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Crochet is Sick!

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This video essay draws on a range of horror films that utilize crochet and crocheted objects. It uses crochet as a way to think through costume and set dressing in terms of material culture, that is, through the objects that are used by people in specific cultural and historical contexts.

Creator's Statement

In 2021, I started collecting examples of knitting in horror films, due to a nagging feeling that there were connections to be made in terms of gender and ageing, knitting and horror. However, I was aware that the examples I was beginning to piece together—from *Les diaboliques* (1955), *Córki dancingu / The Lure* (2015) and from *Hebi musume to hakuhatsuma / The Snake Girl and the Silver–Haired Witch* (1968)—were probably just a fraction of the examples available, so I canvassed the readers of my horror film newsletter, and asked them to send in further examples. My inbox was flooded with suggestions, which was, of course, wonderful, and I duly credited my sources in my video essay "Knit One, Stab Two" (Peirse 2024a).

However, when the knitting project was completed—and published in an *[in] Transition* special issue on aging—I was left with the nagging feeling that there was some unresolved research to complete, and this time, on crochet. What I found, again and again, in my own viewing and in the examples that my newsletter readers submitted to me, was a slippage between crochet and horror. Frequently, horror films featured craft 'done wrong,' an older woman sat, knitting needles in hand, as she 'works' on a crochet blanket; a woman 'knitting' with a solitary crochet hook. As a knitter and crocheter myself, I could never bring myself to include such mixed examples in "Knit One, Stab Two," but I put them to one side, not quite knowing what to do with them.

When I came back to crochet after the knitting project, I discovered that while there are a multitude of examples of knitting needles used as weapons in horror films,

the humble crochet hook does not have the same cultural cachet (and, I assume, the visual appeal of potential corporeal damage). Indeed, I only found a handful examples of genuine crocheting taking place in horror film (which now appear in the middle of "Crochet is Sick!" as an intermission from my larger argument). What became apparent instead was that crochet is physically inert. It stars in film in its completed afterlives, as blankets draped on beds, or sofas, or embodied in clothing.

However, even if crochet does not *move* in the same way that knitting needles do in horror films, it is still not passive.

Crochet still signifies.

Props and clothing come under the remit of set dressing and costume design. Set dressers work for production designers, who run the Art Department, while costume designers work for Wardrobe. Both departments are dedicated to constructing stories and communicating character by visual, tangible means, through the clothing worn by actors, by the objects that they touch, and interact with. This enables us to think through crochet, costume and set dressing in terms of material culture, that is, through the objects that are used by people in specific cultural and historical contexts. Ian Woodward explains, that "studies of material culture are concerned with what uses people put objects to and what object do for, and to, people," and that while objects may be part of our routine and mundane everyday life, they nonetheless retain "the capacity to symbolize the deepest human anxieties and aspirations" (2007: 14, vi).

This perspective has obvious value for doing film analysis. Everything that appears in shot on screen is there because a conscious decision was made, and agreed upon, by multiple craftspeople to include it in the image. These props and costumes then, are carefully thought-out graphic representations of how a filmmaker wishes that character to be represented, the object or garment embodying a specific social and cultural shorthand for who that character is, and who they will come to be. In the filmography at the end of this essay, I follow my usual feminist citational practices by citing the women who have worked on the film (see Peirse 2024b), but this time I prioritize the woman production designer, art director or costume designer first. I do this because I wish to acknowledge their material contribution to the world of the film, a contribution that is important, but is frequently overlooked. Where there is no credited woman on production design, art direction or costume design, I then default to the most senior woman crew member.

In working on this project, I have come to realize that crochet appears in horror films in limited ways. As a prop (say, a blanket, a cushion, a bedspread), it has come to connote illness for a character, draped over the knees or the sofa of someone in mental or physical pain (or someone who will, imminently, be in such agonies). In

An American Werewolf in London (1981) it precipitates the infamous transformation scene, in the case of *The Love Witch* (2016), it becomes associated with death itself. It also connotes vulnerability: when Needy crumples on the sofa in *Jennifer's Body* (2009), when homeless Katie attempts to sleep on the backseat of her car in *Dementer* (2019), when the female protagonists of *It Follows* (2014), *Lost Gully Road* (2017), *Martyrs Lane* (2021) and *Soulmate* (2013) wrap crochet blankets around them as a preliminary act of self-soothing (an act which will, imminently, fail). To cross-reference with costume: crochet shawls are associated with the psychic (woman), while crochet cardigans with the mentally unwell or dangerous (woman). Horror has come to imbue crochet with a virulent sickness, a sickness that infiltrates prop and garment alike.

As the supercut qualities of my video essay demonstrate, this coding of crochet occurs again and again across multiple filmmaking cultures, and across the decades. This signification is not a by-product of a film made or set in the 1970s at the height of crochet's handcrafted heyday. It is something more primal, instinctual, subliminal, something inherent within horror culture itself: forever, evergreen. Last year, I took my teenage daughter to Bradford Cineworld to see *Longlegs* (2024), a film which, about halfway through, features a woman clad in crochet and surrounded by crochet blankets. Once I saw her, *Longlegs* was over, the third act twist unraveled. Sick, vulnerable, psychic, mentally unwell: when you know what crochet means, the production and costume designers have told you how the story ends.

