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**CATHERINE SPOONER**

# Dark Looks: An Interview With Valerie Steele

## **ABSTRACT**

*Valerie Steele is the Chief Curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, and one of the most prominent fashion historians working today. Her exhibition Gothic: Dark Glamour ran from September 2008 to February 2009, and is the first major exhibition to focus on Gothic influences in fashion. An accompanying book, with an additional essay by Jennifer Park, was published by Yale University Press in 2008. I met Steele on 12 February just before the exhibition closed, and talked to her about the process of putting together the exhibition, the popular reaction to it, and about what Gothic in fashion means more generally.*

Catherine Spooner: I really enjoyed the exhibition – it was utterly fabulous. There’s something particularly timely about it I think: Gothic has been coming back again and again in the media over the last few years, and in particular the Autumn/Winter season 2008 saw many designers show Gothic-influenced collections. So my first question is quite a big one: why Gothic and why now – and that relates to the exhibition and more generally.

Valerie Steele: I’ve been working on the exhibition for the past two years, so I felt very pleased that it opened in September 2008, right when the collections were so Gothic, and there were all these other Gothic phenomena in the culture, like all of the vampire movies and TV shows and so on. I guess I felt when I started working on the show that it had been pretty much ten years since Gothic had had a really major impact on fashion. The last time it was really

huge in fashion was Autumn/Winter 97-98 – so a little over ten years – and it just seemed to me it was time for it to re-emerge in a big way. I first started studying it myself back in 1995, when it was on its way up towards that peak, in 97-98, and I remember doing a slide lecture for my graduate students about Gothic influence on fashion. So a lot of reporters kept trying to get me to say the current Gothic revival had to do with either the war in Iraq or the economy being terrible and I said, ‘Well no, the last time it was really big was when Clinton was around and the economy was booming!’ There’s nothing as simple in fashion as wars or economies triggering fashion phenomena – it’s obviously much more associated with things that are going on at a visual, or in the case of Goth, musical level – developments that are happening that people aren’t particularly aware of in the wider culture. I’m not entirely sure what was the concatenation of musical and visual and subcultural and fashion things that all perfectly gelled to make this such a spectacularly Gothic moment. I think that there had been developments like the emergence of Steampunk as the next kind of iteration. High fashion people are very reactive, they’re sensitive to things that are happening in the culture, but they’re not actually the first to notice things. Contrary to the reputation that fashion is the first thing that can tell change, actually change tends to be happening for quite a while before it finally hits fashion designers, so I think undoubtedly things were happening in the world of music and street style, and in visual arts, that are only now being picked up on. For example, there have been a ton of exhibitions about Gothic themes in art, and in fact one reviewer said that no one who has been going to art galleries in Chelsea would think this is such a hugely new thing. But the point is it was new for high fashion, to have this moment, to have Gothic emerge again.

CS: Full credit to your fashion radar for getting it so spectacularly right! Your own career has demonstrated an interest in the dark or more perverse side of fashion for quite some time, for instance your books on fetish and the corset, so in a sense was a full-blown exhibition and book on Gothic the next inevitable step for you?

VS: Well, I don’t know if it was inevitable, but certainly when you look back on it, it is all part of a picture. There was *Fetish* [1996], and there was *Corset* [2000], and then I did a beautiful small exhibition here at FIT, *Femme Fatale* [2003], which was about *fin-de-siecle* decadence. So this has definitely been a major theme in my work; I would have thought at the beginning my work was mostly tying fashion to issues of sexuality and the body, because of things like *Corset*, but I guess there has also always been a perverse undertone to that.

CS: One of the things that I enjoyed most about the book, and the exhibition as well, was the way you talk about the relationship between subcultural style and high fashion and also historical costume. So, I was hoping you might be able to tell me a bit more about the process of curating these very disparate elements – how did you practically go about it?

