

JULIA PETROV & GUDRUN D. WHITEHEAD

A high-contrast black and white photograph of a person's silhouette. The person is standing with their back to the camera, arms outstretched horizontally, creating a wide, dark shape. The background is a bright, hazy light source, possibly a stage or a tunnel entrance, with some circular light patterns visible at the bottom. The overall mood is mysterious and dramatic.

FASHIONING HORROR

**Dressing to Kill on Screen
and in Literature**

BLOOMSBURY

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**Dressing to Kill on Screen and in
Literature**

Edited by

**JULIA PETROV AND
GUDRUN D. WHITEHEAD**

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cape in batlike fashion, circa 1970 (© Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

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Dedicated to the well-dressed things that go bump in the night.

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INTRODUCTION

Fashion and Fear

Gudrun D. Whitehead and Julia Petrov

This anthology explores the connections between dress and horror as they have been depicted in literature, film, and television. In these media, articles of clothing are variously used to establish a foreboding mood, develop the characterization of victims and villains, advance a suspenseful narrative, or add to verisimilitude to heighten audience engagement. The chapters seek to define the fundamental characteristics that make dress such a potent vessel and trigger for a horror response. Clothing, it is argued, is haunted by horror.

Recently, academic attention has turned to exploring the link between popular culture and dress (Hancock, Johnson-Woods, and Karaminas 2013). The role of media in fashion dissemination and reception has been widely discussed (Sheridan 2010; Bartlett, Cole, and Rocamora 2014), and scholars have noted fashion's obsession with subversion (Steele and Park 2008) as well as the dark side of fashion production and consumption (David 2015). It is clear that there is an appetite for exploring the darker side of human nature to reveal what ought to be concealed. This trend is also evident in horror that, as a genre, has been gaining an ever wider audience than before, moving from subculture into mainstream culture, evident, for example, by the multiple original television series as well as series based on cult-classic horror films. A defining feature of any horror genre is the costumes, which easily define the character roles within the narrative. This book brings these two academic trends together and aims to explore what is horrific about dress.

The communicative power of dress is not always straightforward, and this has narrative possibilities for fashion's role in the carnivalesque inversion of social norms, threatening the comforts of an accepted social order. Clothing can be uncanny (Freud 1919), an intimate second skin that follows the contours of a vulnerable mortal body. It can also be duplicitous, concealing the true identity of the wearer, or permitting a new identity to be worn. It can even be shocking, as, for example, a low décolletage or high hem might attract undue attention. Historically, these aspects of dress have resulted in fashion falling under moral suspicion (Johnson, Torntore, and Eicher 2003; Ribeiro 2003; Purdy 2004). More

recently, fashion has come to play a key role in expressing the darker potential of humanity (Evans 2003), and it is this tension between beauty and ugliness, construction and deconstruction, life and death, that we aim to explore in this book. Dress in horror is not a coincidental element; instead, we argue, it is fundamental to the understanding of characterization and setting of horror. Yet horror dress is not limited to costuming victims and villains: all dress possesses, within its very material, the potential to subvert, conceal, or reveal, giving it a metaphorical power often deployed to great effect within the horror genre. The simultaneous mundanity and spectacularity of clothing is the key to its symbolic power. Beyond being a mere instrument of gore, horror fashion is a significant element in popular culture and a powerful symbol of prevailing social mores.

Fashion, fabric and phantasmagoria: Speculations on terminology

In his comprehensive essay on literary horror, Lovecraft writes: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest fear is fear of the unknown” (Lovecraft [1927] 1973: 11). This description serves well for the purposes of defining the term “horror” as used in this publication. According to Robin Wood’s seminal Marxist-Freudian study of the genre, “the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that civilization represses or oppresses” (Wood 1979: 10). Derry suggests that horror, like comedy, refers “more to a particular audience response than a particular content” (Derry 1988: 6). Horror may cause fear, shock, or disgust, but is simultaneously alluring, macabre, and provocative; this feeling creeps off the page and screen and into the fabric of daily life. This book places these effects of horror in relation to dress and costume.

