

REVIEW

Raiding the Superhero Wardrobe: A Review of *The Superhero Costume – Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction*

The Superhero Costume – Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction, B. Brownie and D. Graydon, Bloomsbury Academic, 192 pages, 2016, 15 b/w images, ISBN: 978-1472595904

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This review provides a costume designer's reading of *The Superhero Costume – Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction* by Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon (Bloomsbury, 2016). This book explores the superhero costume within comics, films and its translation into real life, and shows how difficult it is to stitch the line between symbolism and practicality, spectacle and realism, and ultimately between fiction and fact. While there remains some unevenness in how the gender of superheroes makes a difference to the costume and there is a lack of a useful conclusion as far as academic books go, this book discusses a lot of issues that could (and should) inform the designs within a superhero's wardrobe.

Keywords: costume design; fashion; identity; real-life superheroes; superheroes

How would you dress a superhero? If faced with this question, most people would probably have some basic ideas based on what they were able to observe in comic books or movies – and this would probably be sufficient for putting together a Halloween outfit (and if you were totally lacking confidence, just pick some everyday clothes to portray a civilian alter-ego). But designing the costume of an actual superhero is not just a matter of tights, cape and a mask, as Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon's book *The Superhero Costume – Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction* (2016) explores in some detail.

The book's bibliography gives an indication that recent scholarly approaches to the superhero costume from the specific vantage point of comics studies are rare, with most references drawing from a wide variety of disciplines and sources. There is no doubt that the outfits of superheroes have their own specific rules when it comes to their design and the symbolism contained therein – and this is true both for the outfits that reveal and identify them as superheroes and the ones that hide them behind a civilian alter-ego. This book identifies a number of separate strands exploring these rules as applied within drawn and filmic superhero fiction in its first two parts, and then goes on to discuss their translation into real life within the contexts of cosplay, political protests and costumed vigilantes in Part 3. My reading of this is from the perspective of a costume designer, and I have therefore tried to tease out the strands I consider most relevant to that area of interest.

These strands weave in and out of chapters, for example 'Superman: Codifying the Superhero Wardrobe' recounts an origins story of sorts by looking at the prototypical superhero (certainly within the comic book genre) Superman and his costume. This allows the authors to introduce the notion of inspiration from history (in this case Victorian strongmen and – slightly less so – historical armour), the constraints and opportunities of a drawn and printed genre (this wasn't designed to be worn, it was designed to be printed and have a visual impact on cheap paper), the first nod to the idea of a superhero brand that would 'leak' into the real world (in this case the Superman logo), as well as the differences between the attires of the superheroes and their civilian alter-egos.

All of these ideas are further developed in following chapters, as is the role of the mask, as focused on in 'Identity, Role and the Mask', where it is pondered whether a mask not just protects the heroes' identities, but also might make them appear untrustworthy, as it suggests the wearers have something to hide. It is made clear that including a mask in the superhero costume leads to moral ambiguity, because masks and criminal activities are so entwined in our understanding. But the masks also permit superheroes to act as they might not in their civilian guises – it is almost as if this part of the costume gives them permission to act outside of the law, while

at the same time giving them the anonymity that protects their circle of friends and family.

The idea of the costume portraying moral ambiguity and giving permission to act outside of social conventions is further explored in the context of the integration of animal aspects into the costume (and possibly persona) of the superhero. It is argued that animal inspired costumes allow the superheroes to 'channel' selected traits of the portrayed beasts, usually their strengths. Adopting an animal in the styling process also marks the wearer of the costume out as different to the civilised human society (linking back to shamanistic rituals), and thereby removing some of the restraints imposed by it. Superheroes may be primal, instinctual and territorial in their behaviours, and this type of costume provides visual clues to this. Key elements of the animals' abilities get transferred through the design inspired by key elements of their appearance, even if only stylised. For example, bird or insect inspired costumes often include (or hide) mechanics of flight.

The ideals and identities visible in superheroes' costumes can also be inspired by the country they represent. The use of a national flag (or elements thereof) to portray patriotism and nationalism is compared with the use of national dress in order to build up identity. (There is also a discussion of ethnicity, which for me doesn't really work in this context and has little to do with costume as the focus of this book, and which isn't explored enough to do the issue justice.)

