

# The Tyranny of Things: Gothic Thing Theory and Consumerism in *In Fabric* (2019)

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## Abstract:

This article explores the relationship between Thing Theory and late capitalism through the gothic trope of the haunted object in the British horror-comedy film *In Fabric* (2019). It argues that Thing Theory's methodological approach to fiction has an inherent risk of obscuring the material networks of things, leaving social injustices of exploitative labour unexamined. Importantly, *In Fabric's* portrayal of the garment industry highlights the unregulated and precarious conditions that workers endure. Through object-oriented criticism, the article suggests that the Gothic mode can mediate the fraught relationship between commodity fetishism and Thing Theory. The trope of the haunted object demonstrates both the agential quality of matter *and* its dark, dangerous production. The spectral capacity of the object reveals the dead, hidden labour found within all things that is often ignored under consumer capitalism. It also explores how humans can be objectified under late capitalism, as characters develop an 'object-envy' as they are incessantly dehumanised by their labour and desire to become objects themselves.

**Keywords:** Thing Theory; Object-Oriented Ontology; consumerism; capitalism; spectrality; labour; Marxism.

## Introduction

This article advances the relationship between Thing Theory and the Gothic by critiquing how the theory can obscure the reality of late capitalism. Whilst exciting connections have previously been drawn

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between Gothic and Thing Theory in critical studies, I argue that there is a danger of too close an identification between these disciplines as celebrating the dark magical powers of agential objects risks obscuring the exploitative systems of labour and capitalism that bring them into being. In this article, I examine how *In Fabric* (2019), directed by Peter Strickland, uses a gothic mode to mediate Thing Theory's difficult relationship with commodity fetishism. In the film, the commodification of objects enlivens them, imbuing them with the dark powers of a gothic haunted object. The haunted object's agency and liveliness reveals the dead labour that is abstracted under capitalism. This is further depicted in the object-envy that the human characters develop towards inanimate objects, as the film critiques how capitalism objectifies workers.

Thing Theory was originated by Bill Brown in 2001. Brown outlines how objects transform into things, as they 'assert their presence and power', and establishes that this represents 'the story of a changed relation to the human subject'.<sup>1</sup> Brown's theory exists alongside similar ideas known as Object-Oriented Ontology or OOO, a strand of New Materialist thought defined by Graham Harman as 'an ontology that [...] treats all objects in the same way, rather than assuming in advance that different types of objects require completely different ontologies'.<sup>2</sup> The concept of the agential object presents a compelling opportunity to rethink human-object relations. Object-Oriented Ontologies appreciate that the 'thing' is able to impact the 'human' just as much as the inverse relationship. These ideas have been taken up in criticism of the Gothic, including Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's rich exploration in his book *Gothic Things: Dark Enchantment and Anthropocene Anxiety* (2023). Weinstock's 'Gothic Materialism' identifies how the Gothic is 'consistently preoccupied with the nature of matter itself and the relation of the human to the nonhuman'.<sup>3</sup> A gothic reading of the lively object rethinks the relationship between the human and nonhuman, which Weinstock argues works in 'rendering matter as sinister and menacing, human mastery of the natural world a fiction, and human existence as precarious'.<sup>4</sup> For Weinstock, the human and non-human relationship is one marked by terror, in which the human is undermined by startling proof of other forms of agency and power.

*In Fabric* (2019) is a comedy-horror film directed by the British director and screenwriter Peter Strickland. Taking inspiration from Italian *giallo* films, the narrative follows a haunted red dress as it disrupts and destroys the lives of its owners, Sheila Woolchapel (Marianne Jean-Baptiste), Reg Speaks (Leo Bill), and his fiancée Babs (Hayley Squires). Whilst *In Fabric* is underrepresented in scholarship, it makes

an important intervention into both Gothic criticism and Thing Theory, as it opens discussion into the fraught relationship between OOO and the object-oriented world of consumer capitalism. I find that an unquestioned acceptance of Thing Theory within the Gothic is problematic, as it obscures the material networks in which these gothic things exist, leaving social injustices of their creation unexamined. Here, I consider the implications of consumer capitalism on the celebration of objects within Thing Theory, with specific attention to its relationship to clothing since a killer red dress is the primary focus of *In Fabric*. The fashion industry is infamously exploitative; Tansy Hoskins describes it as a 'deregulated, subcontracted, trend-based industry [...] meaning that the safety of workers and the cost to the environment is often overlooked'.<sup>5</sup> To celebrate the inspiring potential of nonhuman agency is uncomfortable when we consider the systemic injustices that reside at the core of the garment. This article argues that *In Fabric* suggests a rapprochement between Thing Theory and Marxism, showing how the uncanny agency of the thing is not only a phenomenological concern but also rooted within consumerist commodity fetishism and exploitative labour practices.