VS: It seemed to me highly unlikely that that stereotype was true that designers just ripped off subcultural style; that paradigm always seemed grossly oversimplistic. I think when I got all of the things together, if you walk through the exhibition you can see well, that sometimes the designers are derivative of subcultural styles, but most of the time what’s happened is the designers and the creators of subcultural looks – who are often designers themselves, just not internationally branded designers – are responding to the same kind of stimuli, like horror movies for example, vampire movies. So I had a kind of

two-pronged attack. I was contacting designers to see what things they still had in their archive, and what I could borrow. Whenever possible I would try and interview them, like I was able to interview Rick Owens a couple of times, and John Galliano, Anna Sui, Olivier Theyskens, and some others. But I also was able to interview quite a few people who self-identified as Goths, and they would introduce me one to the other person, and I'd either talk to them on the phone, if they lived in the UK, or I'd meet them. With Evan [Michelson] for example, who had the store *Obscura*, I went to the store and met her and then I went to her house, and she introduced me to other people and they came up here to FIT – I think for a while the guards felt there was an endless stream of black-clad young people who were coming up to the office!

CS: It looks and sounds like it was an awful lot of fun!

VS: It was enormously fun – it was SO fun! I would happily have worked on this for another year, but I guess then my timing would have been off!

CS: Were there any pieces that you really wanted to have in the exhibition that you couldn't get?

VS: The only piece I really wanted that I couldn't get was Schiaparelli's skeleton dress, which I wanted to borrow from the V&A, but because *Fashion and Surrealism* was still travelling around the world, they couldn't lend me that. I was amazed, I thought that a lot of designers would have refused to lend to the show, because they wouldn't want to be associated with the Gothic, because of all the sort of pejorative connotations, and that wasn't true! Ann Demeulemeester did call me up and she said, 'Val, I trust you: I will lend you the dress that you want, but I want you to know that I am not a Gothic designer!' And this is from someone who has always worn black since she was fifteen, and her clothes are often described as being Gothic in feeling. I said, 'OK, I'll make that clear Ann, but what does Gothic mean to you?' And she said, 'Well, skulls: it's this kind of kitschy thing with skulls.' I said, 'Well we'll have a few of those but not a whole lot, because actually it's been so over-done, you know I'm running into people walking their dog wearing a dog-coat with skulls on it!' So I asked her, 'How would you describe your own clothes?' and she said, 'Kind of dark Romanticism'. I said, 'Well, that's kind of where I'm seeing a lot of the Gothic really being, a dark Romanticism.'

CS: The way she expressed that is really interesting, as there's a frequent subcultural strategy where Goths refuse to call themselves Goths: Bauhaus famously said that they weren't Goths, and The Sisters of Mercy say that they're not Goths...

VS: Exactly! So even in the core of the culture there's this sense that it's a pejorative, and I found that interesting because Punk is valorised, Hip Hop is valorised, people with no connection to Goth claim to have a connection, but then real Goths say, 'Oh no not me! Oh no, I'm not Goth at all!'

CS: 'Gothic' was frequently used pejoratively in the eighteenth century...

VS: Of course, it's been a pejorative from the beginning! Absolutely! Even in the Middle Ages, people who built cathedrals didn't call them Gothic cathedrals. It was a couple of centuries later that people looked back and said, 'Weren't they horrible and barbaric, those old *Gothic* cathedrals!' It always seems to carry this pejorative, like the word decadence: it's never something



*Figure 1: Evening dress by Ann Demeulemeester, autumn/winter 1997/1998.*



Figure 2: 'The Batcave'.

neutral, or just a description; it's all this sense of the morbid, the macabre, the barbarous, the primitive.

CS: So how self-conscious do you think contemporary Gothic style is about the literary and historical precedents?

VS: It really varies a lot. Some of the Goths that I talked to were very much into literary and artistic antecedents and they talked to me about not just Baudelaire, but Byron – they were very widely read, and had lots of different artists that they wanted to bring into the Gothic pantheon, from Gustave Doré, to the Pre-Raphaelites, all kinds of people. Others sent me little sniffy messages that said, 'You're so dumb, it has nothing to do with Goths in history, it all started in the late 1970s.' Which reminded me of one of my informants to whom I said, 'Everyone I talk to is so culturally literate and articulate!' She said, 'Oh no, some of them just read Anne Rice.'

CS: What sort of reactions did Goths have, or have Goths had, to the exhibition?

