

## **Miss Havisham's Dress: Materialising Dickens in Film Adaptations of *Great Expectations***

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### **Abstract:**

This essay focuses on the neo-Victorian materialisation of Dickens's vision through the costuming of the Miss Havisham figure in three film adaptations of *Great Expectations*: David Lean's *Great Expectations* (1946), Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations* (1998), a modern updating. The distinct film language which emerges from the costume designs in each of these films enables cinema audiences to re-read and re-imagine the novel's portrayal of perverse and uncanny femininity. As a result, the disturbing and enduring ambiguity of Havisham's clothing establishes her as a figure of resistance to modernity, and as an embodiment of decline, signalling youth and age by means of a robe which is at once wedding gown, unfashionable garment and shroud.

**Keywords:** ageing, costume, Charles Dickens, fashion, film adaptation, gender, *Great Expectations*, Miss Havisham, *Sunset Boulevard*, textiles.

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Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61) has never been far from our cinema screens, from *The Boy and the Convict* (1909) to Mike Newell's recent adaptation starring Helena Bonham Carter as Miss Havisham (2012). A vivid iconography has developed around the Havisham figure, rendering the character particularly memorable to film audiences. As Georges Letissier states, there is a "mnemonic persistence attached to her image", which means that "the famous recluse has repeatedly asserted her centrality in film adaptations" (Letissier 2012: 33). This centrality is not, however, evident in Dickens's novel for, as Regina Barreca has argued, the latter tends to foreground the "male-male bonds" between Pip and Magwitch, Joe, and Jaggers, along with Pip's friendships with Herbert and Wemmick. Film adaptations usually shift the focus towards Pip's relationships with Miss

Havisham and Estella, both of whom, according to Barreca, “capture our imagination, and [...] provide the images that remain most firmly in our minds, long after the actual viewing ends” (Barreca 2003: 39). With each adaptation of *Great Expectations* Miss Havisham’s image is recognisable, her costume a focal point, whether updated to fit a contemporary context or restyled in relation to the body of the actress playing the role. However it is designed, though, it functions semiotically to convey to audiences Miss Havisham’s situation: that is, the life of an ageing woman who is trapped in, and fixated on, the past. In many ways, Miss Havisham is a figure who lends herself to neo-Victorian interpretation because she embodies the idea of a visible commentary on the past. In one sense, she is eminently and recognisably Victorian, yet in another, she is strangely indefinite and mutable. Miss Havisham is presented by Dickens as inhabiting Satis House “long before the days of photographs” and she is concerned not with her present moment, but a much earlier period (Dickens 1996: 3). Notably, the novel was serialised without illustrations; Miss Havisham thus occupies our imaginations untethered to any preordained image, and her refusal to belong to, and participate in the world complicates any direct association between her and Victorianism. In theorising the neo-Victorian, Ann Heilmann invokes magic and illusion:

The position of the neo-Victorian author and film director can [...] be compared to that of a conjuror: like the audience of a stage magician, we know from the start that it’s all an act, but judge the quality of the performance by its ability to deceive and mystify us. (Heilmann 2009/2010: 18)

For a film director intent on “conjuring” the past, the confusion surrounding Miss Havisham and her place in history makes for an uncanny and flexible signifier of the Victorian. On screen and in costume, she constantly changes shape; she deceives and mystifies as the past is made to speak to the present, and the present reinvents the past.

The vividness of so many screen Miss Havishams owes much to the way her grotesque image is presented in Dickens’s novel. His descriptions of the ageing woman in her decaying wedding gown indicate his extraordinarily evocative visualisation of her world. This ability to invoke the visual has prompted many critics to make links between Dickens’s

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writing and the cinema. For example, Sergei Eisenstein, writing in 1949, argued that Dickens anticipated the medium of film in the rich “optical quality” of his fiction (Eisenstein 2012: 145). Later commentators have agreed: Joss Marsh argues that “there is a more striking affinity between Dickensian modes of narration and film’s developed techniques of storytelling (including editing, camerawork, and design) than exists between film and any other author” (Marsh 2001: 205). Grahame Smith also claims that there are “what might be called proto-filmic elements in his writing” (Smith 2003: 7), while John Bowen suggests that Dickens’s work displays “the essential parts of the grammar of film” (Bowen 2003: 37). It is clear that the visual qualities of Dickens’s fiction have resulted in some striking cinematic images from a variety of adaptations: Oliver asking for more, Mr Pickwick at Dingley Dell, David Copperfield in rags on the Dover Road, and Sydney Carton stoically approaching the gallows, to name just a few examples. These images may originate in Dickens’s work, but their powerful cinematic afterlives provide moments of recognition of ‘Dickens’ even for those who have not read his novels. Juliet John, referring to the “mass cultural repetition of Dickens’s moving images”, argues that cinema and television have “undoubtedly drained his culture-texts of some of their radical, as well as their reactionary, impact” (John 2010: 238). Nevertheless, while Dickens’s politics may seem to have been largely written out of or sanitised in most adaptations, it is not easy to rid his work of all its disturbing potential.