Fred Botting explores similar subject matter in his chapter 'Dark Materialism: Gothic Objects, Commodities and Things', arguing that 'Gothic forms and figures function as capital's shadow, offering images of the effective unreality of commodity fetishism'.<sup>6</sup> However, he divides these gothic forms and figures into two key strands: 'in one direction, solid things seem to evaporate in phantasmal, spectral shapes. The other track, however, sees the excessively material incarnations of capital as monstrous machine and voracious vampire'.<sup>7</sup> Botting's approach to the capitalist Gothic is thus twofold: that gothic figurations of capitalist things, which once represented what we assumed to be concrete, real and tangible, now appear slippery and spectral, and that capital, which we assumed to be invisible and incomprehensible, is excessively materialised in the form of the vampire or monster. Whilst this is a compelling reading of Marxism's Gothic disposition, I am reluctant to agree that spectrality is an immaterial status. Instead, I find that spectrality manifests consistently in material ways, and the spectrality actually enlivens the object. The process transforms it into a 'thing', revealing its strange agency as it begins to act in powerful and unexpected ways. Within *In Fabric*, agency manifests in the Gothic trope of the haunted object, where its spectrality 'excessively-materialises' the object, demonstrating the influence that it has on the human.

Additionally, Bill Brown's more recent publications argue that Thing Theory can explore how 'within things we will discover the human

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precisely because our history is one in which humans were reduced to things'.<sup>8</sup> The human characters of *In Fabric* exist in an object-oriented world, much like our own. However, their relationship to objects can be defined as object-envy. Object-envy drives the humans to *become* objects, due to the privileged position of objects under capitalism. David McNally argues that within Marxism 'images of monstrosity track the intertwined experiences of corporeal fragmentation and social apartheid that characterise modern capitalism' as labour becomes 'a commodity, a separable and detachable thing'.<sup>9</sup> The uncanny transformation into objects that the characters undergo is a welcome change as they find their human existence undermined by society's worship of things. The following study of *In Fabric* shows how the film provides an opportunity to bridge the relationship between Thing Theory and commodity fetishism, using the gothic figuration of the haunted object to portray simultaneously the incomprehensible absurdity of agential objects, and the incomprehensible absurdity of consumer capitalism.

### **The New Haunted Object**

Objects in *In Fabric* wield remarkable power over the humans who interact with them, with many failed attempts to establish control or dominance. Brown argues that humans 'look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful'.<sup>10</sup> Within the film, these codes are reinstated through various 'fantasies' that are predicted when purchasing an item. For example, the shop assistant Mrs Luckmoore tells Sheila Woolchapel when she first tries on the dress, 'This is how I see your night romance: I predict the fantasy [...] There is a lucky man somewhere in the vista of this mysterious mirror [...] I see him, I like him [...] Be bold, your date will compliment you'. The dress is defined by the events that proceed it, perpetually 'looked through' by the human. Furthermore, the majority of purchases in the film are preceded by the phrase 'There will be,' such as 'There will be the vegetable moussaka', and 'There will be this cinnamon bra'. The phrasing here suggests that each purchase is an act of creation: that by purchasing the object, it will begin to 'be' something. Thus, *In Fabric* positions humans as believing themselves to occupy a space of power over objects, which the film then proceeds to break down with the introduction of the haunted object.

In breaking free of these 'fantasies' associated with the object, the human-object relationship develops a gothic quality, akin to the haunted object trope of Gothic and horror fiction. As stated previously, Brown asserts that 'we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they



Figure 1. The red dress, after being deserted in a dirty pile of clothes, creeps down the hallway and under the door of Vince and Gwen's bedroom. Peter Strickland, *In Fabric* (Curzon Artificial Eye, 2019)

stop working for us'.<sup>11</sup> Thingness is seen in *In Fabric*, as the dress is enjoyed by Sheila up until her date goes sour. From then, it is tossed aside, leaving it somewhat indistinguishable from the dress we see beforehand as it has defied the 'fantasies' that were foretold by the shop assistant. However, the dress is seen moving on its own (Fig. 1), making its way into a pile of dirty laundry, and spying on and attempting to kill Gwen (Gwendolyn Christie), the girlfriend of Sheila's son Vince (Jaygann Ayeh). The dress moving through the dark house has similarities to the opening scene of *giallo* film *Blood and Black Lace* (1964) directed by Mario Bava. In one scene, Isabella, a model, is murdered as she wanders the grounds of Christian Haute Couture, a Roman fashion house. She is dragged away by the masked killer, her striking red trench coat bright against dark foliage.