Gothic horror, in particular, is a widely popular element in contemporary culture. For most, the word “gothic” relates to “chills and thrills inspired by Morticia Addams and Bela Lugosi and aligned with morose dark garb” (Roberts 2014: 8). Yet, the term has come to mean various diverse things through history. As Valerie Steele has noted, “‘Gothic’ is an epithet with a strange history, evoking images of death, destruction, and decay. It is not just a word that describes something (such as a Gothic cathedral), it is also almost inevitably a term of abuse, implying that something is dark, barbarous, gloomy, and macabre” (Steele and Park 2008: 3). The Gothic Revival movement in Europe, which began in the eighteenth century, saw historical references included in literature and the visual arts as devices for setting mood and character. The gothic novel’s integration into mainstream fiction started with Horace Walpole, whose 1764 work served as a prototype for a complex, inspired gothic school of writers, including Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley. Walpole’s story marked a significant shift in how the term “gothic” was used, changing from



Figure I.1 Hans Lützelburger after a drawing by Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Countess*, from *the Dance of Death*, ca. 1526, published 1538, woodcut, 6.5 x 4.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1919, <http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/365207>.

meaning something “crude,” “barbarous,” and “in bad taste” to meaning “ancient,” “romantic,” and “charming” (Bleiler 1966: ix), often with traces of the supernatural and human nature at its most extreme. This new literary genre fashioned a compelling vision of attractive abjection, updating the ambiguous image of beauty haunted by death as had been expressed in *Vanitas*, *Dance of Death*, and *Death and the Maiden* artworks since the Middle Ages (see Figure I.1).

It is useful, therefore, to consider the very old association between fashion and moral decline or doom, arising as it did out of a European society broken by the Black Death (Breward 1995: 8) and tainted by its morbid effects:

Since men were few, and since, by hereditary succession, they abounded in earthly goods, they forgot the past as though it had never been, and gave themselves up to a more shameful and disordered life than they had led before . . . inventing strange and unaccustomed fashions and indecent manners in their garments, and changing all their household stuff into new forms. (Villani [1350] 1929: 67)

For these historical reasons, studies of costume and horror in literature and popular culture have been almost exclusively limited to the Gothic. In this book, however, we focus on the wider application and uses of dress within Western (Euro-North American) horror. We follow Cherry's definition of "gothic" as one of the categories of horror typologies: gothic; supernatural, occult, and ghost films; psychological horror; monster movies; slashers; body horror, splatter, and gore films (including postmodern zombies); exploitation cinema, video nasties, or other forms of explicitly violent films (Cherry 2009: 5–6).

Defining the dress elements in horror films and literature marks a shift from previous academic writings on this theme. As this book argues, action, character, and plot development present in horror books, films, and television series are expressed through masks, dresses, and costumes. While some of the case studies in this book refer to costume (an intentional alteration of appearance for performative purposes) and others may reference fashion (garments produced within the fashion system of goods exchange and consumed in accordance with its changeable aesthetic), both can be subsumed under the term "dress," which, as defined by Eicher, Evenson, and Lutz (2008: 4), includes all body modifications and body accessories, making it the most inclusive word to describe the types of clothing, accessories, and dressing behaviors discussed by the authors.

Who's afraid of fashion?

When one considers them from an intellectual position removed from quotidian habit, the adornment rituals we all practice are simply horrifying. In contemporary Western society, it is considered normal practice to use cosmetics of which the ingredients are known to be toxic, pierce the flesh, inject indelible inks under the surface of the skin, and physically distort the body with clothing and accessories, all in the name of fashion. These mutilations might appear to be brutal, yet they also provide opportunities for self-expression, which is often valued above comfort and safety. The real-life horrors of the environmental and labor exploitation of the fashion industry have been documented since at least the nineteenth

century, and the result of our insatiable appetite for fashion has led to a catalog of other horrors, many of which have been ably summarized by Alison Matthews David in her excellent book, *Fashion Victims* (2015).

Yet there are also less tangible horrors hiding in the folds of clothing. As Caroline Evans has noted, fashion is haunted by its own obsolescence (2003: 20). Valerie Steele wrote, “The destructive impulse in fashion centers on change: what was in yesterday is out today. . . . Like the vampire, fashion is undead” (Steele and Park 2008: 65). The doom of irrelevance and decay, which defines the fashion cycle, mirrors humanity’s own fears of inevitable mortality.