*Great Expectations* is highly unusual in its denial of a key wedding scene (although some cinematic reworkings of the novel chose to close with the union of Pip and Estella).<sup>1</sup> Screen adaptations inevitably centre on the gothic potential of Miss Havisham, perhaps the most sinister, spectacular bride in Victorian fiction. Her costuming must suggest, disrupt and exceed all of the usual associations of a wedding gown. Indeed, the Havisham costumes do not primarily function as clothing, but work as statements. Otto Thieme argues that “dress is a visible symbol of nonvisible cultural meanings” (Thieme 1988: 15), yet Miss Havisham’s wedding dress distorts all of the cultural meanings surrounding the bride, especially those linked to notions of hope, fertility, and renewal.

While Miss Havisham’s screen presence originates with a set of motifs from the novel, each adaptation modifies these details for different audiences and contexts. Nevertheless, all share the disturbing qualities of

Dickens's original. The Havisham costumes create a film language which enables new interpretations of the mistress of Satis House, allowing directors, actresses and costume designers the opportunity to add something of their own vision to the materialisation of Dickens's famous spinster-bride in her tattered wedding gown. His representation of female grotesquerie and heightened rendering of her material world present an interesting ambiguity. As a perpetual bride whose wedding gown is decaying visibly upon her corpse-like form, Miss Havisham functions as an embodiment of perversity and contradiction. Although she is wealthy, she wears rags and inhabits a virtually derelict mansion. Costume designers commissioned to dress Miss Havisham have an unusual opportunity to overturn the conventions of the costume drama, conventions based on a sanitised "sheen of aestheticized history", to borrow Jerome de Groot's term, which tends to dominate the visual field in reconstructions of the past (de Groot 2009: 188). Such costume dramas are usually termed, in the language of media advertising, "lavish" and "gorgeous" (Groot 2009: 188). While the heroine in her wedding dress is showcased in most adaptations of Victorian novels as the climax of the narrative's trajectory, Miss Havisham's wedding gown forms a complex visual rejection of all that the traditional costume drama stands for: the fulfilment of a heterosexual romance legalised by means of a marriage ceremony, during which the youthful bride is displayed resplendent in bridal attire. The ragged wedding gown with its yellowing fragments of once-rich material replaces this traditional climactic moment with the image of a woman long past youth and perpetually signalling the failure of her wedding day.

In order to demonstrate the powerful, sometimes disturbing effects created by Miss Havisham's costume, this essay discusses the materialisation of Dickens's vision in three film adaptations of *Great Expectations*: David Lean's 1946 black-and-white version, with Martita Hunt playing Miss Havisham; Alfonso Cuarón's 1998 adaptation set in contemporary Florida and New York, with Anne Bancroft playing Miss Dinsmoor, the Miss Havisham figure; and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Billy Wilder's film noir homage to Lean and a central intertext for Cuarón, starring Gloria Swanson as the wealthy, unbalanced retired star of the silent screen, Norma Desmond. Despite the change of name and historical positioning, the Havisham figure is recognisable in Wilder's and Cuarón's adaptations. Dickens's original conception of the bride-as-failure has

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provided a resonant model which film-makers continue to use to signal the failure of femininity and the uncanniness of the ageing woman's body in an era when health, beauty and youth are presented to cinema audiences as the desirable norm. Significantly, the Hollywood promotion of images of youthful female 'stars' means that the squalid home and ageing body of Miss Havisham's screen presence have the potential to unsettle their audiences, indicating to viewers what happens when, to echo Judith Butler's well-known formulation of the performative qualities of gender, a woman fails to 'do' her age and sexual status according to social norms (see Butler 2007: 185-193).

Miss Havisham's fame, perpetuated by her vivid and varied afterlife on screen, is a result of her uniqueness: brides are not typically represented as grey-haired and corpse-like, forever inhabiting and exhibiting their bridal condition. Her wedding gown, instead of being preserved carefully within the hidden recesses of Satis House, is permanently on display, museal like an art installation which speaks of and in the present (see Wynne 2010: 75). It is possible to trace the biography of her wedding dress through the novel as well as its various adaptations on screen. Dickens's most famous fictional costume originates in Pip's description of his first encounter with Miss Havisham, emphasising the conventional features of the bride:

She was dressed in rich material – satins, and lace, and silks – all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. (Dickens 1996: 57)

This focuses attention on the scene's central figure before Pip's gaze (camera-like) continues its forward movement into a close-up 'shot' which reveals that "everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre" (Dickens 1996: 57-58). In the novel, the spinster-bride strangely resembles a film director, as she instructs the boy she has hired how to act a particular role within the set of her own devising. Her imperative, "Play", prompts Pip to respond: "she could hardly

have directed an unfortunate boy to do anything in the wide world more difficult to be done under the circumstances” (Dickens 1996: 59).

