

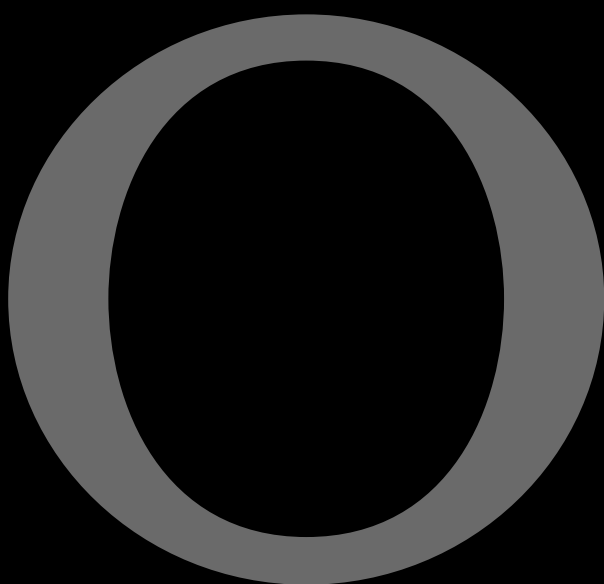
GOTH

UNDEAD SUBCULTURE

Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby, editors



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GOTH

Edited by Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby

UNDEAD SUBCULTURE

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INTRODUCTION



Goth subculture emerged in the socioeconomic decline and Thatcherite politics of late 1970s Britain, on the heels of punk's infamous rebellion. Drawing on diverse fringe cultures, from Dada to garage rock, punk had catalyzed a generation of youth with its DIY attitude toward music, fashion preference for safety pins and thrift shops, and contempt for mass-marketed music culture. By the late 1970s punk was itself being exploited for commercial potential. Yet punk had also energized a surge of new styles such as new romantic, industrial, new wave, and hardcore. Amid this dizzying subcultural effulgence, a number of bands and personalities began cultivating what would soon become known as goth.¹

Many keynotes of goth subculture can thus be traced to the early days of punk. Punk had reveled in the crass and trashy—evoking “flowers in the dustbin,” to cite a well-known Sex Pistols lyric. As this style became intensified and romanticized, a gothic predilection for the dreadful and macabre emerged from within punk's ranks. Siouxsie Sioux, who began her career as a gothic doyenne in the Sex Pistols' scene, helped to popularize a look characterized by deathly pallor, dark makeup, Weimar-era decadence, and Nazi chic (fig. 1). Punk's ethos—its militant, antisexual anarchy—was challenged by the gothic's romantic obsessions with death, darkness, and perverse sexuality. Punk's carnivalesque but often rigid male body (epitomized by the “pogo” dance) was supplanted by an androgynous gothic body. At the same time, punk's driving musical rhythms were infused with diverse gothic gestures. In his contribution to this volume, Michael Bibby explains how postpunk bands such as Joy Division provided important foundations for gothic rock. Through distorted guitars and foregrounded basslines, Joy Division articulated an aural melancholia that has since become central to goth style. Still other gothic musical inflections could be heard in the Sisters



Fig. 1: Siouxsie Sioux

of Mercy's somber otherworldliness, Alien Sex Fiend's comic grotesque, Bauhaus's glam-influenced vampire camp, and Siouxsie and the Banshees' orientalist pastiche.²

By 1982, when the legendary Batcave club opened in London, the music press had begun to use the term *gothic rock* to describe the music and fandom around which a new postpunk subculture was forming.³ The Batcave scene was described by one participant as combining "the more 'dressy' end of punk," "the art-school gang from Blitz, a few from the newly out of the closet fetish scene," and "a bunch of gay guys who'd heard this was a 'safe' place to be" (Merlina qtd. in Scathe, *Batcave*, n.d.). A discordant bricolage of hyperromantic elements, goth drew inspiration from its glam, punk, and new wave subcultural antecedents. But it also culled freely from Gothic literary-historical traditions; from vampire cults, horror flicks, and B-movie camp; from Celtic, Pagan, Egyptian, and Christian mythology; from cyborg and techno cultures; from oppositional sexual practices including queer, drag, porn, fetish, and B-D/S-M; from subterranean drug cultures; and from a historical canon of the gothic avant-garde ranging from the pre-Raphaelites, Nietzsche, and Lautreamont, to Dalí, Sartre, and the Velvet Underground. Whereas punk had, as Dick Hebdige writes,



Fig. 2: New York City net.goths in the mid-1990s

reassembled the sartorial history of postwar working-class youth cultures “in ‘cut up’ form” (26), goth launched an ongoing extension and revision of this practice. Goth incorporated elements of *pre*-subcultural literary, philosophical, and aesthetic traditions within a continuing process of cumulative genealogical construction. The spectacular style thus created was both motley and surprisingly coherent.