In both cases, the red clothing is used to signify the murderous nature of the scene. However, whilst both scenes portray acts of stalking and killing, Strickland updates the classic *giallo* scene by removing human agency of the wearer and her killer. Instead of being dragged, the red dress makes its own way through the house, slinking under doorways and up walls like a ghost. Unable to reckon with the fact that the dress may possess agency of its own, Sheila assumes that human intervention is the only plausible reason for its movement, accusing Gwen of stealing the dress. In this moment, the dress transforms from object into thing, figured through the Gothic and horror trope of the haunted object. Other popular examples of this trope are Stephen King's murderous car *Christine* (1983) or the evil Chucky doll of Tom Holland's film *Child's Play* (1988).

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Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns draws attention to the fact that haunted objects are almost always possessed by some sort of evil or malevolent entity. He suggests that a new cycle of killer objects is being portrayed in horror and Gothic texts that are informed by OOO, and suggests that what drives the objects to be horrific 'is not human agency infused on inert material, but their own volition. They move, attack, kill, give advice, and create havoc because that is their desire. Humans are just the victims, not the puppeteers.'<sup>12</sup> He expands that the horror effect of these killer objects is 'not the fact that they are evil but the ineludible aspect that they are completely foreign to our human supremacy and comprehension'.<sup>13</sup> These new types of cursed object decentre the human, and suggest that objects inhabit a world of their own that is far beyond human comprehension. What is scary about the objects is not their possession by demonic creatures or evil spirits, but the fact that they reject and resist human comprehension. Killer objects, in *In Fabric* and beyond, reveal anxieties in consumer societies about the inferiority of human existence within the universe, suggesting that we lack the control we assume we have.

Whilst the liveliness of matter has thus far been presented as an inspiring philosophical framework, *In Fabric's* agential things are violent and murderous. The film points to the potential problematic elements of Thing Theory through its depiction of the clothing industry. Steven Miles argues that '[f]ashion is arguably the arena within which the wares of consumerism are most visibly expressed and fervently endorsed'.<sup>14</sup> This, he finds, is because fashion is a key example of an industry that is 'consumer rather than producer oriented,' meaning that 'the consumer [has] increasing influence over what was previously a one-way production process'.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is misguided to celebrate the agency of fashion objects without recognising the hand of consumerism in their production, and specifically the worker who makes and/or sells the item. Thing Theory and other branches of OOO do consider the role of the commodity in their theory, with Jane Bennett describing how 'materialism [...] is anti-materiality', and how '[t]he sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter'.<sup>16</sup> However, I propose that *In Fabric* argues the alternative: that the commodification of the object *enlivens* it. Specifically, the Gothic mode provides a necessary disruption to Thing Theory. Weinstock argues that the Gothic emphasises 'the terror associated with being "humiliated," being "chastened," and treating humans as objects without special status – as things, meat, or matter to be confined, utilized in mechanical ways, or consumed literally or metaphorically'.<sup>17</sup> The Gothic is used as a model to reveal the dehumanising

potential of 'flat ontology' and similar paradigms. Therefore, *In Fabric's* haunted objects allow for the dead and disembodied labour that created them to return and inflict terror on the ignorant consumer.