Miss Havisham herself seems to direct the strange gothic story of her own trauma, and her wedding dress is central to her self-display. Later, Pip notes that the “corpse-like” Miss Havisham has “frillings and trimmings on her bridal dress, looking like earthy paper” (Dickens 1996: 60). This uncanny juxtaposition of the bridal and the deathly, which hints towards the textual, is a reminder that even in his earliest writings, *Sketches by Boz* (1836), Dickens’s imaginary linked clothing and death, where the clothes he depicts seem at times more active, more “alive” than their human owners (Dickens 1966: 75). The strange qualities of clothing are explored most fully in his representation of Miss Havisham’s wedding gown. Oddly, the latter contains a pocket, from which Miss Havisham pulls “a yellow set of ivory tablets” (Dickens 1996: 397). Why have pockets been inserted in a dress only intended (at least for a woman of Miss Havisham’s class) to be worn for one day? It suggests an oddly practical note on the part of the designer, as though an abnormal afterlife for this garment was anticipated from its inception. A similar practical note is suggested by Dickens when Estella, “at Miss Havisham’s knee”, is found by Pip “taking up some stitches in one of those old articles of dress that were dropping to pieces” (Dickens 1996: 307). This vignette counteracts the imagery of entropy and promiscuous decay characterising most of Pip’s descriptions of Miss Havisham’s “bridal wrecks” (Dickens 1996: 306). The dress does not continue its gradual disintegration, however, for it is consumed by fire, taking on a dangerously new and active life, the wedding veil “soaring at least as many feet above her head as she was high”, while the dress itself transforms into “patches of tinder [...] floating in the smoky air [...] falling in a black shower around us” (Dickens 1996: 402). Yet the metamorphosis, from the faded, white, papery gown Pip sees when he first encounters her to the “black shower” of tinder towards the end of the novel, does not mean that the death of the gown occurs simultaneously with the death of Miss Havisham. The latter finally returns to her “old ghastly bridal appearance” when she is laid upon the table which once displayed her wedding feast, wrapped in “white cotton-wool [...] with a white sheet loosely overlying that” (Dickens 1996: 403). The weird biography of the dress culminates with the ageing bride cocooned in bandages, resembling both swaddling

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clothes and shroud, signalling a return to her beginning as well as her imminent end.

Miss Havisham's gown offers costume designers of screen adaptations an opportunity to render costumes active and mutable. Despite their vital work in the materialisation of narrative and empowerment of the visual image, however, costume designers of films are rarely household names. As Pam Cook argues, "[c]ostume design is one of the most under-researched areas of cinema history" and this is "particularly remarkable when one considers how important clothes are to narrative, in establishing character, in reinforcing plot, in suggesting mood" (Cook 1996: 41). This is, perhaps, symptomatic of the social denigration of clothing which, as fashion historians and designers have long realised, too often falls into the realm of trivial detail, rather than that of significant sign. The anthropologist Daniel Miller argues that Western society's way of viewing "people who take clothes seriously as themselves superficial" is a misunderstanding of the importance of clothing and what it signifies (Miller 2010: 13). This may offer one explanation for the paucity of references to costume and costume designers in many academic discussions of film.

While most viewers are familiar with the names of the leading actors, and some are aware of the directors of the three films under discussion, the important work of costume designers Sophie Devine, Judianna Makovsky and Edith Head is likely to go unrecognised. Devine designed the costumes for Lean's *Great Expectations*, Makovsky designed the costumes for Cuarón's adaptation, while Head, the recipient of a record number of Oscars during the course of her career, was responsible for the costumes in Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*. Holly Poe Durbin, a costume designer herself, has noted that the work of costume designers rarely registers with cinema audiences. Yet she demonstrates that designing film costumes is very different from the work of fashion designers, for film costumes must be created with the effects of the camera in mind. Poe Durbin states that the "camera lens tends to flatten items on the screen and one technique to combat the effect is to incorporate complex textures in the costumes"; however, because the camera also magnifies every detail, important decisions have to be made to achieve the desired effects (Poe Durbin 2005: 65). For Miss Havisham's dresses the magnification of effect is positively desirable, while the textures of the fabrics are often greatly exaggerated to produce a chaos of smooth and rough, torn and intact,

shining and drab. Costume designers employed to dress Miss Havisham, in other words, can break the rules in imaginative ways because they are not representing a bride or a bridal dress according to convention, a license which has resulted in a range of significant and articulate film costumes. What follows is an attempt to show the distinctive qualities of the costumes designed by Devine, Head and Makovsky in their various interpretations of neo-Victorian Miss Havishams.

One of the most important signals of the Havisham costume, apart from its more obvious bridal uncanny qualities, is that it is out of fashion. Miss Havisham attempts to arrest time, but though the clocks may have stopped, the inevitable movement of decay continues. Moulding and falling to pieces, the textiles and objects that fill Satis House are continually transforming; they reveal the irresistible nature of time and change, and the futility of Miss Havisham's desire to preserve her past. But the attempt itself is significant; she seeks to place herself outside of time, and the primary signifier of this longing is her constant wearing of her wedding dress. For Ulrich Lehmann, fashion and modernity are inextricably linked: both require "the past as (re)source and point of reference, only to plunder and transform it with an insatiable appetite for advance" (Lehmann 2000: 9). Miss Havisham unravels this synthesis of old and new, permanent and transient. She denies the new formations of a vital and evolving present by clothing herself perpetually in the styles of the past. She refuses to be a dedicated follower of the vagaries of fashion, and thus resists modernity.