Very interesting is a look at the difference between the ordinariness of the civilian alter-ego as compared to the spectacle of the superhero identity. It is clarified that the civilian outfits are disguises as well, providing shelter by removing the superpowers and turning the wearer into the ordinary. As Brownie and Graydon argue, the design of this second costume is very different to the superhero costume: where one stands out, the other needs to be unremarkable; where one is unique, the other needs to conform; where one is special, the other needs to be average.

One of the most important aspects of a costume for a designer of an actual garment, however, must be the balance between form and function, an issue that is also discussed. 'Evolution and Adaptation: Form versus Function' traces the evolution

of superhero costumes within different adaptations to analyse whether there is a difference between their credibility. It is argued that in the Golden Age of comics the costume was all about the look in order for the audience to be able to quickly identify the heroes, the design was about colour and silhouette. However, in more recent times the function of the dress has been questioned and audiences demand it to be more realistic and believable. Brownie and Graydon argue that this becomes particularly important for movie adaptations, which at the moment attract a much bigger audience than comic book readers. But adapting a design from page to screen is problematic, if visual faithfulness is sought, because comic book illustrations never needed to achieve realism, they are not like photographs.

One important point in updating the superheroes' costumes to these current tastes of realism is that these garments still need to include the 'otherness' of the dress, it needs to stand out as 'super' to give the visual clues to the environment that different rules apply for these individuals. Part of this is also the concept of fashion and how that can be used to locate a character within a specific era. Superhero costumes, it is argued, need to portray timelessness by NOT conforming to the fashions of a particular time. There might be nods to the era that the superhero was created, but on the whole superheroes are ahistorical by their nature, because they belong to a genre that includes re-incarnations and adaptations as a matter of course. While every new artist interpreting an established character will want to distinguish this new version from any older versions and to make the new interpretation believable to the current audience, the costume must also remain instantly recognisable. The costume designer clearly walks a fine line here.

The exceptions to this are costumes which are not quite so symbolic in their contents, but utilitarian – the ones, it seems, that are welded rather than sewn. If technological discoveries feature greatly in the backstory of a superhero, the tales of Ant Man, Batman and Iron Man are being cited as examples, they are rooted in scientific discoveries and created in research labs, rather than the fashion designer's studio. This seems to make it easier for the audience to embrace change.

It is in Part 3 that the superhero costume is then discussed within the context of the real world, not just as designs on a page or costumes in a film, but garments

worn in the context of real life. This includes Cosplay, where fans are choosing to not just simply be consumers of a provided text, but to actively engage with a canon by dressing up. This participatory fandom expands the worlds initially created, while fans enact narratives or create their own personal narratives when behaving in character. Here visual faithfulness is highly prized and the making of a costume turns into cultural capital, as it demonstrates knowledge and devotion.

While the dressing up as part of fandom remains tied to introduced narratives, real-life superheroes often tap into the symbolism of the superhero costume as a genre. Rather than trying to copy a specific hero from fiction, they create their own hidden identities in order to fight crime or act as political activists. Using their own superhero costume can show their values, masks can protect their identities, but they are still identifiable as superheroes. It is the costume that makes the wearer recognisable as part of a group, and this alignment might be with fictional crime fighters, or, as in the case of Pussy Riot, their 'uniform' moulds them into a recognisable group.

But it is for this group that the practicalities of their costumes become as important as their symbolism, as these outfits need to be practical, comfortable and it needs to be possible to maintain them. In that way we could say that they are not so much costumes but uniforms, they need to work in real life.

The book offers a detailed discussion of these issues, with well-posed examples to make the point – or to provide the exception to the rule. Spider-Man, for example, is singled out as an interesting case within the discussion of how animals can inspire costumes. His suit is not an attempt to dress like a spider, but only bears its image as a logo, whereas the more prominent visual feature is the spider's web. This superhero's behaviours don't mimic the animalistic instincts of a spider, but rather just use some of its abilities.

What works less well is the addition of three short case studies at the end of the book. Because they are all case studies of fictional superheroes, it seems odd to have them after Part 3, which deals with the real world. These chapters appear more like an appendix rather than part of the actual book, and it isn't clear why Superman, for example, warrants a detailed discussion integrated into a number of chapters, while

some traits of *Watchmen*, *Iron Man* and *The X-Men* get briefly referred to within the chapters and then get more detailed case studies that are not really contextualised. An even treatment of the examples would have helped draw this book together more fully.

