

Coco lives at film gala

Festival patrons showcasing styles of the 1920s highlight the rag trade's role in cinema

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Coco Chanel and Igor Stravinsky is one of the films at this year's Victoria Film Festival.

Photograph by: Handout, Times Colonist

The Chanel-inspired outfits at the Victoria Film Festival opening gala ranged from draped dresses and feathered hairpieces of the 1920s and '30s to the black-and-white geometrics French designer Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel became famous for. But the pearls, long-stringed necklaces layered with ribbons and baubles, simple chokers and mammoth wall garlands, dominated the room. A faint whiff of No. 5 brushed by.

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The Chanel theme of the festival gala, held in the elaborate lobby of the new Parkside Resort on Humboldt Street, was inspired by the opening film: Jan Kounen's *Coco Chanel and Igor Stravinsky*.

The film gave equal focus to its subjects' talents -- the long opening scene of *Rite of Spring's* infamous premiere was bliss. But everyone at the gala was talking about the fashion.

"Didn't you just want to touch everything she wore," a woman said as she brushed by on her way to the martini bar. The fine silks, jersey cottons and draperies in primary colour art-deco inspired patterns were a feast for the senses.

Film has always been a medium in which to indulge and inspire great fashion trends: Audrey Hepburn, the muse of Givenchy, is perhaps the most stylish woman in history; Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall* changed the way a generation of women dressed; and *Sex and the City* made Manolo Blahnik a household name.

Recently, the fashion film has gone into hyper-mode, inspiring social event themes and a frenzy of related

products. Just a few weeks ago the Victoria Symphony hosted a dress-up Night at the Oscars event. Shelagh Macartney, owner of She She Shoes and Bags in Trounce Alley tells me women frequently come in looking for wares for Sex and the City-themed stagettes and bridal showers. They describe bags and shoes as the film characters they identify with.

"Girls will pick up a bag and say that's so Carrie Bradshaw," Macartney says. "What's funny is how brunettes will buy the Audrey Hepburn bags and blonds will go for Marilyn every time."

You'd think a style hound like me would be drooling over the rapid fire of recent Hollywood films starring fashion. These include three Coco Chanel biopics, feature documentaries on legends Anna Wintour, Karl Lagerfeld and Valentino, high fashion lines to accompany films such as Young Victoria and Alice in Wonderland, and, what's being heralded as the Superbowl for women, the upcoming Sex and the City sequel in May.

These films are largely directed at women like me -- educated, often single, young professionals with a disposable income -- and are, for the most part, immensely enjoyable. But when the fashion outshines the plot, I turn from enchanted to enraged.

I remember vividly the night the first Sex and the City feature film premièred in Victoria. It was midsummer 2008 and my group of girlfriends got gussied up to attend the gala opening of an Andy Warhol exhibit at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. Our plan was to sneak out after a few hours to catch the late-night première of the film at SilverCity.

We expected to fit in at the gala and be overdressed for a movie theatre, but it was the contrary. While several locals had dared to attend the Warhol event in scrappy T-shirts and Gore-Tex, the snaking lineup at the theatre was almost entirely made up of women wearing cocktail dresses and strappy heels.

Like us, they'd made a night of coming to see television's most famous group of girlfriends on the big screen. Like us, they had come for the fashion.

"It's like the fashion is another character," Janni Aragon, a feminist political scientist and professor at the University of Victoria, tells me. "The fashion is part of the plot."

One scene overshadowed the story: A montage of heroine Carrie Bradshaw in couture wedding dresses at a Vogue photo shoot featured her bedroom voice narrating each label: Vera Wang, Carolina Herrera, Christian Lacroix, Dior and Vivienne Westwood.

The overbearing product placement made me feel bitter, dirty. After that scene all I saw were name brands and labels.

Had the television show with which I'd become a woman, fashion-lover and friend been hijacked as a two-hour infomercial for the multi-billion-dollar beauty industry?

Aragon reminds me of another pivotal scene that puts the material girl message in perspective: "When Samantha goes to the auction to buy herself a ring and Smith outbids her as a gift, she is disappointed. She is a successful, independent woman who wants to treat herself because she can. That's not a bad message for women."

Will Aragon see the Sex and the City sequel?

"Of course I will. I'll probably go the day it opens. The energy is so fun and, really, there are worse things than getting dressed up to see a movie and go to a bar with girlfriends," she said.

Confession: I will also likely be in line to see the film opening night, in heels, with friends and fingers crossed that the magic of movies doesn't break for a message from its sponsors.

Check the related content on this story for links to video clips of scenes mentioned in this column

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