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What to wear to the end of the world: The function of fashion in apocalyptic narrative

ABSTRACT

Narratives of the apocalypse remain a powerful fixture in storytelling across media by confronting notions of mortality and the significance of life. Lorene Scafaria's Seeking a Friend for the End of the World *represents one of several recent, mixed-genre films to unpack a pre-apocalyptic scenario with a more realistic setting than common sci-fi and fantasy approaches. Setting the stage in a world that is ordinary rather than fantastic allows the audience a relatable perspective into an extraordinary event and provides a more pragmatic experience of the familiar myth of total destruction. By exploring identity and symbolism through the everyday ritual of dress, this article examines clothing as a material representation of social and psychological processes at the world's end. Dress is dissected in discussion with physiological needs and cultural norms as well as critically analysed from phenomenological and feminist standpoints.*

After a failed space mission, humankind is facing extinction as a 70-mile-wide asteroid careens towards Earth. It is estimated that the asteroid will strike Earth in three weeks, and this news is broadcast around the globe. A stoic newscaster tells the world that cellphone service has been disabled and that it is only a matter of time before electricity and water services are also discontinued. As civil society begins to unravel, Dodge (Steve Carrell) is forced to manoeuvre his Oldsmobile through a labyrinth of traffic to get to his job as an insurance salesman. During a break from hawking insurance – including the new Armageddon package – Dodge sits in a meeting with four co-workers in front of a smartly dressed man. The man, a superior of Dodge's, is speaking to the diehard workers who continue to come to work despite the impending end of the world. Lightly, the boss tells the remaining workers, 'So, feel free to wear your casual Friday clothing, uh, pretty much any day of the week'.

This is an opening scene from Lorene Scafaria's *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (2012), which follows Dodge and his neighbour-turned-love-interest, Penny (Keira Knightly), as they navigate their final days amongst an increasingly fractured society. As the characters await humanity's ultimate fate, there is an absurdity to working, let alone being concerned with one's attire at the office. However, it is in this space that the narrative functions of clothing can truly come to light. What does one wear when there are no consequences?

By unpacking the narratives of apocalypse in *Seeking,* this article examines themes of identity, norms of dress and gender representation through film symbolism. Brinkmann's (2012) three-part model of interpretive media analysis provides a foundation that includes phenomenological, discursive and object examinations. When combined with feminist film theory, this analysis allows for the dissecting of gender performances in filmic representations through dress. This article considers notions of genre and genre ambiguity when dealing with themes of the apocalypse that can provide additional insight into the narrative and character conventions of *Seeking.*

DRESS, THE BODY AND SOCIETY

The relationship between clothing and the body has long sparked the interest of social scientists (Horn and Gurel 1981; Kaiser 1997, 2012). Theorists have approached dress from psychological and sociological stances (Crane 2000; Davis 1992; Flügel 2007; Kaiser 1997; Solomon 1985), anthropology (Polhemus 2011), cultural studies (Arnold 2001; Evans 2003; Hebdige 1979; Kaiser 2012; Wilson 2003), art and art history (Blau 1999; Steele 1996), communication (Barnard 2002; Barthes 1983) and material culture (Dant 1999; Miller 2010) Generally, individuals use clothing for both physiological purposes – such as protection from the elements (Flügel 2007) – and social processes such as group identification (Hebdige 1979; Thorton 1996) and/or individualization (Davis 1992; MacKinney-Valentin 2014).

Fashion – the garments and adornment worn by 'Western' individuals (Hollander 1994: 11) – generally stands in contrast to costumes (Polhemus 2011: 29–30) and other specialized garments (Davis 1992: 171–86). In addition to expressing individuality, dress also defines social roles, expresses social worth, indicates economic status, acts as recreation and influences attractiveness (Roach and Eicher 2007: 110–200; Rouse 2007: 123–25). Finally, clothing helps to construct identities that are communicated to us and to others (Belk 1988; Kaiser 1997: 147–56). Moreover, clothing and appearance allows people to 'frame and explain their social experiences' (Kaiser 1997: 31). Webster

(2009) adds that the act of consuming and ritualizing dress is one way for people to embody and enact cultural meaning, while Barnard (2010) suggests clothing is a point where cultural meanings interact with individual agency. As such, it is not simply a matter of what garment someone wears, but also how and where they wear it. The garment itself, as well as its styling and appropriateness, work together to provide symbolism and meaning for both garment and wearer.

