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Daughters of decay

Sanda Miller plunges into a vertiginous exhibition in New York that explores the links between fashion and gothic.

'Gothic' is such a multilayered word that it can create confusion. Its etymology is straightforward enough: the 'goths' were an east Germanic people who settled in the Baltic region during the first millennium AD. Fast-forward to gothic architecture: it designates a style dominating western Europe between the 12th and 16th centuries characterised by the pointed arch. Its connotations, however, have a different history. Giorgio Vasari used the word pejoratively to describe the type of architecture superseded by the renaissance. Claiming that it was created by 'barbarous nations', he thought it 'ridiculous to our modern eyes'. These are the principal ingredients that led to the fantastic proliferation of 'gothic' used as an adjective associated with darkness.

The exhibition curated by Valerie Steele at the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York focuses on this

1 Dresses by Alexander McQueen (b. 1969), 2007, and John Galliano (b. 1960), 2006, the former inspired by an ancestor burnt at the stake for witchcraft, the second embroidered with a quotation by the Marquis de Sade. Silk taffeta, glass jewellery, coated silk, ink and metal. Photo: Irving Solero

dimension of darkness. It is a celebration of 'gothic' as, she explains, a word with connotations of 'death, destruction and decay'; enough to send shivers down anybody's spine. To this, another ingredient connoting everything associated with fashion is added: glamour.

The exhibition's point of departure is – paradoxically – the Enlightenment, during which, in parallel with its luminous faith in the power of reason, a cult emerged of the malevolent forces of darkness, embodied in a new literary genre: the gothic novel, such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). The book 'inaugurated a vogue for melodramatic horror stories', writes Dr Steele, and established the gothic building as a *locus horribilis* of evil, redolent of torture, pain and death.

A 1997 exhibition 'Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art', curated by Christoph Grunenberg at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in Boston (it was also shown at London's Institute of Contemporary Art) focused on the 'gothic' novel and film – notably *Dracula* – and also fashion and music subcultures. It also referenced, albeit briefly, mainstream fashion designers, such as Thierry Mugler, Claude Montana, Jean-Paul Gaultier, John Galliano and Alexander McQueen, who had appropriated elements of the 'gothic' style for *haute couture*. It is this last aspect of fashion that takes centre stage in the current exhibition, but it also covers what Dr Steele describes as 'the most important contemporary manifestation of the gothic', namely 'the goth subculture, which developed in the late 1970s'.

Conceived and designed by Simon Costin and Charles B. Froom, the exhibition is structured as a labyrinth, an appropriate *mise-en-scène* for the creation of vertigo and claustrophobia, mental states central to the gothic narrative. In his seminal essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) Edmund Burke introduces the aesthetic category of the sublime, which

hinges on pain and danger: 'a mode of terror or of pain, is always the cause of the sublime'. Terror is induced by obscurity, power, privation (vacuity, darkness, solitude, silence) vastness, infinity – we find them all in gothic.

The exhibition invites the visitor, under the cover of darkness, to wander through the labyrinth, perhaps ruminating on the two main foci within which it unfolds: Eros and Thanatos, eroticism and death. At the outset, a cave-like display window showcases the progress of the street-style 'goths' from their beginnings to industrial and cyber goth, with outfits ranging from designs by Morphius, Plastik Wrap and Kambriel to the more recent 'Elegant Gothic Lolitas', the terminally *kawaii* (cute) *Harajuku* youth style that emerged in the Tokyo suburbs, in which nubile teenagers mimic Nabokov's cult heroine. The

2 Top and skirt by Hussein Chalayan (b. 1970), 2005. Red wool carpet and black wool. Photo: Irving Solero



mannequins, all black with panda eyes and fetishist detailing, invite you to stare and then suddenly they disappear and one sees oneself in a mirror, a living but solitary 'goth'; a disturbing experience that prepares the visitor for what is to come.

'The Graveyard Fence', a large circular structure dominating the central space, is meant to induce claustrophobia. The mannequins are arranged in a circle facing the visitor; one wears Hussein Chalayan's uncanny 'blob' top and skirt made of red-and-black wool carpet and black silk (Fig. 2), eerily reminiscent of that ultimate romantic monster, the Hunchback of *Nôtre Dame*. 'The Ruined Castle' – a metaphor for madness – provides the setting for two outfits by the British *enfants terribles* of *haute couture*, John Galliano and Alexander McQueen (Fig. 1). The former's blood-red dress is inspired by the French Revolution, on which there is an embroidered image of the Marquis de Sade and a quotation by him: 'Is it not by murder that France is free today?' McQueen's black dress, dominated by a huge encrusted cross on its bodice, is dedicated to his ancestor Elizabeth Howe, burnt at the stake in 1692 in Salem as a witch.

'The Laboratory' consists of seven plexi-glass panels through which nauseating faces are thrust. Here are outfits by the London-based Kei Kagamu – a 'discovery' of Valerie Steele – that are dedicated to 'the good old days of the Industrial Revolution'. These lugubrious man-machine ensembles are reminiscent of Dr Frankenstein's monster, with a hint of black humour.

With few exceptions, including the magnificent red costume designed by Eiko Ishioka for the film *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Fig. 3), this is a fully black exhibition. Black was famously predicated as anti-fashion by the writer Ann Hollander because of its symbolic connotations of darkness and death. In clothes, it became associated in the 19th century with dandyism, emerging as an act of wilful rebellion against established norms, expressed through clothes. The figure of the dandy was epitomised by Charles Baudelaire, not in the superficial sartorial manner of 'Beau' Brummel, but altogether more dangerously – by courting evil. In his collection of poems *Les Fleurs du Mal* all the elements of gothic narrative appear: night, ruined



3 Dress (left) by Thierry Mugler (b. 1948), 1981. Black silk velvet. Dress (right) designed by Eiko Ishioka (b. 1939), 1992, for the film *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Red silk. Photo: Irving Solero

castles, the full moon (which signifies madness), the cemetery, a sinister laboratory. His *dramatis personae* are pained, their beauty disturbed.

'Disturbed beauty' is the title of the exhibition's last section. The way that Rei Kawakubo's white dress has been silhouetted against the wall emphasises its two humps: one harking back to the bustle, the other creating a hunchback effect – a historical fashion reference allied with deformity and illness.

Over the entrance to the exhibition a quotation from Giacomo Leopardi's *Dialogue of Fashion and Death* (1842) invites us on our adventure; it provides also a fitting conclusion – an epitaph perhaps? *Fashion*: I am fashion, your sister. *Death*: My sister? *Fashion*: Yes, don't you remember that both of us are daughters of decay?

Sanda Miller is senior lecturer in fashion history at Southampton Solent University.

'Gothic: Dark Glamour', *The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, 1 September–21 February 2009* (+1 212 217 4560). Catalogue by Valerie Steele and Jennifer Park, ISBN 9780300136944 (cloth), \$45 (Yale University Press).