



How to Dress for Dystopia, According to Three Costume Designers

Hunter Harris August 4, 2017 12:25 pm



From TV to books to movies, dystopian tales are in the air right now. All week long, Vulture is exploring how they've been imagined in popular culture.

By the time the apocalypse hits or we're under the rule of a dubiously pristine nation-state, we'll all be wearing jumpsuits. Onesies — the kind you can buy at

Urban Outfitters, or see the sales clerks wearing at Glossier — play into every dark-future fantasy. But they're relegated to the background of three science-fiction dramas — *Equals*, *Gattaca*, and *Snowpiercer* — that challenge our ideas of society's fate. Instead of pocketless, monochromatic jumpsuits, these movies spotlight costumes that pull inspiration from Japanese construction uniforms, the 1930s, or the military (including an old photo of Muammar Gaddafi). Utility is key, as is the ability to affix a garment with markers of status, to visually denote the haves from the have-nots. For Vulture's [Dark Futures](#) week, we spoke with each movie's costume designer, and they walked us through sketching and constructing each look from our dystopian future.



Kristen Stewart in *Equals*. Photo: A24

Abby O'Sullivan, *Equals*

When designing for a future — dark or twisted — it's best to start with something the audience is familiar with. Abby O'Sullivan, the costume designer behind the Drake Doremus sci-fi romance *Equals*, uses bomber jackets as an example: "When an audience has an immediate kinship with a piece," she said, "it really frees you up to do something completely insane underneath it." *Equals* is a love story made up of stolen moments in a future where emotions are outlawed. The homogeneous white color palette and workwear aesthetic was developed by Doremus, Carlos Rosario and Alana

Morehead, and were part of the movie's visuals when O'Sullivan signed on mid-production, but she had to find a way to communicate the separations of class and rank. "It was such a unique project in the sense that there was so much uniformity, but at the same time [we] were really trying to figure out how to build the world out from the constraints of that uniformity." She pulled inspiration from military uniforms and insane asylums: "I looked at a lot of military stuff, but what I really harnessed onto were the uniforms in insane asylums in the early part of the 20th century. That's what the all white was," she told Vulture. "There had been a concept artist and concept art that had been [in existence] prior to my coming onto the project. It was cool in a sense that you build out from a generalized silhouette."

O'Sullivan built that generalized silhouette after seeing the workwear worn by Japanese construction workers on location. "It's not something that a Western eye is used to seeing. They were just all around the studio where we were working," O'Sullivan said. Another source of inspiration: medical supplies. "I would just send someone out to buy all of the medical supplies and all of the construction supplies you could find, and then we'd lay them out in this little studio and build the costumes up from there."

Plain white often films flat, which made fabric with texture essential to making the color palette work on camera. O'Sullivan talked with Doremus about the idea of that world — an environmentally conscious utopia — when choosing fabrics. "[The world was] green and lush, so I used a lot more natural fabrics, like a looser weave, things that didn't have coating," she said, "anything that could have been manufactured in the future without damaging the environment."

So what's key to imagining how we'll dress in the a dark future? Figuring out which trends will last through any disaster, under any regime. O'Sullivan has a hunch: "After the apocalypse, it's gonna be military surplus stuff and a Toyota Tacoma. Those are the things that will last forever," she laughs.