VS: Really positive! Except for the occasional snippy thing, like, 'You were wrong about thinking it has this long history', on the whole I've been really gratified, because people have written and called and emailed me; one of them said 'It's absolutely amazing that someone who's not a Goth herself could get this so right! You really did your homework.' Then another person who identified as a Goth said, 'We were really worried that you were going to make something that was really kitschy, or make fun of us, and instead it's really true to the feeling of being a Goth', so I was really pleased by that.

CS: The one part of the exhibition that I felt slightly ambivalent about was the Batcave section, which has the Goth subcultural styles in it. The reason for that is very subjective, and I'm very self-conscious of why that is, and it's that I didn't recognise myself there from the days when I self-identified as a Goth. Of course, asserting one's own perceived difference is a completely typical subcultural strategy! However, it must be very difficult to encompass such a diverse subculture and such a long-lived subculture – I think there are eleven mannequins in that section. You do find very representative styles, I think, and do some really interesting things with that section, but I wonder if other Goths or ex-Goths have had similar reservations?

VS: Nobody has said it to my face, but I could certainly understand that people might say, OK, so I certainly recognise that those existed, but there is more to it than that.

CS: It's funny, because I actually found myself self-identifying more with some of the designer fashion, and I wonder if that's because the self-image that you have is a fantasised one?

VS: Yeah, and I think that I tried to give a sense in the Batcave of a club environment, which is very hard to do without music – we couldn't afford to pay for the rights to get the music. But of course the club is a literal environment, it's not an imaginative environment, so something like the laboratory or the ruined castle in a way is more imaginatively evocative. Even in the section about the Victorian Cult of Mourning, when I have this Goth girl's real Victorian dress that she wears to cemeteries and parties, that in a way was more evocative of the Goth scene than the Batcave was as a set.



Figure 3: 'The Victorian Cult of Mourning'.

CS: Another thing that I loved about the exhibition was the way it was staged. You talk in the accompanying blurb about it being labyrinthine, and all the other Gothic metaphors that circulate around that space, but the one that I really strongly reacted to was the way that the whole exhibition played with the gaze and the notion of the veil.

VS: I got that from your book! I got that from you, totally. Did you notice how we put a little black band around some of the mannequins' eyes?

CS: And the two-way mirror in the Batcave which is obviously a reference to Alexander McQueen's 'Voss' show with the reflective glass box, and the mirroring in the Victorian Cult of Mourning section where you have the mannequins mirroring each other, then mirroring each other in the mirrors, and the doubling and the uncanny effects and the gauzes and the curtains – it's just fabulous, it's continually playing with the notion of looking, and how we look.

VS: And also the Jean Cocteau movie and opera about death [Orphée], when Death comes through the mirror.



Figure 4: 'The Haunted Palace', featuring evening dress from Alexander McQueen's 'Voss' collection, spring/summer 2001, left.

*Valerie was interrupted by a colleague, and after we resumed she continued to talk about the staging of the exhibition.*

VS: It was incredibly fun putting the show together. I have a wonderful exhibition designer, Charles Froom, but I also wanted to bring in Simon Costin because he's someone who's an artist and a designer and he worked with McQueen and he has a tremendous Gothic sensibility, and collection of things himself. So the three of us worked, and then my exhibition manager, Fred Dennis, and we got more and more itchy, we had these amazing brainstorming sessions trying to envision what could we have. And I told them I had to have a ruined castle, and I had to have a laboratory, and I wanted vampires and I wanted mourning, but then I said how there was that thing in Poe about the haunted palace, and this was a metaphor for a disturbed mind, and I wanted it to somehow be like the Alexander McQueen collection 'Voss', all that madness and horror and beauty, and Simon was the one who came up with those wonderful, Caligari-esque huge doors and the disproportion, and how they're all different angles, and then Fred and I were placing the mannequins, and Fred said 'You've got to be careful to have the mannequins not look at each other' – they're all alienated and separate from each other.

CS: Except for the two who are looking at each other directly – the one with her back to you is quite uncanny as you feel like she might turn round at any moment! I got that sense of the uncanny from the exhibition, that at any moment the mannequins might come alive!