Similarly, clothing frames actors and their performances (Finklestein 2007: 6–18; Church Gibson 2013). Dress, practically and conceptually, performs a variety of tasks for the people who wield its representational power. Clothing helps not only to tell stories but also illustrates the stories of others and forms connections between these stories. As a narrative tool, fashion offers a wealth of possibility as exemplified through fictional narratives across film and television. Munich posits that film-makers channel the narrative symbolism inherent in fashion and that audiences translate these messages in order to unearth 'the contemporary meanings and values' (2011: 5) of the time and place where the story unfolds.

CINEMATIC REPRESENTATIONS AND ANALYSIS OF THE APOCALYPSE

Mortality is perhaps the most compelling component of the human condition. That an individual life is finite, that dying is the common conclusion of each our stories, is what creates the sense of importance for a personal lifespan. Though we all maintain varying levels of introspection concerning our own demise, the notion of collective demise introduces an even more urgent and intense need for reflection. The mythology of apocalypse is as old as any representation of human consciousness; as a society we proselytize about and agonize over *the* end – and have since the beginning. Campbell's (2008) sense of the apocalyptic narrative, like many recurring traditional archetypal patterns, has been reimagined and remediated across countless media.

Since at least the 1950s, there have been observable waves and patterns of media products focusing on complete world destruction, which both create and reflect popular sentiment of the era. For example, Shapiro (1998) offers an in-depth exploration of the bevy of apocalyptic novels and subsequent film efforts that surfaced in the 1950s and centred on atomic bomb scenarios; Kramer's (1959) *On the Beach*, based on the Shute novel by the same name, is exemplary of these early films that focused on nuclear fallout. Retzinger (2008) notes that apocalyptic narratives in films from the 1970s, such as *Soylent Green* (Fleischer, 1973), frequently featured themes like food shortage and contamination; these issues were at the forefront of public concern as unemployment had reached a staggering high. Benjamin identifies a subgenre he calls 'youth apocalyptic films' that emerged in the 1990s; he attributes this development as partially in response to the cheerful and 'banal youth films popular during the 1980s' (2004: 34) and also illustrative of a time when public concern around and research on adolescence had peaked. This trend in films includes *Kids* (Clark, 1995) and *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994). In tandem with public concern and current issues, genres are shaped and reshaped to reflect and respond to societal pressures and dominant ideologies.

As evidenced above, genre can often be used to explain and understand conventions of narrative, characterization and portrayals of the environment in film. Science fiction films frequently approach apocalypse from the perspective of technological paranoia so that the end of humanity is likely to be attributed

to invasion from a more advanced society (Schelde 1994). Further, as Sullivan (2014) points out, science fiction films often aim to create a noticeable contrast between the world of the film and our world while drawing enough parallels that the viewer can make sense of the film's symbolic representations. Into the twenty-first century, film-makers have been focusing on environmentally themed apocalyptic destruction brought on by human negligence of resource management; films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004) forge connections between the traditional apocalyptic myth and current concerns about climate change. Roberts and Stein (2015) illustrate that these environmentally themed films often highlight dystopia or corporate domination that arises because of a decline in human concern around issues of conservation and sustainable practices. These waves of culturally relevant film themes and dialectical discourse demonstrate that archetypal narrative persists and continues to be embodied through contemporary storytelling and, as Walker (2013) points out, represent an intersection of individual psyche and collective concern.