The wedding dress is an apt symbol for such resistance. Though its style remains subject to changing trends, the dress as concept carries a heavy burden of memory and tradition. During Prince Albert's lifetime, for example, Queen Victoria would wear her wedding lace and other accessories on the anniversary of their marriage (Staniland and Levey 1983: 7-15), and in 1854 she clothed herself in full wedding ensemble, recreating and immortalising her bridal image in a photograph.<sup>2</sup> In addition to their status as objects of sartorial commemoration, wedding gowns are liminal and the figure of the bride is caught between (but does not belong to) opposing states: daughter and wife, girlhood and womanhood. This is exaggerated in *Great Expectations* by the "not quite finished" quality of Miss Havisham's arrested state (Dickens 1996: 57). Her wedding toilette is never complete; she has "but one shoe on" and her veil remains "but half arranged" (Dickens 1996: 57). She is also located at a historical 'hinge'

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point. On the basis of Dickens's notes and internal evidence, Jerome Meckier has dated the main action of the novel to the period between 1812 and 1840; consequently, the jilting of Miss Havisham occurs in 1800-1 (Meckier 1992: 164, 160). Perpetually half-dressed in her wedding gown, Miss Havisham refuses to enter the new century and to participate in its modern world. Adapting *Great Expectations* for the screen, film-makers continue to use Miss Havisham's dress as a visual and material symbol of her resistance to modernity. On film, as much as in the book, she invokes the pernicious dangers of nostalgia and is positioned as an outsider, superfluous to society.

David Lean's post-war *Great Expectations* coincided with a new national mood of confidence and hope. The war had just been won and the incoming Labour government had pledged to vanquish the "five giants" of the Beveridge Report: disease, want, ignorance, squalor and idleness (Beveridge 1942: 6). Swept along by patriotic optimism, the film industry "strove to celebrate Britain's rich cultural heritage and its advanced social policies as it established a welfare state", and Dickens's iconic reputation as a great British novelist, along with the "social conscience" displayed in his work, proved a ready source of material (Brosh 2008: 83). Cinema audiences could readily identify with the ambitions and struggles endured by Pip. For Joss Marsh, Dickens's protagonist stood in for the millions of children – poor, hungry and displaced by war – "for whom a new society was being built" (Marsh 2001: 211). By adapting a classic and celebrating the past, *Great Expectations* re-imagined the future and seemed to prophesy an escape from wartime austerity. Lean's film thus demonstrates that hallmark of modernity: a synthesis of old and new. But Miss Havisham has no place in this progressive future society; she is singled out as "the past that Britain must reject" (Brosh 2008: 87). Memorably portrayed by Martita Hunt, Miss Havisham as social outsider is depicted on screen through a visual grotesquerie: she is "a predatory spider in a web of dilapidation" (McFarlane 2008: 140), a lost soul "damned in some genteel hell, full of cobwebs and old ribbons" (Barreca 2003: 40). Here the reference to ribbons is a reminder of the centrality of costuming and fabrics in establishing Miss Havisham as antithesis and obstacle to a new generation.

Hunt's Miss Havisham is shrouded in gossamer and lace, in veil, long sleeves and flounce. She is cocooned in a web of her own construction, a visual and material pun inviting comparisons with the spider's silk

covering fixtures and furnishings, preserving objects (perpetually unused) on her dressing table. Attention is drawn to the age of this wedding ensemble. A traditional wreath of orange blossoms remains in her hair, but the blooms have long since withered and dried. The hair itself, once presumably styled for the occasion, has worked itself loose and wild. The unravelling disorder of Hunt's *coiffure* is echoed in the heavy and ragged fabrics adorning the walls and covering the windows, a physical barrier to the outside world and a recurring motif throughout John Bryan's interior designs.<sup>3</sup> Age is also suggested by the costuming of Hunt in an Empire-line gown. Somewhat disguised by an abundance of layers, the raised waistline and (relatively) slim skirts demonstrate an appropriately Georgian influence that befits Miss Havisham's turn-of-the-century jilting.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 1:** David Lean, *Great Expectations* (1946)  
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Yet claims to authenticity and historical accuracy must be tempered by a broader examination of the film's 'look' as constructed by Sophie Devine. As the descriptions above suggest, costumes are used to materialise the novel's gothic excess, and in the case of Miss Havisham, the pleasurable anachronism of period film is exploited and redoubled to establish her as a

being out of place. Costume dramas fetishise the fashions of the past, granting voyeuristic access to a sartorial world beyond the immediate experience of cinema audiences. As such, there is a strange yet satisfying disjunction between the viewing subject (in the 'real' world) and the characters on screen (part of the film's diegesis) – a pleasing shock of the period. In the case of Lean's *Great Expectations*, the use of an Empire-line gown leaves Miss Havisham doubly (and paradoxically) anachronistic. Her costuming lies outside the time and fashions belonging to both the film's audience and its period setting; she is a relic of the past twice over, situating Hunt's performance within a strange 'otherly' frame.

Elsewhere costumes exaggerate period detail and eschew authenticity. The result is an imaginative recreation of the past glimpsed through a critical lens. Devine's costumes for the younger generation, for example, are often stylised with sharp lines and ornamental features. Pip (John Mills) and Herbert (Alec Guinness) share oversized neckties and puffed shoulders, while Pip demonstrates the influence of modish French fashion in his choice of headwear, sporting a 'Paris beau' beaver hat and elsewhere a dandified 'D'Orsay'.