### *Tu Qui Me Induis, Nunc Me Cognosces: Spectral Consumerism*

In *The System of Objects* (1968), Jean Baudrillard argues that production no longer drives capitalist society, and that it is consumption that now defines capitalism. Consumption, defined by Steven Miles, is the system that allows for '[e]veryday life in the developed world [to appear] [...] to be dominated by our relationship with consumer goods'.<sup>18</sup> However, Baudrillard argues that '[t]he systematic and limitless process of consumption arises from the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life [...] Consumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning, because *it is founded upon a lack*' (my italics).<sup>19</sup> Despite consumerism's inherent obsession with objects, it is actually driven by a lack that can never be satiated. The idea of absence is also explored within Severin Fowles's critique of Thing Theory, in which he expresses his concern that 'in the rush to take things seriously, we have over-privileged a crude notion of presence linked to physicality and tangibility, as if the only meaningful relations were those between entities that can be seen, smelt or felt'.<sup>20</sup> He continues, 'When absences become object-like, when they seem to exist not merely as an afterthought of perception but rather as self-standing presences out there in the world, they begin to acquire powers and potentialities similar to things'.<sup>21</sup> Combining Baudrillard's and Fowles's thinking, the lack that forms consumerism has become an object-like absence. The lack ultimately drives us to attempt to fill it, leading to the incessant pursuit of buying and selling. Consumerist lack has been defined as spectral, as David McNally notes how 'we attribute extraordinary powers to an *immaterial* substance [...] bowing down before something spectral, a practice infinitely more absurd than the worship of material things'.<sup>22</sup> Fred Botting identifies that this lack manifests within Marxist writings as a Gothic figuration, as 'solid things seem to evaporate in phantasmal, spectral shapes'.<sup>23</sup> I argue that spectrality has the power to possess and enliven objects, in which the object garners more power than it had before. *In Fabric* represents how objects can reveal the absence at the core of consumerism and commodity fetishism through the Gothic figuration of the haunted object, in which the spectral is materialised in attempts to reveal the hidden human labour of consumer goods.

The haunted object is used in *In Fabric* to reveal the hidden, dead labour that created the dress, and to inflict punishment on those who were ignorant to it. The second half of the film sees the cursed red dress passed on to washing machine repairman Reg Speaks, and his fiancée

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Babs. The dress is found by one of Reg's friends in a charity shop, and then used as a joke gift for Reg at his 'stag-do'. Bill Brown asserts that another way for an object to become a thing is through 'the deformation of the object or in its dislocation from one system into another'; for example, 'to use a spoon as a knife' or 'a knife as a screwdriver', thereby making seemingly simple changes that 'deform the object, however momentarily, into a thing'.<sup>24</sup> By utilising the dress as a joke prop in Reg's stag-do, the dress becomes a thing. The idea of deformation or misuse is interesting within the context of the second-hand clothing industry, which has a notable gothic quality. Elizabeth Wilson describes the feelings experienced upon viewing second-hand clothes within a museum:

We experience a sense of the uncanny when we gaze at garments that had an intimate relationship with human beings long since gone to their graves [...] they hint at something only half understood, sinister, threatening [...] like souls in limbo, they wait poignantly for the music to begin again. Or perhaps theirs is a silence patience with vengefulness towards the living.<sup>25</sup>

Wilson's envisioning of vengeful, ghostly garments is deeply reminiscent of *In Fabric's* red dress. In fact, the film's script includes a subtitle – *In Fabric: A Ghost Story* – which reinstates the narrative as a haunting. The dress appears many times throughout the film to be floating around on its own, moving around in wardrobes, and creeping under doors. The dress as a form of haunting is important when seen in the context that it is second-hand, drawing attention to the Latin stitching on the dress, *Tu Qui Me Induis, Nunc Me Cognosces*, which translates to 'You who put me on, now you know me'.<sup>26</sup> By inhabiting the dress, the wearer is possessed by its spirit and all those who came before it.

However, the haunting narrative is a larger commentary on the notion of the production of goods. The film's ending sees the shop assistant Mrs Luckmoore (Fatma Mohamed) riding down an elevator, outside of which we see flashes of each of the dress's wearers stuck in a purgatorial garment factory, repetitively making the red dress (Fig. 2). Aviva Briefel explores the haunted object in the context of Victorian society, which portrayed these objects as having 'a surplus of useless energy through things that move frantically around, crashing into bystanders and wreaking extreme havoc'.<sup>27</sup> However, Briefel suggests that this is due to the residual human labour within these items, which she remarks as 'spectral in its anonymity and inaccessibility: it is at once there and not there, a trace of human agency and of its absence'.<sup>28</sup> Using Briefel's analysis, the red dress in *In Fabric* seemingly represents the residual labour that is left over within the object, coming to life fuelled by