While the public and societal concerns are somewhat more evident, Walker (2013) also notes the power of individual transformation through the apocalyptic myth. Through these destruction narratives, he argues, we can envision ourselves and the potential for complete destruction and/or re-emergence. This is where fashion helps to crystallize the narrative. Just as the apocalyptic mythology persists, Stutesman (2011) explains that the impact of dress on the human psyche remains remarkably consistent over time. If we allow for fashion choices as embodiment of the psyche, clothing can represent comfort and discomfort, our intrapersonal states and interpersonal relationships. Benjamin cites Fiske's notions that in the current media moment film no longer represents '"a second-hand" reality' (2004: 34) but that instead individuals are coming increasingly closer to envisioning their lives playing out through the images on the screen. Since an actual apocalypse would by definition render it impossible to retro-actively critique the role of fashion symbolism, it stands to reason then that in apocalyptic scenarios in films are the best and closest chance to live through – or in this case *up to* – the end of the world. Drawing on Sobchack's (1992) claim that audiences can experience cinema not just through narrative portrayals but also through material connections, this research builds an argument about experience with fashion and embodiment. Ince (2011) adds that scholars have long been willing to accept media characters as direct representations of children's bodies but allow that to dissolve into a secondary representation for adults. If, instead, adult viewers are actually still experiencing a more primary identification to 'bodily, affective ties […then] bodily sensation and perception may play a far larger part in cinematic viewing than film theory and criticism have tended to assume' (Ince 2011: 7). What can we learn, then, about the symbolism and relevance of apocalyptic narrative through examining the symbolic fashion throughout the journey in *Seeking* and other apocalyptic films?

As previously mentioned, *Seeking* is not a post-apocalyptic film like many that have dealt with the topic, but instead is an intimate prelude to the impending end. The story follows Dodge and Penny as they experience their last days on Earth. There are no alien creatures or human/mutant hybrids, no infected persons, no supernatural occurrences. Unlike the science fiction films that strive to make the audience feel at least some distance from the apocalyptic setting (Sullivan 2014), the scenario at hand here is grounded in utter realism. The characters know that an asteroid is coming, but it has not yet hit, so the setting is the everyday world. The cinematic twist is that the characters must confront the notion of what happens to everyday norms, routines and perceptions when time suddenly becomes finite.

The film opens up a space where fashion choices and clothing can be used without consequence. This turn towards absurdity allows the film to play with narrative elements and allows viewers to postulate on what they would do as the end approaches. Turning a critical eye to the use of clothing within this narrative, it is possible to see which social norms are maintained through the end and which social norms are disregarded. Such analysis allows us to see additional uses of clothing and material goods that might not be apparent when social repercussions are a factor. These uses of dress, neither fully apocalyptic nor fully realistic, blur the lines of typical genre conventions.

In order to explore such elements, it will be key to follow Brinkmann's (2012) suggestion that film can demonstrate salient features of everyday life. This salience is not only through fictional portrayals but also through the experience of watching people living their lives as consumers. Consumption both influences and is influenced by the moving images that unfold on the screen. The current work is carried out under the dialectic of film as a medium that is 'co-constitutive of who we are in a visually oriented culture' and that the images create and express identities (Brinkmann 2012: 129). In *Seeking,* Dodge and Penny, along with their neighbours and the strangers they meet, are not *viewers'* bodies, but they are bodies *like* the viewers' bodies. Sobchack (2004) calls for a phenomenological reconnection with the corporeal experience of cinematic viewing and to move beyond analysis of the image on-screen and discuss material connections; for Sobchack a more accurate description of the audience experience must include not only an identification with a subject but also with the object and the notion of 'the materiality itself' (2004: 65). Thus, the characters are images of subject positions but are also bodies the viewer can relate to; viewers can identify and empathize with these bodies as the characters perform the same social rituals and enact the same normative meanings that viewers understand and exhibit in day-to-day life.

In order for social norms to serve as a lens for exploring the relationships between fashion, the apocalypse and the everyday body, *Seeking* is interpreted through a three-tier strategy of analysis. First, the imagery and obvious details of selected objects and scenery in *Seeking* are outlined; this allows the realization of the mundane that is often taken for granted and allows some initial understanding about the function of dress in the narrative. Next in a more critical approach, it is possible to draw out the more implicit features of dress, behaviour and emotion. Beyond the obvious images, what can be deduced about the state of the characters' lives? Further, what can be learned by what is noticeably absent from selected scenes? Through this more paradigmatic interpretation it is possible to highlight the dynamic relationships illustrated through fashion in the everyday versus fashion in the face of the extraordinary. Finally, the third mode of analysis involves imagining alternative readings and asking questions about how things could be if the discourse were different. By dissecting phenomenological perceptions and integrating feminist approaches to film, it is possible to arrive at broader insights concerning the weight of apocalyptic mythology and the expression of fashion in social practices.