**Figure 2:** David Lean, *Great Expectations* (1946)  
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Estella (Valerie Hobson) is visually tied to these fashionable gentlemen; her many gowns with their low, corseted waistlines and massive puff sleeves set her apart from the monotonous, unchanging materiality of Satis House. Devine’s playful caricatures of Victorian fashion undermine the nostalgic structures of costume drama: outdated Victorianism is no longer desirable. But Estella’s independence from Miss Havisham is hard won, and this is reflected in the ambiguous connotations of her dress. In a particularly telling scene, Estella sits at the feet of her adoptive mother and instructress – both in white, and both shot in profile or from a high angle (mimicking Pip’s point of view).



**Figure 3:** David Lean, *Great Expectations* (1946)  
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At first glance, it appears that Estella is doomed to repeat Miss Havisham’s existence, to remain trapped in the past, and this suspicion is reinforced by her exchange with Pip in the film’s closing sequence. In this later scene, Estella sits in self-imposed exile at Satis House, wearing lace over her gown and with her possessions arranged on Miss Havisham’s dressing table; she is alone, haunted by memories: “[Miss Havisham] is not gone. She is still here with me in this house” (Lean 1946: 1:51:25-1:51:28). Yet in both scenes this

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mirroring is problematic and Estella's connection to Miss Havisham is severed through the signifying use of textiles. The film ends with Pip tearing down the heavy fabrics that adorn the walls of Satis House; he lets in the light and the outside world, taking Estella's hand and running into the sunset. In the earlier scene, Estella's separation is less violent but similarly material. While Miss Havisham surrounds herself with torn and unravelling fabrics, Estella knits; while Miss Havisham resists change and embraces decay, Estella weaves threads to form new material. In Dickens's novel, as mentioned earlier, Estella does not create but repairs, stitching a tear in Miss Havisham's gown. Still, these contrasting engagements with textiles emphasise the generational divide, established elsewhere by the ironic contrast between the older woman's unchanging, old-fashioned gown and the exuberance of the younger woman's dress. Lean's neo-Victorianism was not, therefore, an unqualified celebration of the past: unthinking nostalgia of the kind exhibited by Miss Havisham would not serve the interests of a post-war audience. And so, in looking back, the film insists on looking forward and privileging the Victorian as modern. Devine's *inauthentic* costumes for a younger generation, "plunder[ing] and transform[ing]" the fashions of the past, invoke the forward movement of modernity (Lehmann 2000: 9). If Miss Havisham's gown signifies her resistance, the strangely exaggerated costumes worn by Pip, Herbert and Estella demonstrate their allegiance to a new and changing world.

There is no character named Miss Havisham and no wedding dress in Alfonso Cuarón's modern updating of *Great Expectations*. The Kent marshes have been replaced by the Florida gulf and Finn (not Pip) is raised from fisherman to artist and sent to New York by his mysterious benefactor. Satis House is now *Paradiso Perduto*, a crumbling Mediterranean-style mansion and home to Nora Dinsmoor, "the richest lady in the whole goddamn state" (Cuarón 1998: 0:17:01-0:17:02). Dinsmoor is the Havisham figure: she spends her days smoking, drinking and dancing, and her turntable is surrounded by hundreds of vinyl records, each one a different version of 'Besame Mucho'. Like her literary original, Dinsmoor is abandoned by a lover and responds by isolating herself from the passage of time and resisting change. But she is not fully separate from the world: she is strikingly mobile, leaves the confines of *Paradiso Perduto*, and forms an integral part of the film's homogenous colour palette. Green is dominant in every setting, whether exterior or interior, rural or urban, and green is the

keynote of Judianna Makovsky's costume designs; across a variety of shades and hues, every character, including Dinsmoor, is clothed almost exclusively in green. This most natural of colours becomes, in this film, strangely unnatural; as a result of uncanny proliferation, the green fabrics form a sartorial link between Dinsmoor's monstrosity and the modern world.

Nevertheless, Dinsmoor remains out of time. The film straddles three decades, from Finn and Estella's first meeting in the late 1970s, through the sexual teasings and frustrations of the 1980s, culminating in 1990s New York. But through all this, Dinsmoor remains clothed in the chic fashions of the 1960s: her outfits, and there are several of them (another deviation from the original source text), include kaftan tops and flared batwing sleeves, capri pants and cocktail dresses, all with intricate detailing on collars and cuffs, all combined with heavy make-up, dramatic wigs (blonde and red) and an ubiquitous cigarette. Far removed from its Victorian setting, and despite the noticeable absence of a wedding gown, Cuarón's *Great Expectations* returns to clothing and fashion to signify Havisham/Dinsmoor as a being out of place. Pleasurable anachronism is still present, though lessened, in the styles of Dinsmoor's wardrobe, but the primary method of sartorial 'othering' in Cuarón's updating is "fashionable quotation" (Munich 2011: 5). Adrienne Munich argues that fashion designers possess a "penchant [...] for importing the past into their declarations of the *now*", and this finds its ultimate expression on screen: "Movie goers do not need the fashion industry to act as interpreter in order to understand movie costume of whatever period as a fashion show for their own moment" (Munich 2011: 4). Makovsky's costume designs borrow their 'look' from 1960s fashions, but they also make reference to an older, more cinematic source – a form of Munich's "fashionable quotation" that becomes clear when the complex intertextuality of film adaptation is subjected to closer scrutiny.