Filmography (in order of appearance in video essay)

Longlegs (2024, Canada / USA) Costume Design by Mica Kayde

The Substance (2024, UK / France) Supervising Art Director Gladys Garot

In Memorium (2005, USA) Production Design by Sara Mills-Broffman

Housebound (2014, New Zealand) Production Design by Jane Bucknell & Anya Whitlock

Into the Dark: Culture Shock (2019, USA) Costume Design by Lynette Meyer

Black Christmas (1974, Canada) Art Direction by Karen Bromley

The Curse of Willow Song (2020, Canada) Art Direction by Lindsay Burke

Soulmate (2013, UK) Production Design by Felix Coles

The Love Witch (2016, USA) Production Design by Anna Biller

The Conjuring (2013, USA) Production Design by Julie Berghoff

An American Werewolf in London (1981, UK / USA) Costume Design by Deborah Nadoolman

Phantom Lady (1944, USA) Costume Design by Vera West

Jennifer's Body (2009, USA) Set Decoration by Joanne LeBlanc

Lost Gully Road (2017, Australia) Co-Written & Directed by Donna McRae
The Vigil (2019, USA) Production Design by Liz Toonkel
The Lost Boys (1987, USA) Costume Design by Susan Becker
Dementer (2019, USA) Production Design by Kelly Anne Ross
The Conjuring 2 (2016, USA) Production Design by Julie Berghoff
Dead Alive (1992, New Zealand) Co-Written by Fran Walsh
The Amityville Horror (1979, USA) Costume Design by Cynthia Bales
As Boas Maneiras / Good Manners (2017, Brazil) Set Decoration by Juliana Di Grazia
Halloween III: Season of the Witch (1982, USA) Set Decoration by Linda Spheeris
Santa Sangre (1989, Mexico / Italy) Costume Design by Tolita Figueroa
Krampus (2015, USA) Props by W. Therese Eberhard
Tower of Terror (1941, UK) Edited by Flora Newton
Martyrs Lane (2021, UK) Production Design by Gini Godwin
Honeymoon (2014, USA) Costume Design by Courtney Arthur
Messiah of Evil (1974, USA) Art Direction by Joan Mocine
It Follows (2014, USA) Costume Design by Kimberly Leitz

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Biography

Alison Peirse is a Professor of Film Studies at the University of Leeds, UK. Her research focuses on illuminating women's invisible or overlooked contributions to the production of genre film and television. Her many books include the multi-award-winning *Women Make Horror: Filmmaking, Feminism, Genre* (2020). You can find out more about her research at www.alisonpeirse.com.

Review by Francesca Granata, Parsons School of Design

The video essay "Crochet is Sick" by Alison Peirse builds on her previous work "Knit One, Stab Two" (2024) on knitting, horror, femininity and aging in the horror genre.

Similar themes are taken on in this film by creating a collage of scenes in horror films, where crochet objects feature prominently. Unlike with knitting where the act of knitting as well as the knitting needles resurface in the horror genre to signify danger, in the case of crochet it is the actual crochet objects, often in the forms of a handmade blanket, which comes to signify looming danger. Peirse's video essay investigates why this seemingly harmless object associated with femininity and craft is coded in such a way in the horror genre. In her accompanying statement she sees similar connections between femininity, ageing and danger surfacing over and over in the forms of crochet objects. These associations are jarring as crochet is generally used to bring up feelings of nostalgia or homeliness as it is a stand in for grandmothers, the domestic arts, and hippy style.

The connection between feminine-coded material culture and horror is a novel and surprising one and goes beyond the more well-studied association of horror, abjection and the female body which have been studied at length in the literature in film studies, as with, for instance, Barbara Creed's by now famous book *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993). I believe both the video essay and the accompanying text offer new insights into the way material culture plays a role in film and the horror genre in particular.

References

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Review by Vicente Rodríguez Ortega, Universidad Carlos III Madrid

"Crochet is Sick!" is a very well-edited and thoughtful piece that draws attention to a relatively unexplored aspect of horror films—namely, production design and its relevance to characterization and narrative development.

The accompanying text is very well-written and, at times, humorous, which is a significant strength, as academic writing often unnecessarily leans toward dulled seriousness. This same playful tone anchors the authorial perspective in the video and its structure. In my view, this positionality enhances the piece by fostering an active form of spectatorship that becomes participatory.

In both the video and the text, the author skillfully weaves her personal experiences, her engagement with the horror scholarly/fan community, and her insights into the use of crochet in various films, successfully presenting a well-crafted argument.

Additionally, this work highlights costume design and set dressing, two aspects typically marginalized in film analysis. By incorporating Ian Woodward's observation that material culture symbolizes our deepest anxieties, the author effectively re-centers the importance of seemingly subordinate elements of the *mise-en-scène*, emphasizing their relevance as storytelling devices.

The video essay explores different utilizations of crochet in horror films. It begins with the personal (the author's perspective as a spectator) and then transitions to a range of examples that anticipate, foreshadow, or express the dynamics of narrative and characterization within the horror genre. The selection of clips is entirely pertinent.

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