SEEKING PROTECTION AND COMFORT AT THE END

Seeking deals with many familiar apocalyptic tropes by setting up a situation where the end is actually near and is therefore not hypothetical. By focusing on the imagery and narrative, it is possible to see several functions of clothing already recognized by theorists. As Chatman highlights, film cannot avoid precision of detail and therefore clothing 'must be *bestimmt* in a film' (1980: 30,

original emphasis); this means that unlike verbal narrative, film is a medium that has no choice but to represent the detail of dress in its telling of the story. Combining rich description with a critical eye of contemporary fashion theory reveals how these functions of clothing are used within the narrative. Despite the transition from 'everyday world' (Vogler 1998: 1) to the 'special world' and, ultimately, the end of the world, some uses of clothing remain the same. The film shows clothing and adornment used as both physical and emotional protection, and to define social roles and to express social worth. After reading the roles of clothing through both intrapersonal and interpersonal lenses, it is then possible to open up other interpretations of the use of material goods.

Dress as a means of protection from the elements is perhaps its most basic use. As Flügel (2007) points out, clothing and material objects help to protect humans from both physical dangers and psychological or social dangers. While clothing can help to keep the body warm or cool and prevent physical harm, it can also protect against social harm including ostracization and feelings of vulnerability. The protective elements of clothing can be seen when Penny and Dodge arrive at her ex-boyfriend's survivalist compound. Speck, Penny's former lover, has set up a basement bunker with a stockpile of supplies and friends who are ready to repopulate the earth after the asteroid impact. Speck is tall, muscular and ready to lead a new civilization, wearing a red Lycra shirt, cargo pants, dog tags, training gloves and combat boots. Lycra is an athletic material that can also help protect from the elements, while cargo pants and combat boots allude to a militaristic tone (see Figure 1).

In comparison, Penny illustrates the psychological protections of clothing and material goods. Penny and Dodge first meet when she leaves her boyfriend and is crying on the fire escape. Dodge opens his window and invites Penny inside. In a satirical yet undeniably uncomfortable comment on gender dynamics, Penny expresses slight uncertainty at climbing into a stranger's apartment and asks Dodge to make an agreement that he will not

Figure 1: Speck (Derek Luke) is dressed in military-style clothing when he meets Penny (Keira Knightley) and Dodge (Steve Carell) in Seeking a Friend for the End of the World *(2012), producer Steve Golin, director Lorene Scafaria.*

Figure 2: Dodge teaches Penny how to play the harmonica while she wears his argyle sweater in Seeking a Friend for the End of the World *(2012).*

try to rape her if she promises not steal anything. During this time, Penny is upset that she missed the final plane to see her family because she was involved with her now ex-boyfriend. In the scene, Penny is wearing a dress and cardigan, along with Converse sneakers and cross necklace. She is also wrapped in a quilt suggesting a psychological comfort of being shrouded in something soft. After Penny falls asleep on Dodge's couch, he covers her with the blanket, and the stage is set for the relationship that develops.

Two other scenes show Penny using material objects and covering as a means of psychological protection. After Penny gives Dodge the backlog of mail that had been wrongly delivered to her apartment, he becomes irate that he did not receive a love letter from an old flame months earlier. Penny, who is in bed, cries and says, 'Oh, well now I feel bad'. As she does this, she pulls the blanket up over her head, shielding herself from the guilt and the embarrassment.

Long after Penny and Dodge have reconciled, they stumble upon a beach where a long line of couples are getting married. The two smile and kiss as they recognize their special devotion to each other in this moment. Dodge, at the time, is dressed in business casual attire – jeans, a pair of Puma sneakers and a grey argyle sweater. The scene quickly cuts from the kiss to Penny and Dodge sitting on the beach together. However, Dodge is now wearing a t-shirt and Penny is instead wearing the grey argyle sweater (See Figure 2).