Relatedly, worn clothing carries with it a frisson of the uncanny (Wilson 1985): like a reptile’s shed skin, it echoes too closely the passing of its inhabitant. To the bereaved, the clothes of the dead, as described by Juliet Ash (1996), can be a powerful and unsettling memento. It is little wonder that in literature and folktales, the attire of ghosts seems more important than the specter itself: the white lady is defined by her dress, and many ghost stories feature entirely disembodied, but animated garments, mimicking the motions of their long-deceased wearer.

Our fears about clothing are reflective of much deeper anxieties around the vulnerability of our bodies. The folk dress of Eastern Europe, for example, is characterized by embroideries around the garment openings; the designs are said to have magical powers to protect against evil spirits from entering into these vulnerable spots at the throat, wrists, and belly (Welters 1999: 103). A very real threat of disease or injury may be thus explained as a metaphysical contagion in instances where clothing or accessories are given an apotropaic function. Relatedly, the medieval church was said to have objected to the fashion for the sideless surcote during the plague epidemic, its openings dubbed “the gates of hell” (Webb 1907: 346) or “windows of the devil” (von Heyden 1889: 98).

Grooming rituals also leave us vulnerable. In the news, one might read about botched plastic surgeries (Melendez and Alizadeh 2011). The plot of the 1846 penny dreadful *Sweeney Todd* shows how our very lives might be threatened by a barber with a grudge; a man might present his bare throat to be shaved clean, but be thus deprived of his head instead. Even merely taking a shower or a bath has frequently been the downfall (or near such) for an unsuspecting victim in horror, including Marion Crane’s famous shower death scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960).

A lack of clothes can also open up the human body to vulnerability and shame. Most people have experienced a variation of the nightmare in which the dreamer appears naked among their fully dressed peers at work or at school. But clothing inspires anxiety for reasons that go far beyond the possibility of social ridicule (von Busch and Bjereld 2016).

Indeed, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, dress in horror rarely involves outright nudity. Instead, the psychological tension comes from a fear of

the disruption of boundaries—the social and physical categories we shore up against chaos. Robin Wood wrote of the genre:

The definition of normality in horror films is in general boringly constant: the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, armed forces) that support and defend them. The Monster is, of course, much more protean, changing from period to period as society's basic fears clothes themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments—rather as dreams use material from recent memory to express conflicts or desires that may go back to early childhood. (1979: 14)

Dress in horror can be understood as the guise of society's norms and fears, displaced, symbolized, and condensed in horror as they might be in a dream. The fears inherent in horror are coded visibly through the dress of characters: foreignness, decadence (sexual and material), hegemony, anonymity, disability, criminality, ageing, and so on. Any disruption of "normal," accepted, and ordered boundaries, through dress or otherwise, might presage even worse things to come—the greatest fear of all being the oblivion of death.

As fashion, accessories, and cosmetics are accepted in common discourse as being part of a "beauty" regimen, grotesque elements might inspire horror. For example, in 1896, American newspapers reported on the eccentric millinery choices of a Brooklyn woman, who appropriated a skull from her physician husband and used it to trim her hat. According to the reports, the woman's "taste for peculiar things has been well developed," and so, "full of a new idea, [she] had the skull carefully cleaned and polished, and, with a deftness known only to the hands of woman, fashioned an affair of skull, feathers, and ribbons which, when completed, was as original an arrangement as one could imagine" ("A Bonnet Made of a Human Skull" 1896: 6). One newspaper commissioned an illustration of what this novel hat might have looked like; the result was similar to fashion plates of the time, only the lady's headdress was crowned by a human skull. Indeed, when compared with the then current fashion of including entire taxidermied birds on hats, a skull does not seem to be so outrageous (see Figure 1.2). The horrifying nature of the skull hat, therefore, had to do with its provocatively toying with accepted ideas of beauty, as well as alluding to taboo notions of death.