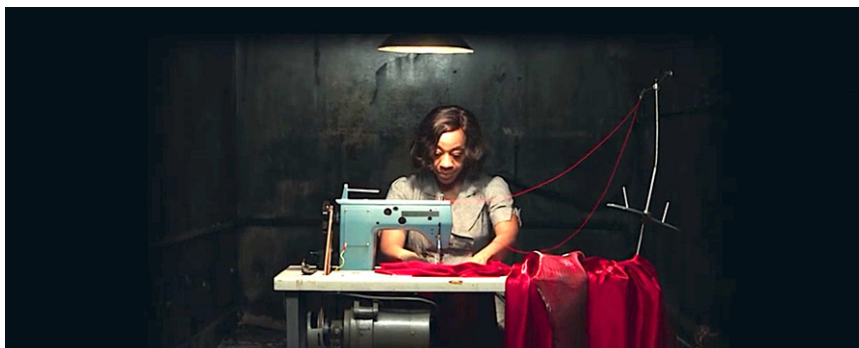


Figure 2. Sheila, having been murdered by the dress, is trapped in a dress-making purgatory below Dentley and Soper. She is accompanied by Reg and Babs Speaks. Peter Strickland, *In Fabric* (Curzon Artificial Eye, 2019)

these traces of human labour. Due to its role in making a second-hand piece of clothing, the labour is even further abstracted from the object itself. Speaking on another cursed object, the Monkey's Paw from the short horror story 'The Monkey's Paw' (1902) by W. W. Jacobs, Weinstock claims,

The belief that [the Monkey's Paw] has inherent value and power obscures its role in mediating social relationships among human beings. Sleight of hand indeed: The severed, bloodless paw obscures the bloody connections that in fact structure its existence.<sup>29</sup>

These 'bloody connections' are visualised as the dress's wearers are doomed in eternity to make and remake the red dress. Additionally, the object's being a dress is incredibly pertinent due to the fast-paced and exploitative nature of the garment industry. The ending of the film provides a bleak look into the garment industry – albeit sanitised when compared to the reality – and provokes reflection on where clothes truly come from. Thus, the liveliness of the fashion object is read in opposition to what Thing Theory or OOO would suggest, finding instead that it is cursed by the ignorance of consumers to the labour that goes into its creation.

Labour is absent from objects within *In Fabric*, and revealing the labour inside objects often leads to strange, transcendental experiences. Various scenes throughout the film show characters sent into trances by the presence or description of a washing machine. Reg Speaks, a washing machine repairman, describes the functions and the repair necessary to the characters' washing machines. The owners' responses are bizarre;

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they are sent into a hypnotic trance, as Reg's voice dissolves into deep synthetic tones. For Reg's fiancée Babs, the experience is somewhat erotic, as she bites her lip and her eyes roll back. The absurdity of these scenes parodies the concept of use-value, which Marx defines as 'the utility of a thing', suggesting that all commodities internalise a very simplistic value of their use, separate from exchange value, which would determine its worth under capitalism. Importantly, Marx distinguishes that the 'use value [of a commodity] has value only because human labour in the abstract has been embodied or materialised in it'.<sup>30</sup> In describing the inner workings of the washing machine, Reg reveals himself to be one of many branches of labour at the heart of the consumer good, which becomes a transcendental experience for the consumer due to the systemic absence of the means of production in a modern consumer society.

Baudrillard, though, argues that Marx's theory of use/exchange value no longer functions under consumerism, proposing the idea of sign-value for objects. He suggests that '[i]n consumption generally, economic exchange value (money) is converted into sign exchange value (prestige, etc.)'.<sup>31</sup> These [s]igns, like commodities, are at once use value and exchange value. The social hierarchies, the invidious differences, the privileges of caste and culture which they support, are accounted as profit, as personal satisfaction, and lived as "need".<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the sign-value of the washing machine would perhaps be the flashy tech brand or simply a show of wealth. Hoskins draws attention to how '[c]onsumers are far removed from the production of goods [...] Items appear in shops without revealing a trace of the manufacturing process, seemingly independent of people'.<sup>33</sup> In a consumer culture dominated by the sign-value of objects, Reg's understanding of the functional use-value of the washing machine becomes esoteric and entralling to the consumer. However, the reaction is *not* a revelation, and the hypnosis indicates an unconscious act of ignorance towards the labour at the heart of the object. The characters do not want to know the truth, as it unravels the consumerist greed that insubordinates other humans in the worship of objects. Labour remains abstracted to the consumer characters of *In Fabric*; they experience brief encounters with an alien world that is obscured by consumer capitalism.