This exchange of clothing is important in several ways but illustrates both protection and comfort. First, Dodge's removal of his sweater marks an important moment for him; he has let go of some of the things weighing him down, and the audience, as well as Penny, gets the opportunity to see Dodge's layers shedding and to understand more about the man underneath. There is a comfort in being vulnerable, but also in being able to share the final days with someone. Further, Penny now wears Dodge's sweater. Instead of Penny finding her own comfort – i.e. the quilt she used earlier – Dodge's clothing is now a source of comfort and protection.

SEEKING SOCIAL APPROVAL AND BELONGING AT THE END

In addition to the psychological and physiological needs met by clothing, *Seeking* also offers a variety of social components related to the characters' dress. Despite the hopelessness of the situation, the idea of human attraction

and intimate connections are omnipresent in the film. In the first scene of the film, Dodge and his wife, Linda, hear the news about the impending end of the world. When Dodge shows no emotion, Linda flees in disgust. Later, themes of social connection are repeated when Dodge hopes to reconnect with a lost love and Penny discusses the romanticism of her parents. As society breaks down, attractive ideals and desire for personal connections remain.

Clothing and adornment, as Rouse (2007) highlights, work as a means to display and exhibit the body, as well as to situate the body in relation to a social context. When Dodge attends a dinner party at the home of his friends Warren and Diane, most guests are still dressed in socially appropriate, 'attractive' clothing. Diane is in a yellow cocktail dress and a pair of heels, and others have also dressed up for the occasion. As the party heats up, Dodge seeks refuge in the bathtub, where Diane finds him and attempts to come on to him. When Dodge rebuffs her by implying that she is someone's spouse, Diane asks, 'What is anybody's anything anymore?', followed by, 'Why did Linda get to disappear? Why does everyone else get to do what they want?'. The implicit assumption is that Diane is still looking pretty and attempting to keep up appearances while others – including her husband – have tossed them aside. Soon after, Diane can be seen dancing while wearing a decorative animal head, which reads as a symbolic indication that Diane has in fact relented to her more primitive urges.

Penny later subtly illustrates the socially prescribed ideas of attractiveness. When having dinner with Dodge, she is musing about things that are no longer important. In triumph, Penny states, 'No more days spent picking out what you're gonna wear for nights that don't mean anything'. She goes on to say that the loss of expectations of attractiveness is 'liberating'. However, Penny does not act out that sentiment.

The next day, Penny and Dodge drive to the house of his lost love so he can reunite with her and Penny can be freed of the guilt from not giving him his mail. As Dodge walks up to the house, Penny remains in the car where she takes off her headband and fixes her hair. It is clear that Penny is attempting to make herself look conventionally attractive, especially when faced with the prospect of another suitor for Dodge. Penny still adheres to the social conventions of attractiveness, assuming a competition with another woman.

There is also a protection and/or comfort in fitting into social roles. This use of clothing can be seen throughout the movie – from Dodge's workplace to Dodge's housekeeper Elsa to the party scene at the chain restaurant Friendzy's. As Roach and Eicher (2007) point out, clothing helps to define social roles, the who, what, where and why we are. Likewise, Craik has suggested that uniforms or any socially prescribed use of clothing and personal adornment are 'strategically used to play the games of social life by allowing people to conform to groups they are part of …' (2005: 7).

In an early scene of *Seeking,* Dodge's superior tells the company employees that they can wear casual Friday clothing every day from here on out, for the remainder of their existence on Earth. This scene is both poignant and bizarre. The executive is holding this meeting with a handful of people; some, like Dodge, still dressed in more business-like attire while his co-worker is in an Adidas tracksuit. At the same time the executive is also telling the gathered about various 'openings' at the company, including 'chief financial officer'.

The absurdity is notable: why even bother continuing to work, let alone give a second thought about what you would wear there? On the other hand, the set-up here opens the discourse about apocalypse and comfort/discomfort.