Goth fashion was and remains a mix-and-match *mélange* of black and retro garments fashioned from leather, buckles, velvet, silk, PVC, chains, or lace. Goths may wear spiked heels, pointy-toed lace-ups, shiny thigh-high boots, or clunky Doc Martens. They may accessorize with sunglasses, top hats, capes, corsets, cravats, riding crops, or lunchbox purses. They may dye their hair black, white, red, or purple and wear it back-combed, teased, shaved, crimped, or spiked. Goths may sport tattoos, body painting, piercings, purple contact lenses, fangs, or decorative scarring; applying their makeup, they may favor whiteface, mascara, eyeliner, Kabuki-inspired face paint, or red, black, or purple lipstick and nail varnish. Goth fashion may incorporate elements of ancient Celtic, Christian, pagan, Egyptian, or Asian iconographies. The overall style of any gothic ensemble may evoke high chic, antique, retro-kitsch, punk, fetish, secondhand trash, or some combination of the above (see figs. 2–6).⁴

This cumulative and polymorphous style makes goth a comparatively unique subject for subcultural and ethnographic study. More than twenty years after its postpunk emergence, goth continues to thrive as an “un-dead” subculture, especially in large cities, suburbs, college campuses, and



Fig. 3: Sisters of Mercy

in cyberspace. Grunge, by contrast, has all but disappeared since its mid-1990s heyday; and even punk, with its canonical status in the annals of rock, and still-resonant call for antibourgeois refusal, has failed to generate the ongoing communities that goths across the world have staked out for a quarter of a century. Such notable longevity, we will argue, stems partly from goth's complex relation to the notion of subculture, the elaboration of which involves revisiting the work of critical precursors such as Dick Hebdige. But it is also worth noting that the goth tendency to embrace gothic literature and art has made the subculture more dialectically engaged with the past than is typical of most youth cultures, providing yet another source of exceptional vitality. The antique and archaic are central to a gothic sensibility, just as death itself is typically perceived as a source of inspiration rather than a terminus. That is perhaps part of why goths, according to Brian Perera of Cleopatra Records, a goth-oriented label, "don't drift from scene to scene—they live this life, and they remain loyal to it" (qtd. in Thompson and Greene 1994, 45).

It is also important to recognize goth subculture's remarkable ability to operate transnationally, an ability enhanced in recent years by the World Wide Web. Critics who have wished to highlight the importance of locality



Fig. 4: The Cult



Fig. 5:
All about Eve



Fig. 6: Lycia

and place in the shaping of youth cultures have sometimes preferred the concept of scene to that of subculture.⁵ Yet, while *scene* is a useful term (and one that appears intermittently throughout this volume), it does not account for the ways in which a subculture such as goth produces a strong sense of shared identity even while traversing geographical boundaries. We have encountered goths from North America, Australia, and Europe, as well as Japan, the Caribbean, and Latin America. As Paul Hodgkinson observes, goths separated by distance share “both a translocal sense of identity and a relatively consistent and distinctive set of tastes and values” (2002, 28). Writing in this volume, Kristin Schilt takes us from a small “dark culture” community in Austin, Texas, to the clubs of Los Angeles, while Angel Butts and Rebecca Shraffenberger write from within the New York goth scene. Anna Powell describes goth rituals in various parts of the United Kingdom, including Leeds and Whitby, while Mark Nowak focuses on goth’s specific material history in Buffalo, New York. Ken Gelder explores the interesting question of goths’ national filiations; in Australia, he concludes, goths oscillate between indifference to and dialectical engagement with the preoccupations of the dominant national culture.

As a subculture, goth designates a social grouping that is “perceived to deviate from the normative ideals of adult communities” (Thornton 1997, 2). Yet elements of that perceived deviance have also been popularized over the years. In 1983, *The Hunger*, an arty Hollywood vampire film that has

since become a cult staple among goth and queer audiences, prominently featured Bauhaus performing their landmark 1979 single, "Bela Lugosi's Dead."⁶ By the mid-1980s, formative gothic bands (e.g., the Banshees, Southern Death Cult, the Cure, and the Sisters of Mercy) had begun to play large concert venues, release chart-climbing albums, and appear regularly on MTV and in the popular music press. In 1995 when *Swing*, a trendy youth magazine, published an article on goth role-playing games (Rushkoff 1995), posters on alt.gothic, an electronic newsgroup, waxed nostalgic for the days when goths were regarded as "freaks." One poster responded, "Those days are long gone. Goth is now normal, if it was ever that strange."⁷ Yet, in retrospect, 1995 can be seen as a turning point, especially in the United States, after which goth's mainstream manifestations would alter in a context of conservative gender ideologies and media-generated scrutiny occasioned by the subculture's misleading association with teen violence.⁸ Situating goth thus requires a willingness to revisit underlying assumptions about subculture, as well as a readiness to recognize the ongoing dialectic between subcultural difference and the mainstream norms to which such difference is typically opposed.