Cuarón's film adapts Dickens's text, but Makovsky's costumes 'quote' from Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, itself a loose adaptation of *Great Expectations* with its ageing film star, Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), living in "a great big white elephant of a place", a "neglected house" with "an unhappy look" (Wilder 1950: 0:12:31-0:12:40), surrounded by photographs, films and memories of her former fame. Desmond entraps the younger, poorer Joe Gillis (William Holden) in her deteriorating mansion by

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bestowing gifts on him, and Gillis's posthumous voice-over draws an explicit comparison to Dickens's novel. Wilder clearly expects this reference to *Great Expectations* to be widely understood by mainstream cinema audiences, even by those who have not read the novel and have only encountered Miss Havisham on the silver screen. In doing so, he appeals to the Oscar-winning success of David Lean's film, released just four years earlier.<sup>5</sup> Joss Marsh recognises the complex relationship between these films and their shared source text. She describes *Sunset Boulevard* as a "cynical homage" to both Dickens's novel and Lean's film, while Cuarón's subsequent adaptation becomes "an act of screen incest" that marries together these filmic siblings (Marsh 2001: 215). Nora Dinsmoor is thus the hideous progeny of both Miss Havisham and Norma Desmond with whom (as her name suggests) she is semantically as well as sartorially linked.

Makovsky's designs borrow from the accessories and ornamentation used by Edith Head for Desmond's wardrobe. These sartorial flourishes from an earlier time problematise Dinsmoor's 1960s style, replicating the redoubled anachronism of Hunt's Empire-line gown. Dinsmoor and Desmond both appear swathed in long, glamorous headscarves, and Desmond's cigarettes, "clamped in a curious holder" attached to her index finger (Wilder 1950: 0:19:57), find their counterpart in Dinsmoor's chain-smoking use of a long dinner-length holder. Mirrored costumes are also accompanied by mirrored scenes. Following her meeting with Cecil B. DeMille, Desmond mistakenly believes that Paramount will produce her screenplay. She begins a "merciless series of treatments" (Wilder 1950: 1:12:55-1:12:57), attempting to erase the lines and marks that inscribe her age and embody the passing of time. But this beauty regime is rendered monstrous by the strange technologies and ghastly prostheses used to lift, stretch and tone her body and face. Desmond is both creature and Frankenstein in her cosmetic "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 2008: 36), and in one particularly striking shot her right eye is magnified to unnaturally massive proportions. Dinsmoor's dressing table presents a direct allusion to this sequence, with its multiple mirrors and discarded beauty paraphernalia. Likewise a magnifying mirror is used to distort Dinsmoor's reflection, emphasising the grotesque and heavy make-up that masks her face.

"[F]ashionable quotation" (Munich 2011: 5) and shared iconography bring the satire of *Sunset Boulevard* to bear on Cuarón's *Great*

*Expectations*. For Dianne Sadoff, the latter film transforms Dickens's novel into a mirror for the concerns of "Reaganite" America, with its "corporate mergers and takeover bids", and a Hollywood movie industry built on sex and celebrity: "Adapting character, atmosphere, tone, and perspective, Cuarón updates romance for a late-century commodity culture" (Sadoff 2010: 88). Class division and social mobility fade into the background as Mitchell Glazer's screenplay shifts its focus onto Finn's "erotic obsession" (Katz 2003: 96).<sup>6</sup> As such, the film participates in a late twentieth-century commodification of sex and the female body – a central concern of the film's updated plot and marketing strategy. Estella (Gwyneth Paltrow) is constantly subjected to gazing eyes; she is scrutinised by Finn (Ethan Hawke) as he sketches and paints, while cinema audiences pore over her naked body, "tastefully morselized by extreme close-up" (Sadoff 2010: 89). Estella is an erotic commodity within the film's diegesis: her image is reproduced across multiple canvases, displayed on walls and put up for sale. But in the broader context of the movie industry, the same could be said about Paltrow and the use of her image in promotional materials. Following the success of *Emma* (1996) and her high profile relationships with Brad Pitt and Ben Affleck, Paltrow was a major name and hot box-office property in 1998. *Great Expectations* capitalised on this celebrity and promised a career watershed: Paltrow's release from the safe confines of heritage drama – but ironically through an adaptation of a classic text of that genre. This was signified by the use of her naked body in film posters and teasing clips from nude and sex scenes in the theatrical trailer. The increased visibility of the film's young female lead was accompanied by a significant absence of costuming – Paltrow and her body were laid bare as they became the film's stock in trade.

*Sunset Boulevard*, as intertext, suggests Cuarón's macabre awareness of the film's complicit relation to a damaging celebrity culture that transforms the female body into a commodity. Norma Desmond is a victim of the old Hollywood studio system, and of the transition from silent film to 'talkies'; as an ageing woman whose body can no longer be used to sell movies, she is suddenly surplus to requirements. Louis B. Mayer, the iconic studio boss at MGM, was famously incensed by this vision of fame and its devastations, accusing Wilder of "[disgracing] the industry that made you and fed you" (Mayer qtd. in Friedrich 1997: 421). Desmond sits in her mansion watching the movies she made in her youth projected onto the