For many people, there is comfort in routine, that one thing we can count on from life is that it goes on. Though we know that, logically, life does not go on, we are not often in a position to ponder such a finite end. In *Seeking,* we see routine manifest through occupational wear across several occasions.

First, the film clearly shows Dodge in what is essentially his workwear throughout all of the rising exposition; despite the fact that his boss has declared every remaining day 'casual', he does not appear interested in changing. We see him in a series of Oxford button-downs, sweaters, sweater vests and slacks. Dodge also wears these garments both at the office and outside the office, suggesting that Dodge is not very exciting outside of his corporately defined role.

This routine is also seen through the television news anchor, who keeps viewers up to date on the impending apocalypse, and in Elsa, Dodge's housekeeper who continues to clean – and ask for more Windex – despite the soon-to-be incineration of everything. The news anchor continues to wear suits and ties up until the very last broadcast. The calm of the studio is in comparison to rioting in the streets and the on-scene reporter announcing in deadpan, 'We're fucked, Bob'. Similarly, Dodge finds Elsa at his apartment several times throughout the film. She keeps coming to work, in her work uniform, despite Dodge's unsuccessful attempts to relieve her of her duties. She will not accept his goodbye and maintains, 'See you next Wednesday, Mr Dodge!'

What individuals wear as part of daily routines and how they approach social expectations through clothing offer insight on what is seen as appropriate. The individual seeks comfort, both physical and emotional, but what if the routine and social pressures are actually causing discomfort? While Elsa and the news anchor present business as usual, the other side of the coin is the other characters that clearly take advantage of the sudden lack of consequences, by the nature of the apocalypse.

A mix of both abiding by and breaking the social roles is obvious when Penny and Dodge stop by the fictional chain restaurant Friendzy's. A clear mockery of chain restaurants, Friendzy's employees are dressed in their uniforms – black-and red-striped shirts – but also display boas, glow sticks, tutus and other costume items. Another restaurant refugee is dressed in a bunny suit. While there are markings of the typical server–patron relationship (the waitress telling Penny and Dodge that if they remain positive, she might be able to get a free 'spin dip' for the table), other social norms have been cast aside. This is especially noted as the servers are featured doing MDMA and participating in orgies within the restaurant.

A clearer foil to the normalization represented by the anchorman and Elsa normalization is Dodge's friend Warren. At the dinner party early in the film, Diane is trying to set Dodge up with a friend. Warren, who is wearing a Dunkin' Donuts t-shirt underneath a suit jacket, has already thrown caution to the wind (Figure 3). While Dodge and Diane are both dressed in socially appropriate attire – Dodge in jeans and sweater and Diane in a yellow cocktail dress – Warren no longer follows social pretences. He makes his outlook known by yelling, 'This isn't the fucking ark, Diane! This is the fucking Titanic and there is not a life raft in sight!'

Like attractive qualities, the role of clothing and adornment in social worth is deeply embedded in the narrative. This can be seen in a variety of instances, including in Dodge's attire, through Penny's ex-boyfriend Owen, through Dodge's father, and through Karen and Diane at the dinner party. This suggests that fashion and clothing is intricately involved in social valuations has been a

Figure 3: Diane, right, and her husband, Warren, fight before a dinner party in Seeking a Friend for the End of the World *(2012).*

part of fashion discussions for some time. As Warner points out, fashion does not simply serve the background of on-screen narrative but instead becomes 'central to the narrative itself' (2009: 181) since, as Bruzzi and Church Gibson note, clothing choices help to develop character identities (2004: 116).

Using the costume choices as a narrative device (Munich 2011), the less prominent and/or useful characters are shown in dishevelled states. A key example is Penny's ex-boyfriend, Owen, who is emotionally unstable as he cries at the thought of Penny leaving, but also uses her as a human shield. Owen, who Penny leaves in the middle of a riot, is wearing a holey t-shirt, pajama bottoms and Ugg boots. This is not the height of class or composure and, later, Owen is cast aside.