VS: We got some special, ghost-like mannequins, to have some of that, because I hate the normal, schleppy mannequins, but when the shleppys were ghosted, it was more abstract.

CS: What makes them 'ghosted'?

VS: It's a different material; if you look carefully some of them are greyish clear, instead of the normal white, and then some of the more theatrical ones were older, highly stylised, 'realistic' mannequins by Reifstein. And someone's friend came in for practically nothing to do the wigs, and they were inspired, and people were so keen on working on this show that they were doing it for a fraction of the fee they'd normally charge. Then we started coming up with these amazing wigs and things to capture the doll-like quality, which is so uncanny, like an automaton or a mannequin coming to life. I once wanted to do a show called 'Sexy Robots', so this idea of the robot mannequin doll is really important.

CS: You incorporate quite a lot about Japanese Gothic Lolita style in the catalogue and there are some examples in the exhibition as well. I find Gothic Lolita particularly interesting, because it seems to be all about the clothes and not necessarily so much about the lifestyle or the music, so it's almost a distillation of the Gothic in clothes. When I was looking round the exhibition I noticed there were many interesting pieces by Japanese designers as well: Comme des Garçons and Yohji Yamamoto and so on. What interests me, therefore, is how you think Gothic style works in non-Western cultural contexts?

VS: Well, there are real Goths in Japan, and also people who are into vampires, but Elegant Gothic Lollitas are a whole separate category, and are not 'real Goths'. I mean they're into Visual Kei music, and they're not into



*Figure 5: 'Elegant Gothic Lolita' ensemble by Hirooka Naoto with 'angry' doll, autumn 2008.*

Goth antecedents. However, they all have this totally fantastic look that they put together, and that look is actually influencing a lot of Western Goths now in a big way. So I think that to say I couldn't include them because they're not 'real' Goths is not valid. There are 'real' Goths in lots of other non-Western cultures apparently, in Mexico and South America there are also whole Goth subcultures, but the Japanese are just different – in so many ways – I mean way more different even than the Indians, certainly more different than the Chinese, it's such a fascinatingly different culture. A lot of Japanese designers are very avant-garde and they're very sensitive to visual ideas. I think it depends from designer to designer how much you could say that they had a real Gothic sensibility. I mean someone like Yohji Yamamoto actually used to have a line called Gothic, as well as a line called Noir. Jun Takahashi talks about how his clothes are 'cute and scary', which is kind of like Gothic Lolita. There was Lolita first and then there was Gothic Lolita, and he carried that on further. But I do think probably there's a bit of leaching with the next project that I'm working on, which is about Japanese fashion, so part of it was also that I was starting to get really interested in that.

CS: I found some of those pieces, as I said, among the most brilliant in the exhibition. I particularly loved the Yamamoto dress which he compares to Samurai clothes but it's like a deconstructed suit at the same time. It's cut so amazingly! But you wouldn't necessarily have thought of it as Gothic in a different context.

VS: There just seem to be things about ruin and destruction and transience, I think a lot of the Japanese – and this does actually have to do with Japanese culture, into that idea of *mono no aware*, the fleetingness of time and the pathos of things, the beauty of ruins, that's a deep part of Japanese culture.

CS: In the accompanying book to the exhibition you call Alexander McQueen the greatest contemporary Gothic fashion designer. I would agree with you – but why do you think he is so great, and what is it about his work that is so particularly Gothic?

VS: I think that he's the designer who's most consistently interested in certain Gothic themes such as the macabre, and the beauty and horror of context. He often incorporates themes having to do with death, and skulls, and bones, and also religious iconography, and he often views religion through this lens of it having to do with the sorcery and superstition and prejudice of the past. He created a collection inspired by his ancestor who was executed as a witch at Salem, all about religious persecution, and sorcery, and superstition. The 'Joan of Arc' collection, which we didn't include in *Gothic* because I'd included it in an earlier show on *The Weaponized Woman*, had to do again with Joan as a heretic and a witch and a female deviant, who was being cast out as a scapegoat. So I think he's very much obsessed with that outsiderdom, which I think is really part of that Gothic sensibility too, from Walpole on. I mean Walpole's biographer describes him as the great outsider, and I think that that feeling is why so many adolescents are drawn to Gothic, as during adolescence you feel like an outsider.