**'An echo in the recesses of the spheres of retail': The Objectified Worker**  
*In Fabric* uses gothic figures to represent how labour is abstracted within consumer culture, specifically how the worker is objectified. In *In Fabric*, workers develop a profound object-envy, in which they realise the superiority of objects under consumer capitalism and attempt to ascend



Figure 3. Mrs Luckmoore and the mannequin lay side-by-side, revealing their similarity. Peter Strickland, *In Fabric* (Curzon Artificial Eye, 2019)

to their level. What follows is an invocation of the uncanny, which is defined by Sigmund Freud by two key tropes: a 'doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self', and a 'constant recurrence of the same thing'.<sup>34</sup> The concept of the haunted object such as the dress in *In Fabric* is definitively uncanny, as Pippa Goldschmidt, Gill Haddow and Fadhila Manzanderani suggest that examples of Freud's uncanny are 'related to human and non-human bodies,' and examples include but are not limited to 'a dead, Inanimate [sic] or mechanical object behaving as if alive; conversely a living being behaving as if dead, inanimate or mechanical'.<sup>35</sup> *In Fabric* features the uncanny transformation of the live body into an inanimate object, and the slippery boundaries between these two states. Mrs Luckmoore exemplifies how these boundaries can be transgressed. She has a romantic and sensual relationship with objects in the Dentley and Soper department store, while her costuming and styling have striking similarities to the mannequins on the shop floor (Fig 3). Their makeup is identical – dark, thin arched eyebrows, striking winged eyeliner and red lipstick. It is also revealed that Luckmoore, much like a mannequin, is completely bald, wearing a wig on the shop floor. The makeup for both Luckmoore and the mannequin draws from the *giallo* tradition, in which the arched eyebrows and winged eyeliner are staples for female characters. Her styling is seemingly another reference to *Blood and Black Lace*, specifically the murder of Tao-Li, in which her black winged eyeliner and red lipstick are unaltered as she is drowned in a bathtub. Both films feature women working in the fashion industry who are rendered inanimate; the models of *Blood and Black Lace* are murdered, and Luckmoore is indistinguishable from mannequins. Luckmoore's resemblance to the mannequin and to Tao-Li's dead body

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evokes an uncanny affect, as the lines between animate and inanimate are increasingly blurred. As a shop assistant, her living death and her interchangeability with the objects on the shop floor is emblematic of her objectification as a worker in the fashion industry.

However, rather than rejecting this objectification, Luckmoore develops an intense desire towards objects within the department store. Luckmoore becomes intimate with a mannequin, massaging and washing her, and erotically caressing the mannequin's menstruating genital area. Her desire towards the mannequin reveals her desire for objects, and specifically how they are revered in the consumer capitalist system more than the worker. Nicholas Royle asserts that '[t]he uncanny can be a matter of something gruesome or terrible [...] But it can also be a matter of something *strangely beautiful*, bordering on ecstasy'; the uncanny can communicate 'a compulsion to return to an inorganic state, a *desire* (perhaps unconscious) to die, a death drive' (my italics).<sup>36</sup> Royle's version of the uncanny does not ignore its associations with fear and unease, but suggests that the uncanny experience may entail a strangely beautiful experience of desire.

Whilst Luckmoore's similarities to the mannequin are uncanny, her erotic relationship with it represents a desire towards objects, which I define as 'object-envy'. Luckmoore's humanity is undermined by things, but in the face of ontological dread, she chooses to *become* object-like. Throughout the film, she shows a sensual appreciation of each item she touches, including fabric, catalogues, and money, and the consuming of the mannequin's menstrual blood is a moment of communion with the object. In Babs's dream sequence, she watches Luckmoore caress a catalogue of clothes (Fig. 4). The sequence is sensual; Luckmoore whispers incoherently, running her fingers slowly down the crease of the catalogue and caressing the images. It has a dream-like quality, with close-up shots of Luckmoore's hands overlaid by a hazy orange glow. Luckmoore then begins to cut away at the pictures, often cutting the head off the model first (Fig. 5). As a first-hand witness to consumerism in her role as a shop assistant, Luckmoore witnesses objects receiving superiority over the human, as the shop assistant is effectively a subordinate to the object. As she cuts the head off, she cuts away the human from the object, showing how she privileges objects over their human counterparts. However, Luckmoore's role as a shop assistant makes her love for objects somewhat unsettling. Annalee Newitz describes how consumerism can transform humans into nonhumans, suggesting that 'driven insane by corporate conformity, or gorged on too many products [...] capitalism's monsters cannot tell the difference between commodities and people. They confuse living beings with inanimate objects'.<sup>37</sup>