Similar themes of horror have also been explored by contemporary fashion designers. The "predatory glamour" of vampires depicted in films such as *The Hunger* (1983) was noted by the *New York Times* to have been referenced in the visual style of fashion photography (La Ferla 2009: 2). The New York designer duo, The Blonds, showed outfits inspired by Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* in their fall 2013 runway collection. Valerie Steele's book *Gothic: Dark Glamour* (2008) explores other fashionable engagements with



Figure 1.2 “Toquet Djémée (5962),” 1895, Art and Picture Collection, New York Public Library, New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e1-21ba-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>; M. O’Flaherty, “A Brooklyn Woman Whose Bonnet Is a Skull,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Missouri, October 11, 1896, p. 28.

horror themes. She highlights designers like Ann Demeulemeester, John Galliano, Alexander McQueen, Rick Owens, Anna Sui, Olivier Theyskens, Ricardo Tischi, and Yohji Yamamoto as being particularly influenced by decay and the macabre and being dark in their work, but also points out other connections, such as how the Fall/Winter 2008–9 Rodarte collection was inspired by Japanese horror films (Steele and Park 2008: 100).

Perhaps because prominent designers brought these dark themes to the fore, television series have become unlikely fashion icons; the FX drama series *American Horror Story* (2011– ongoing) was profiled by the leading fashion periodical, *Vogue*, which identified its occult-inspired styles as a real-life fashion trend: “Besides its gratuitous violence and oft-unsettling subject matter, the show has come to be known for another sort of spectacle: That of sartorial, dare we say, reverence. Who’d have thought a tale of bloodthirsty sorceresses and necromancer voodoo priestesses would be so engaged in fashion?” (Remsen 2014). Perhaps not so surprising after all, considering the ways in which pop culture horror, especially teen horror such as the iconic television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), was preoccupied with fashion on and off the screen. This has been fruitfully examined in other publications, including work written by Speed (1995), Williamson (2005), and Stenger (2006).

The fashion of horror

The horror genre has not only been the inspiration for fashion; films and television have also actively engaged with it themselves. For example, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer sponsored two national beauty contests in connection with the release of films in its Gothic-themed *Dark Shadows* (1966–71) franchise in the early 1970s. Contestants for the 1970 Miss American Vampire pageant were given suggestions in the press for their outfits: “the white, diaphanous shroud, for the newly initiated vampire, or a slinky black for the more sophisticated ghoul. A touch of red here or there would not be amiss, and accessories, such as necklaces of teeth, would certainly be in order” (Thermal 1970: 14). In 1971, MGM crowned a Miss Ghost America. Contestants were encouraged to “let their imaginations run wild as to the ghostly attire and makeup they feel appropriate for their appearance in the contest” (Rockwood, 1971: 3), and the publicity poster featured a female shape draped in a sheet, with glowing green eyes—a somewhat improbable outfit for a beauty contest.

Overall, the importance of costume to horror is widely understood. Clothing is the mechanism, or driving force of horror, creating meaningful connections within and outside the narrative. The teen-slashing mass murderer is recognized from his mask, the jock from his football jersey, and the monster from his attire. Each one has a role to play, readily understood by authors, readers, viewers, and artists. How the creators play with these preconceived notions is one of the things that continue to make horror interesting and relevant.

When dress is used in horror literature and film as a plot device, it is used knowingly. It reflects the properties and characteristics of dress, but these are often twisted in unexpected ways for narrative effect. The ability of dress to be a marker of the wearer’s personality or social status may turn out to be misleading, with dangerous consequences (Lezama, Chapter 7, this volume). Its beauty can hide grotesqueness (Paci, Chapter 1, this volume). Its protective function may fail to contain the mortal flesh underneath (McKnight, Chapter 6, this volume). It becomes an untrustworthy signifier, as well as an effective narrative element. We are all familiar with dress; we all intuitively know how it should function. Therefore, to disturb that “nature” is to add to the disturbing effect of horror.

The 1988 film *Bride of Chucky*, a sequel to the tale of the killer doll, toyed with conventional depictions of beauty, by featuring an extensive makeover sequence (see Figure I.3). As frequently seen in romantic comedies, it features an unattractive female who gets a makeover, effectively turning her into the ultimate dream girl, who is finally fit for the film’s male lead character. Yet in Tiffany’s case, the innocence is only “skin deep,” as it veils a deadly personality beneath the plastic surface. Furthermore, in the realm of horror, where the makeover is in favor of an evil villain, the makeover here is subverted. Tiffany’s doll body transforms from being the epitome of innocence, in a white dress, bridal veil, and black, silken