CS: Does McQueen accept the term Gothic?

VS: I didn't have a chance to ask him – I couldn't get an interview.



*Figure 6: 'In memory of Elizabeth Howe, Salem, 1692' by Alexander McQueen, autumn/winter 2007.*

CS: That's a shame. Another thing that's really struck me, and this was confirmed when I went round the exhibition, is that so many of these designers are British – what is it about the British that draws them to Gothic in particular do you think?

VS: I think that it has to do with the connection between high fashion and street style in Great Britain, which is so strong – it's strong in Japan too. And I think it also has to do with a sensibility which prizes the eccentric and the offbeat, whereas something like Italian fashion does not: it's all about luxury, and it's a kind of haut-bourgeois fashion. Riccardo Tischi is practically the only really Gothic Italian designer.

CS: And he trained in Britain...

VS: Exactly. I remember I gave a tour to some dignitaries from Italy and walked them through the show, and they hated it! They were like, 'This is Hallowe'en!' It was only near the very end, when I showed them Galliano's take on the Marchesa Casati,<sup>1</sup> and they read the Leopardi quote about fashion and death,<sup>2</sup> that they were like, 'Oh – la Decadenza!' And then they could understand it through that framework – d'Annunzio and so on. It's so alien – I mean that's the heartland of the classical, of making everything calm, and where preserving the equilibrium is all – whereas Gothic is the exact opposite, it's northern and barbaric and anti-classical.

CS: It's interesting how that still plays itself out in fashion even though that's such an ancient division. You say in the book that the role of the fashion photographer and the stylist is crucial to understanding Gothic fashion, and there are some examples in the exhibition of Sean Ellis's work and that of art photographer Tanya Marcuse. So what do you think that photography can bring to the clothes?

VS: I think photography's essential as I think the photographer and stylist are the ones who tell the story about the clothes. Clothes can look many different ways depending on how you style them. I deliberately included a couple of dresses, one by Calvin Klein and one by Armani, that don't particularly look Gothic, but they were both chosen for Gothic fashion spreads, one in *American Vogue* and one in *Paris Vogue*, and both pieces are a black dress which can be styled Gothically. Now the stylist and photographer could do another take, they could do a Punky, rock'n'roll take, or a 'tough chic' take, but once in a while they choose to style it in a way which is Gothic. So fashion photography can take more liberties with developing a full-scale story and a scenario, because of the other objects there, and which mannequins you choose, and everything including the contact lenses can make the look much more one way than another way.

CS: So in a sense, the curator is also telling a story about the clothes too, so you're doing the same thing in a different medium. Do you think the story that the exhibition tells and the story that the book tells is a slightly different one?

VS: Yes, they are a slightly different story, and I think I'm very happy with the book but I think the exhibition is even better. I think it's the best exhibition I've ever done – even better than *Corset* and *Femme Fatale*. So, I spent a lot of effort trying to get good photographs of the exhibition, because an exhibition is like a dance performance, it's so ephemeral, I mean in a week and a half

1. Luisa Casati Stampa di Soncino, Marchesa di Roma (1881–1957), flamboyant Italian heiress.
2. The quotation from 'Dialogue Between Fashion and Death' (1824), by Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, displayed on the wall of the museum, reads as follows:  
 'Fashion: "I am fashion, your sister."  
 'Death: "My sister?"  
 'Fashion: "Yes, don't you remember that both of us are daughters of decay?"

they're going to tear down all of the ruined castle and everything, and it will all be gone.

CS: In the book you write that, 'Gothic fashion is thus a rejection of "normal", "natural" beauty in favor of an alternative vision of horrific, excessive, artificial and (sometimes) sexually fetishistic beauty.' That leads me to wonder whether you see Gothic fashion as possessing a capacity to critique our perfection-obsessed culture?

VS: Oh I think it does, potentially.

CS: I like that 'potentially'.

