Impact of Film on Fashion:
Mia Wallace in *Pulp Fiction*

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**Abstract:**

The character of Mia Wallace, portrayed by Uma Thurman, in Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* has had an undeniable impact on fashion. Throughout the film she wears a pair of black cropped pants and a white button down shirt that have become staples of the American women’s wardrobe. Her smoky eyes, dark lips, and vampy nails also changed the landscape of the cosmetic industry. In this paper I will examine how the character of Mia Wallace altered the fashion trends of the 1990s and how popular it remains today.

**Introduction**

*Pulp Fiction*, released in 1994, is a dark comedy, crime film written and directed by Quentin Tarantino. Like the rest of his films, *Pulp Fiction* exists in a highly stylized world, crafted by Tarantino, and follows a nonlinear story structure that combines violence with humor. Starring John Travolta, Samuel L. Jackson, Uma Thurman, Harvey Keitel, and Bruce Willis, the film was a critical and commercial success, receiving nominations from the Oscars, Academy Awards, and Cannes Film Festival. Despite its small budget of $8.5 million it made $213 million at the box office, proving to Hollywood studios that independent films could produce large profits (IMDB). In 2013 it was selected to be preserved in the Library of Congress by the United States National Film Registry for being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant” (National Film Registry). Named in reference to the pulp magazines that revolutionized mass marketing in the publishing industry, it comes as little surprise that *Pulp Fiction* had, and continues to have, a major effect on mass-market fashion.
Figure 1: Opening credits of *Pulp Fiction* acknowledging the reason for its title. Screenshot, *Pulp Fiction* (Motion Picture). (1994). Miramax Films.

**Mia Wallace**

The film’s major influence on the fashion world comes in the form of Uma Thurman, as the bored, drug addicted Mia Wallace, wife of mob boss Marsellus Wallace (Ving Rhames). Her look is decidedly minimalist with a short black bob, white button-down shirt, and cropped black pants. The iconic outfit has been recreated by countless designers during the past 20 years and remains a classic look. The other major influence Mia Wallace had was on makeup and nail polish. Her dark lipstick became a major fashion trend, with makeup brand Urban Decay releasing a collection in 2014, allowing fans to recreate her look. The largest trend that Mia Wallace started was dark vampy red nails. Chanel’s “Vamp” nail polish flew off the shelves and still remains a color that other nail polish companies aim to emulate.
The desire for women to imitate Mia Wallace’s aesthetic caused a sharp shift in trends in the mid 1990s. In the early years of most decades, fashion trends usually remain similar to those of the previous decade, and for the 1990s that meant much of the elaborate and flashy trends of the 1980s were still in style. The over-the-top looks soon gave way to the anti-fashion grunge movement, popularized by bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam and the short lived TV show *My So Called Life*. Grunge was heavy on layers, rips and tears, and flannel. While the grunge look was more toned down than loud styles of the 1980s, it peaked in 1994, coinciding with the release of *Pulp Fiction* and the shift to a more uncluttered approach to fashion.
The Look

Despite being iconic, Mia Wallace’s main outfit in the film is decidedly basic. She wears a simple white button-down shirt and black pants for most of her appearance on screen. This incredibly simple look shifted the trends of an entire decade. The concept of Mia Wallace’s look was twofold. Tarantino wanted Mia’s look to be the female version of the tailored black suits popularized in his first film Reservoir Dogs, and he wanted her to resemble a silent film star, which is why she bears a strong resemblance to Louise Brooks. Costume designer Betsy Heimann understood this vision and was able to bring the dualities of the femme fatale and more masculine style together. As put by Heimann, “People want to emulate characters they find appealing. If they find Uma Thurman’s character in Pulp Fiction intriguing they want to look like her” (Harman). Heimann’s understanding of how film can impact mass fashion is essential to how iconic Mia Wallace’s look has become.


Mia Wallace’s outfit began with a pair of tailored black trousers; however, because Thurman is 6 feet tall, every pair of pants she tried on was just a little too short. Heimann decided to just go with it and chopped off an extra two inches, creating a pair of cropped black trousers. Audrey Hepburn had originally made cropped pants popular in the 1950s.
The black-cropped cigarette pants she wore in *Funny Face* (1957) became a major fashion trend, making it not only acceptable for women to wear pants, but chic. However, they had fallen out of style in recent decades. Heimann’s decision to cut off the bottom of the pants made them Mia Wallace’s pants, they weren’t something that was out in the mass market or on the runways, but it did send women to the store in search of cropped trousers (Harman).

