugler
and the Reinvention of the Little Black Dress

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Abstract

In Adrian Lyne’s *Indecent Proposal*, we find one of the most iconic little black dresses in the history of film. Designed by Thierry Mugler, the cutout black dress was a sudden hit when the film debuted. The characterization of an outfit, particularly of a black gown, is not a novelty, but a reinvention. One can easily spot the similarity between the aforementioned dress and Hubert de Givenchy’s gown from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. It is not only the resemblance that exists between the two, but also the context in which the main characters wear them. The audience will notice that the dresses do not make much of an appearance, perhaps for a scene or two, but it is enough for the characters to be transformed and give the dresses personalities of their own. The purpose of this report is not only to contrast the usage of these two gowns in their respective films, but also to locate the influences they later had in fashion. To this day, we still see remnants of the cutout front from Thierry Mugler’s dress and many modern-day designers continuing to borrow the idea.

Introduction

*Indecent Proposal* is a drama film directed by Adrian Lyne, starring actors Demi Moore, Woody Harrelson and Robert Redford. It is based off a novel of the same name written by Jack Engelhard, first published in 1988. The movie follows a couple of newlyweds, Diana and David Murphy, who struggle financially during the recession and are forced to make a decision that will affect them for the rest of their lives. When the couple goes to Las Vegas to try to make some money at the casinos, the young and attractive Diana encounters billionaire John Gage while trying on the famous Thierry Mugler dress. He offers to buy her the dress, yet she refuses and goes back to her husband. Moments later, John is playing a high stakes poker game, sees Diana and asks her to be his lucky charm. With some encouragement from her husband and the public, she accepts. John later asks the couple if they would take one million dollars in exchange for a night with Diana. Unsure at first, David and Diana discuss the proposal, and finally agree that they both really need the money to escape their financial ruin. The black dress in this film is almost a character in itself because it arms Diana Murphy with a weapon of seduction that converts her from a young girl into an elegant woman. She is transformed the moment she puts on the dress. The use of a black gown as a character in a movie is not an innovation. In fact, one can argue
that this is the same strategy used in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* with Givenchy’s famous little black dress (LBD). Both dresses have a simplicity that makes them a sensation amongst the public and, later, legends in the world of fashion.

**Review of Literature**

This investigation began by isolating the main element in the film, which was the black dress. Searching for a historic reference to fashion with this dress in mind was difficult at first, as it was not clear which direction to take. There was the possibility of making this report about the current influences that this dress had on present fashion. This could have been a viable option due to the fact that the shape of this gown is still the muse for many designers’ work. Alternatively, this could have been a historical piece of the little black dress and a contrast to previous dresses of the kind. The most iconic little black dress by far is the Givenchy dress seen in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, so it was imperative that this was the chosen contrast element in the report. By uncovering a starting point, the investigation began by researching how the little black dress began and how Coco Chanel was the pioneer behind the trend. The next step was to find evidence of how the Thierry Mugler dress still had influence in today’s black dresses. This evidence was taken from searching several stores and magazines in which celebrities are seen wearing variations of the design.

This is a unique study in the sense that it contrasts two classic black dresses used in two different eras. Furthermore, these two dresses were used in the exact same way for the two films and this report highlights the fact that the black dress is an element in costume and fashion that will never die. This report is important because it is a historical research of two dresses used in similar fashion and how they elevate the characters to become icons. The years may pass and the movies may differ, but the little black dress as the most versatile element in fashion is something that will certainly never change.

**Data Collection**

The little black dress was created in 1926 by no other than Coco Chanel. The color black used to be associated with mourning and it was not until after Chanel began to wear her below-the-knee creation that black started to be associated with an item that could be worn with anything (Fiori). “When a woman puts on a black dress, the world assumes she’s sophisticated, sexual, and knowing” (McDonell). The original design was simple enough that it could be styled with a wide range of accessories. This was the first step into creating something that would later save women from the question, “Is this okay for the occasion?”