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walls, and these scenes are taken from the actual movies made by Gloria Swanson when *she* was a star of the silent screen (including *Queen Kelly* [1929], the unfinished film that nearly killed her career). The juxtaposition between immortalised youth and the wasting, ageing woman looking on offers a sly nod to the scarcity of roles available to older actresses – the Miss Havisham figure being a notable (and unflattering) exception. Cuarón makes reference to this problem by casting Anne Bancroft as Nora Dinsmoor, thus invoking one further intertext: Mike Nichols's *The Graduate* (1967) and its female protagonist, the dangerous and desiring Mrs Robinson. Mark Llewellyn considers neo-Victorianism to be palimpsestic, an engagement with past forms that enables new and old, copy and original, to enjoy a “simultaneous existence [...] occupying the same space, and speaking in odd, obscure, and different ways to one another” (Llewellyn 2008: 170). He also contends that neo-Victorianism is self-conscious and meta-critical: “neo-Victorian texts are [...] processes of writing that act out the results of reading the Victorians” (Llewellyn 2008: 170). Cuarón's *Great Expectations* wanders far from Dickens's source text and no attempt is made to recreate the Victorian past on screen; nonetheless, its processes of adaptation manifest the film's neo-Victorian processes of reading. Dinsmoor (re-)views Miss Havisham through the dual lens of Desmond and Robinson; she is palimpsestic, a new text built on the foundations of old, invoking a range of literary and filmic spectres. Cuarón's Havisham figure combines an array of tropes and images belonging to predatory, superfluous female sexuality from different cultural moments. Stereotypes and clichés are brought together on screen, placed in dialogue, and thus reveal the resonance of the past in the present. Dinsmoor, as multi-text, crystallises the haunting power of women who refuse to age gracefully by society's standards.

Surveying a variety of on-screen stereotypes for ageing women, Elizabeth Markson identifies two broad categories: benevolent and malign. Women of the former type can be recognised on the basis of their outmoded maternity; they are mothers and grandmothers, often dressed unfashionably and in clothes that “denote [their] advancing age and fragility” (Markson 2003: 83). Desmond and Dinsmoor (not to mention Mrs Robinson) refuse this stereotype: they are, instead, malign. Contradictory by turns, “shabby, unfashionable and stylish”, these women are monstrous stars of the carnivalesque; they perform an identity that is *untimely* and age

*inappropriate*, abandoning “[traditional] signifiers of femininity” as inflected by age, favouring instead “the exotic absurd” (Markson 2003: 88, 89). Desmond’s ultra-modern ‘New Look’ gowns and Dinsmoor’s 1960s styles do not signify or enhance the desirability of their bodies. Rather, the spectacle of age adorned in modish fashions is strange and uncanny: a grotesque masquerade. For Kathleen Woodward, this is the product of a “culture which so devalues age”: “masquerade with respect to the aging body is first and foremost a denial of age, an effort to erase or efface age and to put on youth” (Woodward 1991: 148). Miss Havisham and her cinematic offspring all participate in this ghastly charade: Dickens and Lean present us with the perpetual bride – clothed in that sartorial symbol *par excellence* of youth and futurity – while Wilder and Cuarón resort to a deformed glamour: “the ‘horror’ of mutton dressed as lamb” (Brooks 1999: 236). Havisham, Desmond and Dinsmoor are thus caught in a double bind: their masquerade is prompted by a societal double standard that seeks to erase the no longer (re)productive, no longer desirable older woman, and yet the incongruity of their performance (the shock of age dressed as youth) is what sets them apart as ‘Other’. Each text, both literary and filmic, seeks to resolve this contradiction and expel the monstrosity of its Havisham figure.

To that effect, Dickens’s Miss Havisham goes up in flames and her wedding gown is transformed into ash and tinder. The dress is destroyed and its wearer reduced to an appropriately fragile state, wrapped in cotton-wool and covered in a shroud-like sheet. Lean’s dramatic visualisation of this scene was deemed “too frightening for small children” and cost the film its ‘U’ certificate (Brownlow 1997: 224). Pip, the representative of a new generation, is invested with a deadly agency, for as he slams the door he dislodges a burning ember and causes Miss Havisham’s dress to ignite (Barreca 2003: 40). We see her fall to her knees consumed by flames; Pip covers her in his cape and pulls the tablecloth down to swathe her body. The final shot in this sequence is taken from a high angle and displays Pip, suddenly small and helpless, surrounded by devastation and the floating tinders described by Dickens. Next to him is the tablecloth covering Miss Havisham; she is completely disguised, her human form no longer recognisable under the smoking pile; she is fully invisible and fully fabric.



**Figure 4:** David Lean, *Great Expectations* (1946)  
© ITV Studios, reproduced with kind permission from ITV Studios

Like Dickens, Lean puts an end to Miss Havisham's masquerade by destroying her dress, and later enforcing the final erasure of death upon her body.