The other component of her outfit is the simple white dress shirt. The idea was to take the standard men’s button down, but make it more feminine and add sex appeal. As the boss’s wife, Mia Wallace is supposed to be unattainable, but still seductive. Heimann feminized the shirt by making a larger collar, longer cuffs, bringing in the waist and allowing a little cleavage to peak out. On the white button down, Heimann has stated, “People said, ‘Wow, I want that.’ I made all her clothes, but every designer in the world has claimed credit for her white blouse, because they knocked it off” (Landis).

**Figures 6 and 7:** A close up of Mia Wallace’s shirt, you can see the ruching on the side and fitted waist. Screenshot, *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Miramax Films.

**Mia Wallace’s Impact on Fashion**

This feminization of men’s dress had a huge impact on the workingwomen of the 1990s wardrobe. In the previous decade there was a surge of women entering the work field. In
an effort to be taken seriously by their male colleagues, women began wearing masculine style suits and large shoulder pads. Mia Wallace’s look provided a template for women to look professional while embracing their femininity. This idea that a women can still look like a women and be taken seriously in the workplace has continued to hold and evolve in the present day.

By the mid-90s, designers like Calvin Klein, Donna Karen, and Prada began crafting sleek suits with simple structure in colors like black, white, and gray. Their collections reflect the idea that a woman can wear a suit to convey power and femininity simultaneously. Mia Wallace’s look also embraces minimalism, which helped designers like Jil Sander and Helmut Lang bring this style back into the mainstream fashion conscious.

![Figure 8: “Fashion: The Best & Worst Looks of the ’90s” article in January 1996 Vogue magazine. Screenshot Vogue Archives.](image)

This effect has been seen on the runways as recently as Spring 2015. From Marc Jacobs sending each model down the runway with a short black bob to black trousers at Tom
Ford and white dress shirts at Jil Sander, the Mia Wallace look has become a part of our cultural zeitgeist (Burke).

![Images of fashion models wearing white blouse and black trousers]


**Mia Wallace’s Impact on Cosmetics**

In addition to her impact on the fashion world, Mia Wallace started a beauty revolution. Her light smoky eyes, dark lips, and vampy nails have become a beauty staple for women. Because her nails are often on display in close up shots of her smoking a cigarette, the decision for Mia Wallace to wear Chanel’s “Vamp” nail polish helps convey her as a dangerous femme fatale.
“Vamp” was developed in 1994 when Karl Lagerfeld wanted a dark nail polish that would show up in black and white photographs for his 1995 Spring/Summer collection. Chanel’s director of makeup creation didn’t have such a color so he layered black marker ink and a clear topcoat over a red polish to create it. Conventional cosmetic companies and consumers traditionally rejected dark polish, but its use in Pulp Fiction helped usher it into the mainstream. Chanel ran with this and made two similar shades of the polish, the traditional “Vamp” and “Metallic Vamp,” as well as a matching lipstick. “Vamp” flew off shelves, with nationwide shortages taking place for months after it was first introduced to the market (Strauss).
The widespread trend of Chanel’s “Vamp” made wearing nearly any color acceptable and laid the groundwork for edgier cosmetic lines to form. One such brand was Urban Decay, founded in 1996. Known for experimental colors and highly pigmented products, they released a limited edition collection inspired by Mia Wallace on the films twentieth anniversary in October 2014. The collection contains an eye shadow palette, lipstick and liner, and nail polish that are near perfect matches for the colors Mia wears in the film. The eye shadow palette comes inscribed with a notable film quote and a tutorial on how to do the Mia Wallace eye look (Stebner).
Conclusion

The release of Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* in 1994 altered not only the film industry, but also significantly changed fashion for the rest of the decade. Despite only being on screen for one chapter of the film, Mia Wallace has arguably become the most memorable character. Her iconic black cropped pants and white dress shirt revolutionized fashion, bringing about both the minimalist trend and the adoption of menswear as women’s wear, and her makeup look forever altered the cosmetic industry.
Works Cited