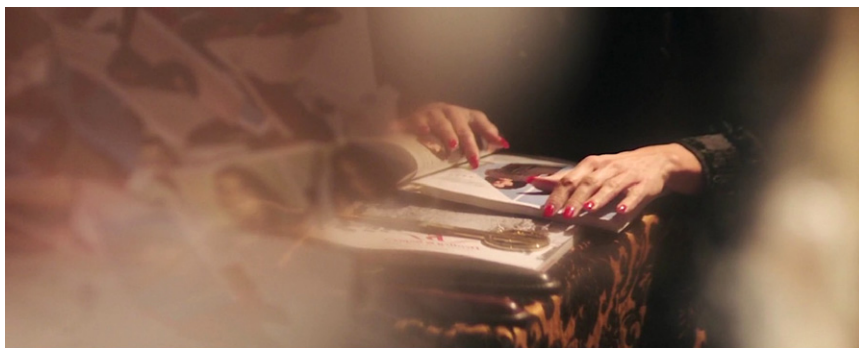


Figure 4. In Babs' dream sequence, Mrs Luckmoore caresses a clothing catalogue sensually. Peter Strickland, *In Fabric* (Curzon Artificial Eye, 2019)



Figure 5. Luckmoore begins to cut into the catalogue, often cutting the heads of the models. Peter Strickland, *In Fabric* (Curzon Artificial Eye, 2019)

Dehumanised by her labour, Luckmoore enters into sensual relationships with the objects that aid her work, and she becomes interchangeable with the mannequins of the store. Applying Newitz's analysis to *In Fabric* shows that Luckmoore's uncanny nonhumanity represents how her existence is interchangeable with the objects that she uses and sells.

*In Fabric* visualises the ambiguous categories of human and nonhuman in its use of zombie allegory. In the final climatic scene, Dentley and Soper breaks out into a vicious riot, as the all-female consumers attack one another. The riot begins when a shopper pushes in the queue, and they begin to argue. However, throughout their disagreement, Luckmoore remains focused on cherishing the clothing items, tenderly folding the

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customer's dress and remarking, 'Such fascination of marvel, its touch on the skin, its contour on the body'. As the women quarrel about who deserves to be first in the queue, Luckmoore retains an object-fascination that is seemingly external to consumerism. However, as the riot becomes violent, she realises in horror that the customers' desire for objects is driven by insatiable greed, not the love and kinship she feels towards them. She is seen cradling the broken body of a mannequin, before she is viciously dragged away by a horde of female shoppers. They rip her wig from her head and tear at her clothes, exposing her mannequin body. In the background, another shopper leans down to steal her wig and disappears off screen.

The scene emulates a classic zombie horde, as they attack Luckmoore before running off to their next victim. The invocation of the zombie in *In Fabric* draws on their allegorical relationship with consumerism, exemplary in George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Steven Shaviro argues that in *Dawn of the Dead*, the zombies that occupy the mall 'mark the dead end or zero degree of capitalism's logic of endless consumption and ever-expanding accumulation'.<sup>38</sup> The shoppers in *In Fabric*, much like Romero's zombies, mindlessly consume, stuck in the endless consumer cycle of capitalism. They are unable to differentiate between objects and humans, attacking Luckmoore in the same way they do mannequins, clothes, and each other. Unlike *Dawn of the Dead*, the shoppers lack the markers of decay and death commonly associated with the zombie. The façade of humanity is perhaps more sinister, as it shows the consumerist monstrosity beneath the middle-class, department-store shopper. However, the riot's wholly female zombies fall into stereotypical positioning of women as mindless consumers. Consumerism is often associated with femininity. As Rachel Bowlby details, historically, 'the phrase "consumer society" usually suggested a deluded, essentially *female* population: the unresisting victims of manipulative advertising and vulgar, alluring displays' (italics in original).<sup>39</sup> The feminisation of mindless consumerism is perhaps a shortfall of *In Fabric* as it objectifies female shoppers, rendering them as brainless corpses whose only drive is to consume. Whilst the gendered portrayal of consumption is problematic, it demonstrates how the consumer cycle objectifies its human participants.