What is also disappointing is how little the book problematises the gender divide. It states in the introduction that it will not debate the sexualisation and fetishisation of female superheroes, as that has been explored in detail in other works. This is a useful narrowing of the focus, but the book then goes on to almost exclusively use male pronouns to refer to superheroes in general, which makes it sound like there are only male superheroes, with some named exceptions few and far between. This in a book that features a silhouetted superhero on the cover (**Figure 1**) which has fur on the bottom of the cape and wears high heels, so is probably a woman.

There were opportunities to address this balance, for example, Wonder Woman could have been mentioned as one of the superheroes that doesn't wear a mask and that hides her true identity with a civilian alter-ego rather than the other way around. In the chapter about fashion, it is argued that the rules are slightly different for female superheroes. Both Wonder Woman and The Wasp (whose alter-ego is a fashion designer) have undergone frequent transformations in the wardrobe department. But the problematics of this difference in genders is underexplored, although there is a nice reflection on whether high heels are tools of oppression, or are used as tools by the wearers, by making their stature more imposing or being used as actual weapons. However, since it is argued that fashion adherence shows conformity to a social group and that not doing so is a further aspect that marks the superhero out as special, doesn't it follow that female superheroes are shown as less special if portrayed to conform? I don't think that this is connected to issues of sexualisation and fetishisation, but it is just not explored.

These small issues aside, this is a very interesting book full of many separate strands that it attempts to weave together into an exploration of the superhero costume not just in drawn and filmic fiction, but also in its translation into real life, within the contexts of cosplay, political protests and costumed vigilantes. It provides

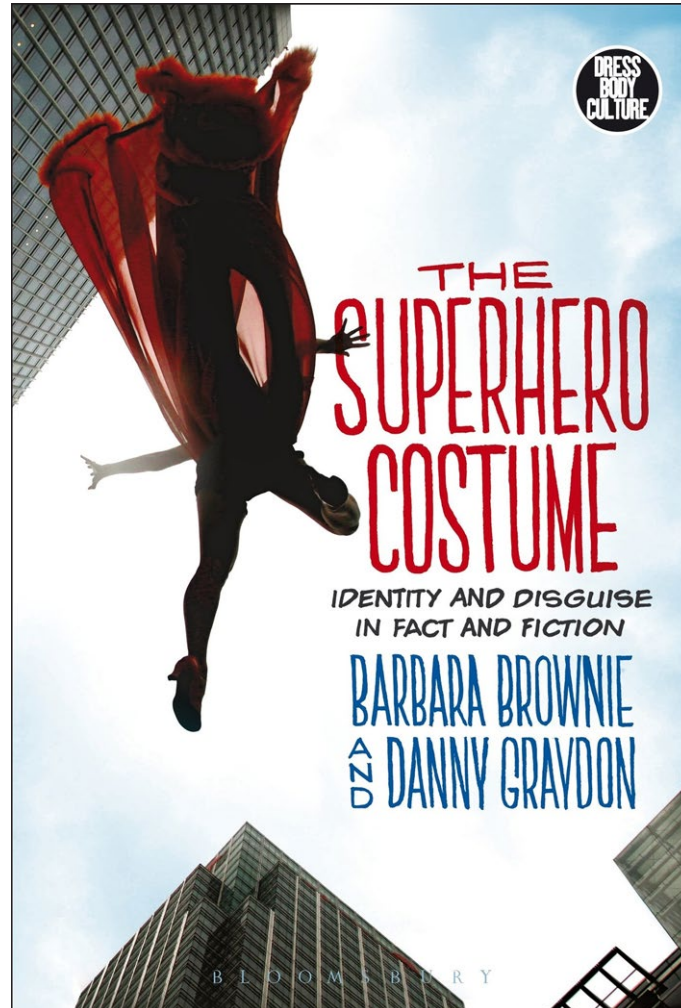


Figure 1: The cover of Brownie and Graydon's *The Superhero Costume – Identity and Disguise in Fact and Fiction* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). Might this be a female superhero? © 2016 Bloomsbury Academic.

a chain of interesting ideas that invite reflection on the relationship between the fact and fiction of superhero costumes, and give some useful hints of what to consider when designing costumes for superhero characters.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Reference

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