A similar use of clothing can be seen during a visit to Dodge's father, Frank. Father and son have been estranged for years, and as such, the visit is a surprise. Like Owen, when Frank is first encountered, he is wearing pajama bottoms and t-shirt, but he is also wearing a bomber jacket, a foreshadowing artefact. As Frank becomes more useful and important to the plot, he changes into jeans and a button-down for dinner. The bomber jacket resurfaces when we find out Frank is a pilot, and he leaves with Penny to fly her back to her family in his small plane.

Outside of the narrative structures, the class implications of blue-collar and white-collar individuals are also apparent as they reinforce conceptions of clothing and appearance in the film. Blue-collar workers like Glen, a construction worker who give Penny and Dodge a ride, and Frank are dressed in typical blue-collar attire: knit caps, work boots and jeans. The styles of these garments are looser and less tailored than what white-collar, insurance salesman Dodge wears. An even starker contrast can be made between the blue-collar individuals and the omnipresent anchorman and Karen, a guest at Warren and Diane's dinner party. The anchorman, clearly a national figure, wears a shirt and tie through his final newscast and, before his sign off, is

seen in a full suit. Karen wears a tiara and a fur stole, stereotypically luxurious items. The class divides and social values are clear.

Ultimately, clothing as a narrative tool can illustrate ideas of attraction and social worth, as well as idea of protection, comfort and social roles. Due to the situation presented in *Seeking,* clothing is employed in acceptable ways and also in manners that challenge social conventions. Throughout the film, clothing is used to tell viewers about the characters and about the world the characters (and the viewers alike) inhabit. Now, following the third step of Brinkmann's (2012) tri-level model it is possible to explore some additional uses of clothing and adornment as the characters prepared for the end of the world.

BEYOND SEEKING: FASHION AS OWNERSHIP AND REINFORCEMENT OF NORMS

Beyond the previously theoretically defined uses of fashion and adornment, is it possible to offer two additional uses of clothing from *Seeking.* The ability to explore one of these two uses lies in the formation of the film's narrative – the idea that the actions have no consequences. The second offered use of clothing is not reliant upon the apocalyptic premise but still can be read into the film. The varied use of clothing can be partially attributed to the blurred genre of *Seeking.* The film is part apocalyptic film and part romantic comedy, thereby utilizing elements of each. The argument is not that clothing is always used in these manners, but that these are two additional means in which clothing and adornment may be used in both fictional narratives and everyday life.

The first and more prominent of these uses of clothing is illustrated through the character of Karen. While little is known about the character outside the fact that she is single and a friend of Diane's, her use of clothing is meaningful due to its fanciful nature. Upon coming to Warren and Diane's dinner party, Karen is clad in what would generally be seen as over-the-top. She is wearing a tiara, a fur shawl and a fancy dress. While the clothing of others, namely Diane, would suggest that the entire affair is somewhat formal, Karen's attire is particularly extravagant.

Karen's justification for wearing the outlandish ensemble is equally telling. When first meeting Dodge, Karen says, 'It's everything I never wore'. The implication is that Karen, at some point, purchased these items but never had appropriate places to wear them. Now that her options are even more limited, Karen is uninhibited and wears the garments to a dinner party where previously they were not socially appropriate. This use of clothing calls to mind Warren's Dunkin' Donuts/suit jacket combination and his proclamation that none of this matters anyhow.

Taking Karen's attire a step further, however, opens up other questions. Why would she have these pieces in her closet if she never had somewhere to wear them? Moreover, where would it ever be appropriate to wear a tiara? Perhaps on her wedding day, but ultimately, the socially appropriate displays of these items are few and far between. Still, Karen kept these items for potential future use, which adds a fantasy or aspirational element to her clothing ownership. She held onto the items with the hope that one day she would have a place to wear them. When this did not come to fruition, she chose to wear them to her friends' dinner party, ostensibly one of her last definite social engagements.