But Norma Desmond and Nora Dinsmoor meet very different fates. Having shot Joe Gillis in the back, Desmond loses her hold on reality and falls completely into the illusory world of her misremembered fame. Believing herself on set and shooting a scene, she descends the stairs to an awaiting audience of journalists and police. In one of Hollywood's most famous scenes, she announces to the absent "Mr DeMille" that she is "ready for her close up" (Wilder 1950: 1:44:57-1:44:59) and begins a ghastly walk towards camera, fading to grey then nothingness, consumed by flashbulbs and camera lenses. For Jodi Brooks, this moment represents Desmond's last stand, a self-defeating attempt to avoid being discarded as "cultural refuse": the ageing actress seeking "to carve or burn her way into the present" by "staging (or restaging) her own disappearance" (Brooks 1999: 233, 238). Desmond's exit is undoubtedly memorable: she glitters on screen in her elegant gown, trailing silver flounce, and her clothes, skin and hair are adorned with decorative jewels and sequins. But Desmond is nonetheless

discarded: the glamour of her final performance is rendered fully abject by her loss of sanity. As she breaks the fourth wall, a discomfited audience welcomes the respite provided by her on-screen obliteration. Dinsmoor is also forced to disappear, though her death is not imagined on screen. After his successful gallery opening, Finn stalks the streets of New York, bottle of drink in hand, looking for Estella. But he finds Dinsmoor instead: she is relaxing in her luxurious Manhattan apartment, after having attended Estella and Walter's nuptials. This is her last appearance on screen, and we are finally presented with a dress for a wedding (though not a wedding gown). If the absence of a spinster-bride seems to threaten the authenticity of Cuarón's modern updating, Dinsmoor's final scene recuperates this transgression. Still in green but drained of colour to near-white, her outfit reproduces the layers and Empire-line that form part of Miss Havisham's traditional on-screen iconography. But the addition of a shawl, grey hair in a loose bun, and the absence of her glamorous paraphernalia – gone are the wigs, make-up and cigarette holder – all serve to emphasise Dinsmoor's age. This costume cements her status as the Havisham figure and causes her youthful masquerade to collapse: she repents her cruelty in an age-appropriate outfit. Though Dinsmoor does not burn, she succumbs to invisibility. This ageing woman simply disappears from the film's final sequence, despatched off screen and in voice-over.

Miss Havisham and her dress need to be destroyed or neutralised in order for the obstruction she represents to be removed. Both Dickens and Lean dramatise the destruction of her dress and body, both material obstacles and symbols of the forces of anti-progress and anti-modernity which impede the hero's trajectory. Wilder and Cuarón fade out their Havishams, Desmond and Dinsmoor, in order to neutralise the dangers of the older woman; she is a figure of excess, her body superfluous in a society that commodifies youth and beauty. Yet it is the disturbing ambiguity of Havisham, her simultaneous signalling of fertility and death by means of a robe which is both wedding gown and shroud, which cannot be destroyed. Dickens presents us with a spectre who haunts Western culture in her tattered gown, a perpetual reminder that youth and beauty fade to age and death. Yet, ghost-like, Miss Havisham will not die. She returns again and again in her strange garb, offering actresses the opportunity to signal a rite-of-passage in their careers, resembling the journey many actors make from Hamlet to King Lear. The most recent incarnation of Miss Havisham hit our

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cinema screens in late November 2012. In promotional stills and trailers for Mike Newell's *Great Expectations*, Helena Bonham Carter was portrayed in role as Miss Havisham (Pulver 2011), and perhaps unsurprisingly, these images focused on her dress with its narrow bodice, large veil, and strangely twisting, torn fabrics. This role confirmed her entry into a new phase of work as an actress the wrong side of forty-five. No longer the virgin experiencing a sexual awakening – such as Lucy Honeychurch in *A Room With A View* (1985) – Bonham Carter's performance is a parody of youth, and of the cultural capital of her early career. But it was not a role she accepted without question: her first response – “Am I that old?” (Bonham Carter qtd. in Masters 2012) – suggests the fatality of Havisham, and the extent to which the role may be perceived as an obstacle that bars the actress's return to younger, more desirable roles. Yet in another sense, the role *was* an uncanny return, as the actress admitted: “In a way I'd already played her because I'd done *The Corpse Bride*. I only played her as a puppet, but there were a lot of similarities” (Bonham Carter qtd. in Masters 2012). Shielded no longer by animated ‘puppetry’, Bonham Carter now embodies Miss Havisham and her grotesque femininity in costume and on screen, producing yet another filmic palimpsest that brings together the two phases of her career to date: Merchant-Ivory heritage drama and the gothic camp of Tim Burton. As such, the film marks the culmination of Bonham Carter's transition from corseted angel to corpse bride, and in returning to our screens, the ineluctable Havisham figure provides us, once again, with a monstrous reminder of fading glamour, as youthful roles give way to more complex representations of age and loss.

### Notes

1. Even Dickens's bleakest works, such as *Little Dorrit* (1857) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), end with the wedding of the hero and heroine.
2. This photograph by Roger Fenton is part of The Royal Collection (RCIN 2906513) and can be viewed online: <http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/2906513/queen-victoria-and-prince-albert-buckingham-palace>.

3. John Bryan (1911-1969) was the Production Designer on Lean's *Great Expectations*. He was an important figure at Cineguild Productions throughout the 1940s.
4. BBC television adaptations of *Great Expectations* have followed the precedent set by Lean and Devine, costuming the actress playing Miss Havisham – Charlotte Rampling in 1999, Gillian Anderson in 2011 – in authentic Empire-line gowns.
5. Lean's *Great Expectations* won two Academy Awards for cinematography (Guy Green) and art direction (John Bryan and Wilfred Singleton). This was a significant recognition: Oscars were "not in those days lightly given to British films" (McFarlane 2008: 172).
6. Cuarón hoped to provide the film with greater class consciousness but met with opposition "from all sides": "most Americans will deny the problems of class in their own country" (Cuarón qtd. in Katz 2003: 97).

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