VS: The meaning's not in the clothes, ever. Like a high heel is not a sex object *per se*, it's only the stories we tell about it, how we use it to create a *mise-en-scene*. So if somebody is wearing a dress and make-up and hair and body presentation which is questioning or denying what is assumed to be beautiful and acceptable, then I think it does have a potentially disruptive effect. If you think of something like the Comme des Garçons so-called 'bump' dress, when that was shown all the journalists went crazy and they said, 'Oh, she's deforming women and making them look ugly'. I thought 'Well, maybe...', but you could just as easily say she's questioning how come it's OK to have padding in certain parts of a woman's body and that's normative and making it more beautiful, while in other places it's making it into a witch, a monster. But I think that many people have a very low threshold in how much they're willing to turn themselves into an alternative vision, particularly in America, which is very conformist. One of the cool things about Britain and Japan is that many people are very, very willing to go out on a limb and have people not understand what they look like. I remember in the Eighties I used to wear all Japanese, big oversized black clothes and even people who were in the industry didn't get them, and it was like, 'What are you doing, that is so weird!' Most of these messages simply are not understood by those around, but a few other people maybe will pick up on them. One of the Goth girls that I interviewed has green dreadlocks, and she's a living question to the people around her. Is green OK too? Is it OK for a white girl to have dreadlocks? It's asking potentially all kinds of questions.

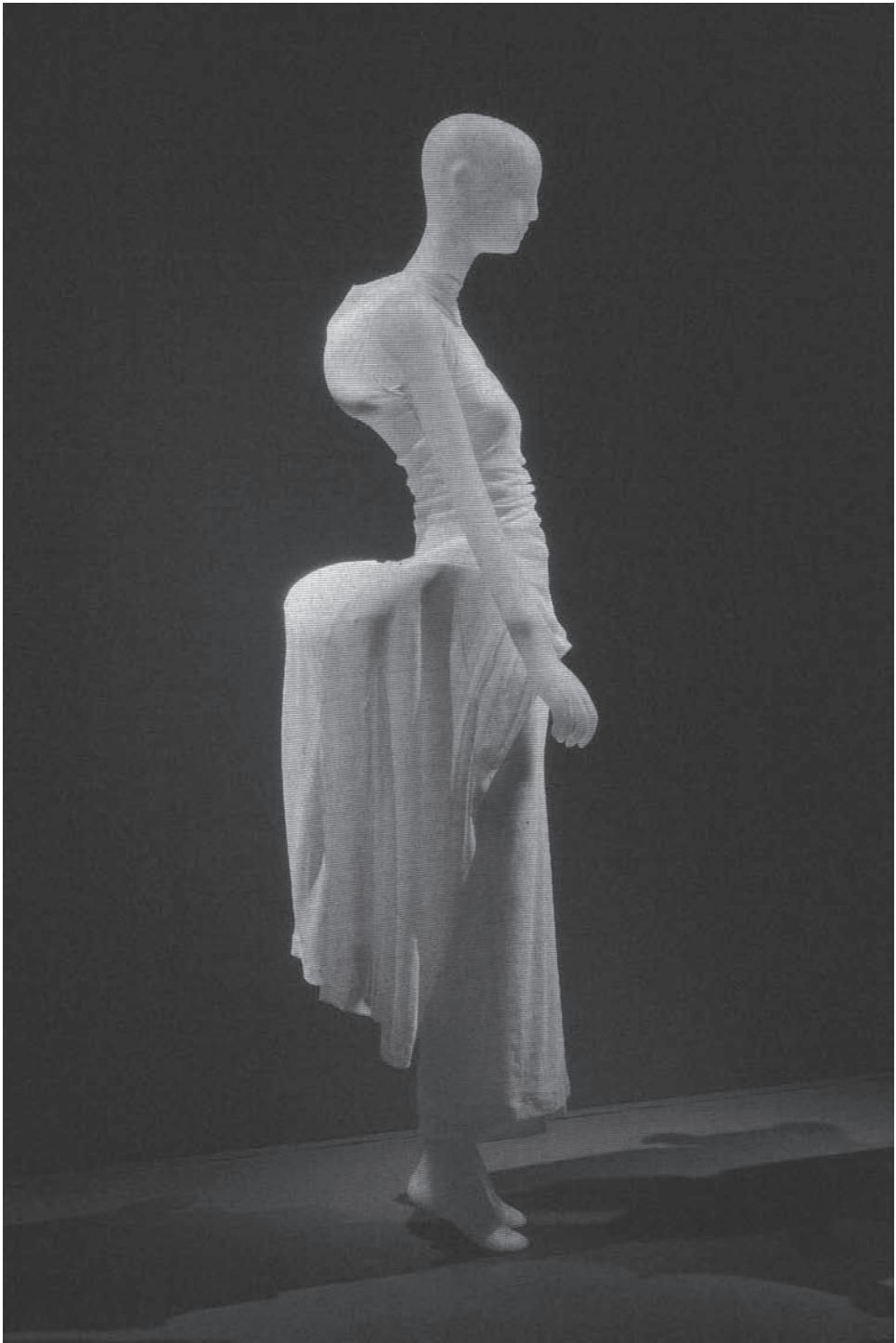
CS: So do you think that part of whether the fashion is subversive or not is partly to do with the story that's being told around it and partly, as you said, to do with the context?