The suggestion that individuals use clothing for aspirational and/or fantasy means is not entirely new. Theorists such as Wilson (2003) and Kaiser (1997)

have approached this issue but neither seems to fit with what Karen's character is doing. For Wilson, 'fashion acts as a vehicle for fantasy' and helps explore the 'unconsciously unfulfillable' (2003: 246). However, there seems to be a validation by actually *wearing* the clothing. Karen previously never wore the clothing and was only able to do so when there were no consequences. Kaiser notes that 'little is known about fantasy dressing' (1997: 162) and suggests that individuals continue to use fantasy with regard to their clothing throughout their lives. Fantasy fulfilment is also attributed to costumes, a concept shown in the film through children at the dinner party in superhero and princess garb and by a guy at Friendzy's dressed as a rabbit. These fantasies may be fetished-based (Edwards 2011: 67–85) or simply imaginative.

Karen certainly *wanted* to wear the clothing but did not feel there was an appropriate time and place to do so. The items are not extraordinary, such as a superhero costume, but something she could realistically wear in public. She only needed a context-dependent fashion situation, a situation that never presented itself. Now, as the end of the world approaches, Karen takes it upon herself to create a suitable event. Since there is limited time for repercussions, Karen takes the opportunity to become who she always hoped to be.

The second clothing element that could have an alternative reading is the scene in which Penny and Dodge connect on the beach while a line of couples are getting married. When the scene cuts and Penny is wearing Dodge's sweater, it is a sign of comfort and/or protection as discussed above. There is something reassuring about having a loved ones' garment. There was no element of coercion within the exchange of the sweater, and we can assume Penny put it on willingly, since she seems happy with it, and so the sweater is a symbol of comfort for her. Still, Dodge's symbolic enveloping of Penny with his sweater, a garment owned by him, literally covers her and could also be read as him taking possession of her.

Under this view, Dodge and Penny have united as a couple, but Dodge, the male, has taken traditional ownership of Penny, the female. Evoking images of earlier Americana such as letterman jackets and pinning ceremonies, wearing his sweater implies that she belongs to him and that others need not apply. By examining the recent fashion trend of 'boyfriend clothing', which is designed to look like men's clothing but be purchased and worn by women, Skerski critiques gendered fashion branding and argues that supposed moves towards androgyny are falsely presented as multidirectional while the discourse of the 'gendered clothing swap operates in a single direction' (2011: 476). Thus, it is telling in this scene that there is no *exchange* of clothing; Dodge does not wear something of Penny's in reciprocation. There is no equal footing. Dodge is a masculine, dominant man – even if he has been a weak force throughout most of the film – and he got his girl. In line with Skerski's assertion that 'boyfriend clothing' carries the assumptions that women want boyfriends – whose clothing they can wear – and currently has no marketing counterpoint of 'girlfriend clothing', the sweater exchange for Penny and Dodge 'confirms the terms of the heterosexual contract (2011: 476)'.

CODA

Seeking a Friend for the End of the World, while following some genre conventions of romantic comedy and offering other parallels to disaster films, is an unconventional pre-apocalyptic film effort. Imagining how society would function as it knowingly approaches its final days is an absurd thought that has

clearly never come to fruition in reality. However, drawing from Sobchack's assertion that cinema 'employs lived modes of perpetual experience as sign vehicles of representation' (1992: 74), it follows that we as viewers essentially experience our own bodies as we take in the bodies represented in film. In this case, we examine the function of clothing and its relationship with the body while confronting the reality of mortality and impending death. Further, by exploring the narrative structures used here, it is possible to glean an embodied understanding of how symbolic elements also create and support character identity. Through the function of fashion and the details of dress in an apocalyptic scenario, *Seeking* provides insight into the characters' use of clothing for comfort and protection, for social approval, for establishing relationships. Moreover, the addition of feminist analysis considers stereotypical as well as alternative readings of gender performances and gendered social norms related to the body and dress. While we see some normative dress behaviours being disregarded in the context of social and occupational life, others are reinforced in the realm of normative gender roles. More rich data for this type of examination surface as contemporary film-makers continue to interrogate apocalyptic narratives. Of particular interest are genre-defying and more subtly realistic efforts like *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*. Recent films such as *It's a Disaster* (Berger, 2012), *This is the End* (Goldberg and Rogen, 2013) and *The World's End* (Wright, 2013) provide future opportunities for close readings of the relationship between identity and consumption at the end of the world.

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