*In Fabric* is a definitively uncanny film, especially in its use of language. Dialogue across the film is uncomfortable, often seeming archaic or eccentric. For example, when Sheila first visits Dentley and Soper, she is approached by Luckmoore, who notes, 'The hesitation in your voice [is] soon to be an echo in the recesses of the spheres of retail'. In more attempts at upselling, she invites Sheila to '[i]magine: sixty percent

vanished from this sensational garment,' and upon making the purchase asks Sheila to 'announce [her] locus of residence followed by the numbers to [her] telephone'. Additionally, Sheila's managers at her workplace, Clive (Steve Oram) and Stash (Julian Barratt), speak in an odd manner, criticising Sheila's 'mysterious toilet breaks before feeding time' and comparing her to another employee who was 'diligent [and] hardworking', though they 'noticed a core of [the] inscrutable about her'. Through strange language, *In Fabric* attempts to provide the audience with a view of late capitalism's oddity from the outside. The absurdism of Dentley and Soper – the sensual appreciation of objects from mannequins to catalogues, the out-of-place and yet unquestioned Gothic attire, and the peculiar language choices all represent the worship of the commodity as a strange ritual from a distant, alien world or a far-off time within history.

But upon closer inspection, these rituals align with our own. The rabid department-store riot at the end of the film replicates the crazed images of Black Friday sales seen on the news each year. The strange language mirrors our unquestioned understanding of 'BOGOF' and '241', and the required pleasantries that retail workers must offer customers even in the face of abuse. The uncanny is provoked, as viewers are startled by the revelation that our world is just as strange as the one of *In Fabric*. Bowlby reflects on the strangeness of consumer culture, and how as consumers 'we rarely think twice, or even once, about our supermarket selves, so oddly adapted to choosing and refusing, seeing and disbelieving, desiring and ignoring, listing and drifting'.<sup>40</sup> However, the strange quality of *In Fabric* is undoubtedly comedic, and its titular description as a 'A Ghost Story' is seemingly at odds with these elements. The film's contradicting genres highlight the absurdity of consumer capitalism. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik argue that the comic turn in Gothic fiction is not an 'abberation or a corruption of a "serious" genre', but that the theatricality of both genres is complementary. They suggest that comedy counters the Gothic's depiction of modern life as 'unliveable', arguing that 'subjecting the uncanny to various comic Gothic turns [can] help to make the modern condition liveable'.<sup>41</sup> The absurdity of *In Fabric* allows us to realise the simultaneous strangeness and hilarity of our 'supermarket selves'; or, in this case, our 'department-store selves'. The result is an uncanny realisation that the unfamiliar world of *In Fabric* is actually all too familiar, and provides a way to find humour in the strangeness of late capitalism.

### Conclusion

*In Fabric* presents us with an existence that is tyrannised by things. It is a darker side to the emancipatory promises of Thing Theory. There are

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many positives to this framework of thinking; encouraging us to think in ways that challenge predisposed anthropocentrism, providing a richer engagement with our material worlds, and considering our place in the nonhuman assemblage in the throes of the climate crisis. However, there is a reductionist potential here. In Guangzhou, China, garment workers work for seventy-five hours a week, sometimes being paid less than a dollar per piece in factories for fast-fashion retailer Shein, which is valued at around \$66 billion.<sup>42</sup> When confronted with accounts of modern slavery and child labour in the garment industry, celebrating the exciting agency of the object becomes reductionist; it ignores the human agency that has been taken away during its creation. In our centring of objects, it is important to remain alert to the ways in which humans are *objectified* by this process.

The use of Gothic mode in the film *In Fabric* offers an opportunity to reconcile these differences. *In Fabric* agrees that objects have strange and wonderful powers, but through its central red dress we see that this is not necessarily a wholly positive transformation. As Weinstock suggests, ‘if the Gothic teaches us anything, it is that it is never, ever good when objects stop working for us, assert themselves, and transform from “dead stuff” to “live presence”’.<sup>43</sup> The agency of objects within *In Fabric* functions as a materialisation of the dead labour at the core of the object, as it returns to vengefully and powerfully remind the consumer of its presence. This extends, too, to the object-envy of humans within the film, who demonstrate that, in an object-oriented world, it is better to join the winning team. Through the film’s thematic darkness, its gothic objects allow us to accept the peculiar agency of objects whilst recognising the violent systems of exploitation under late capitalism that produce them.

### Notes

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