VS: Oh yes, and the perception, and most people won't get it at all, which I think is also interesting – the fact that it's unreadable to most people is just part of what's going on, it becomes sort of a secret Masonic handshake that only some people are going to understand. Others may understand at some visceral level – 'I don't like that person, they're questioning my values' – but they wouldn't be able to put a finger on exactly what values are being questioned.

CS: But some of the dresses could be worn in a relatively conventional way.

VS: Absolutely.

CS: They could be styled conventionally and probably wouldn't trouble anyone at all, they could be worn on the red carpet or whatever. Arguably, you



*Figure 7: 'Dress becomes body' by Rei Kawakubo for Comme des Garçons, spring 1997.*



Figure 8: Evening dress by Rodarte, autumn 2008.

could say the same thing about Goth subculture, that some of the looks are deliberately outrageous, disturbing and all the rest of it, but it is also possible to wear Goth street style in quite a conventional way. Or would you disagree with that?

VS: No, its meaning is always contextual and is always being recreated at any given time. Absolutely. And whether there's a deep teenage angst behind it or whether there's a slightly ironic feeling that, 'Yes, I believe this but I know that it's also over the top' or whatever, that's going to be part of it too.

CS: I suppose what I'm thinking of is what Goths within the subculture often call the 'Weekenders' or the 'Saturday Goths', that you can just dress up that way for a Hallowe'en party and you can actually look quite glamorous. Many Goths would probably think of that as not representing the whole lifestyle; also, that look might still conform to conventional ideas of beauty.

VS: Yes, and most people are going to want to conform in one way or another, if not to conventional ideas then to the conventions within that subculture – because there won't be a hard and fast difference. But I think one thing that was interesting is that a lot of Goths were very open to the idea that there were nuances between the kind of 'authenticness' and the fashion quality. That you know when you're talking [in *Fashioning Gothic Bodies*] about how the clothes are the life and it's really part of the Gothic psyche, but also a sense that there's an awareness that it's a theatrical, artificial thing too – that's really interesting, because when I interviewed fetish people, they flatly hated the fashionable co-optation of elements. As one guy said to one leather-fetish guy, 'What do you think of Versace?' He said 'I hate it!' He asked why, and the leather-fetishist said, 'Because now you can't tell if people are really into it or not. I mean, are you *really* into it, or is it just fashion?' But I think that with Goth there is a much more sophisticated awareness that the outer layer is always going to be to some extent a mask, and there might just be layers of masks.

CS: Last question: why do you think Gothic does keep coming back in fashion, and why does it keep being recycled every ten years or however many years?

VS: Well, I think that people respond emotionally to that whole vocabulary of images and stories that have been built up over the years about the Gothic and people respond to feelings of monstrosity, they respond to the eroticism of the vampire story, they respond to the dark grammar of being the dandy anti-hero, and I think that vocabulary and that visual iconography keeps being added to. One thing that I loved about the Rodarte dress in the exhibition is that the designers looked to East Asian, Japanese and Korean horror films and they came up with new imagery and new ways to convey that feeling of outsidersness and eroticised horror.

All photographs by Irving Solero, © The Museum at FIT, New York.

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