The LBD craze took off after the Blake Edward’s film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* in which the main character, Holly Golightly, wears a Hubert Givenchy creation. The dress is a modest creation that harnesses elegance and the capacity to be worn with jewelry and
multiple accessories (see fig. 1). What appeared to be humble was actually a physics project in itself, as lead weights were used in order to make it “fall” the appropriate way (English). What separated this gown from any regular black dress was its back. The dress has a piece of fabric that connects in a C-shape, and this is the detail that makes the dress stand out from any regular sheath dress. The Thierry Mugler dress is similar in this way because what makes it stand out is the cutout front (see fig. 2 and fig. 3). Take these two elements out and we are left with unexceptional black pieces of fabric.

The two dresses are similar, but their purposes vary. On one hand, the Givenchy dress attempts to portray a sense of elegance and sophistication, whereas the Mugler depicts sensuality and allure (English). Mugler’s designs are known for their sensuality and a “bondage-like” style that could be described as futuristic and geometric. Despite the brevity of their scenes, both dresses caused a stir. As a matter of fact, the Hepburn dress auctioned for £500,000, while the Mugler was used as inspiration for many designers (Ings-Chambers). After Indecent Proposal debuted, many people wanted a look-a-like, which left an open window for designers such as Nicole Miller, Roberta Manufacturing, Laundry, and Hoss Intropia (Gendel) (see fig. 4 and fig. 5).

The importance of the black dress in fashion cannot be underestimated because, in plain words, it is a safe haven (Ings-Chambers). It is the one garment that will save women from faux pas and it is an item that keeps on giving with its versatility. Its spotlight shone with Breakfast at Tiffany’s and then another variation was shown in Indecent Proposal. The Mugler dress had such allure with its bondage style that celebrities such as Madonna and Kim Kardashian were seen wearing variations. What is important about this dress is that no one truly expected it from this film based on its premise. It surprised the audience with a new take on the little black dress.

The costume in Indecent Proposal was contemporary. The clothes worn by Diana Murphy swing back and forth between tasteful and nightmarish. The audience understands that she is close to financial ruin and therefore her clothes will not be the most glamorous, but some of the outfits she wears with her husband are simply unpleasant. This is perfect in a sense because when she puts on the Mugler, everyone can see the difference that a little couture can make. So the dress serves as a tool of transformation from an edge-of-ruin wife to a million-dollar girl.

**Conclusion**

Thierry Mugler was not the first designer to use a little black dress in film as a tool of transformation. Hubert Givenchy was also not the pioneer in the black dress itself but thanks to him, it has become one of the most utilized items in women’s wardrobes. A security blanket for any occasion. This investigation confirms that the little black dress is a trend that has matured into a style and a staple in the world of fashion. No matter the occasion, one can never go wrong with a little black dress.
Figure 1. Holly Golightly in the opening scene of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Courtesy of Paramount Pictures. Screen capture by Eugenia Chalbaud Santeliz, July 31st 2015. All rights reserved.

Figure 2. Diana Murphy wearing the Thierry Mugler dress in *Indecent Proposal*. Courtesy of Paramount Pictures. Screen capture by Eugenia Chalbaud Santeliz, July 31st 2015. All rights reserved.
Figure 3. Thierry Mugler dress seen from the front in *Indecent Proposal*. Courtesy of Paramount Pictures. Screen capture by Eugenia Chalbaud Santeliz, July 31st 2015. All rights reserved.

Figure 4. Laundry by Shelli Segal dress worn by author on July 18th 2015. Photo courtesy of Thais Santeliz de Chalbaud. All rights reserved.

Figure 5. Hoss Intropia dress worn by author on July 18th 2015. Photo courtesy of Thais Santeliz de Chalbaud. All rights reserved.
Works Cited


Ings-Chambers, E. (2006, Dec 09). “That old black magic as the famous frock worn by Audrey Hepburn in ‘breakfast at tiffany’s’ is sold for almost pounds 500,000 at auction, Edwina ings-chambers explains why the little black dress will never go out of fashion.” *Financial Times* Retrieved from