According to Hebdige's classic account of the subject, spectacular subcultures operate as resistant "mechanism[s] of semantic disorder," blocking prevailing representational systems (90). Yet the publicization of such oppositional activities, writes Hebdige, "invariably ends with the simultaneous diffusion and defusion of the subcultural style" (93). Subcultures are thus "recuperated" through two converging processes: commodification, through which subcultural style is mass-produced, and ideological containment, through which subcultural deviance is made subject to the disciplinary effects of dominant institutions such as the media, professional social science, and the police (94). Yet, though spectacular style is clearly central to goth, and though the subculture has been variously *diffused* since the 1980s, it has never been *defused* in some fashion tantamount to recuperation.⁹ Rather, so far, goth has remained—to cite Bauhaus's classic lyric (which cites Todd Browning's classic horror movie citing Bram Stoker's classic vampire novel)—"Undead, undead, undead."

The history of the subculture so far can be divided into two epochs: one which began with goth's punk-era emergence and saw its mainstream diffusion peak in the 1980s and again in the mid-1990s, and the second in which goth's presence in the mainstream became more subtle, while it continued—and continues into the twenty-first century—to thrive as a seemingly per-

manent fixture at the margins of turn-of-the-millennium late-capitalist societies, thanks partly to the new electronic media.¹⁰ As we write, gothic rock has been absent from the pop charts for at least a decade, yet the genre continues to attract fans all over the world. Niche record labels such as the U.S.-based Projekt and the U.K.-based Nightbreed, which once thrived through mail order and specialty boutiques, now also sell music through Web sites and online outlets such as Amazon.com. In fact, Amazon devotes an entire category in its alternative catalogue to gothic rock. Although foundational bands such as Bauhaus and the Sisters of Mercy are no more, new bands have risen to cater to the latest generation of goths (as well as many older ones). Unlike the earlier bands, with their roots in punk's twilight, these more recent goth favorites, including Lycia, Faith and the Muse, and Type O Negative, are strongly identified with and active in the subculture.

Goth subculture also continues to maintain a vibrant presence in urban nightclubs. At the Slimelight in London, the foremost descendant of the legendary Batcave scene, nongoths (or "normals") are excluded by a policy in which new entrants are signed in by existing members. According to Anna Powell, a contributor to this volume, goth clubs such as the Phono in Leeds operate as sites of parareligious postmodern ritual. In the United States, cities that do not have clubs exclusively devoted to goths often cater to them through special "industrial/gothic" nights. Such events feature 1980s standards alongside later goth-influenced bands such as Nine Inch Nails or, more recently, Interpol. Clubs of this sort may, like Seattle's Catwalk, feature two different rooms: one for the ambient music and ballet-inspired dancing favored by many goth purists, and another for the harder-edged music and dancing associated with gothic-industrial fusions. In her contribution to this volume, Kristin Schilt analyzes the gender dynamics that emerge in such hybrid club scenes when goths, renowned for androgynous style, rub elbows with fans of industrial, a comparatively masculinist (though still discernibly "gothic") music culture. As Angel Butts, Rebecca Schraffenberger, and Jeffrey Weinstock illustrate, the goth club scene continually adapts itself as it attracts new generations of youthful participants.

Goth zines, which were crucial in the pre-Internet phase of goth's history, remain an expressive medium through which the subculture perpetuates itself. Zine formats range from slick glossies like *Propaganda* and *Ghastly*, to small-scale DIY productions like that of New Yorker Althea Morin, also known as Lilith, a frequent poster on alt.gothic in the mid-1990s. Lilith published *the tongue of the serpent* for "The Temple of Lilith," described as "a loose network of individuals who appreciate the ideals embodied by" the medieval cultic figure Lilith: "Independence, strength, erotic power,



Fig. 7: *Terminal State*

and the beauty of all things dark and chaotic and uncontrolled” (1994, 1). Another example is *Nyx Obscura: A Magazine of Delicate Decadence*, published by Diana, an Atlanta goth who, disliking the dominance of high tech in so much recent goth subculture, hand-painted and hand-sewed the bindings of each issue of her zine. Small-scale goth zines generally feature poetry, fiction, and illustrations by goth contributors in addition to interviews with musicians and articles about the general goth scene (figs. 7 and 8). In the mid-1990s Aidan Sammons, a member of Waterglass, a goth band in Birmingham, England, published *Terminal State*, a zine devoted to goth-related humor. “You can tell it’s a fanzine,” the legend read, because “it says ‘bollocks’ on the front.” Today, though, Sammons prefers to devote his spare hours to creating a Web site for the band.

Indeed, the Internet has quickly become the most important channel for the dissemination of goth culture. In the early Internet era, before the widespread accessibility of the World Wide Web, Usenet newsgroups such as alt.gothic provided the main venue for an emerging “net.goth” cul-



Fig. 8: *Propaganda*

ture. Initiated in 1990 as an offshoot of the Sisters of Mercy mailing list, alt.gothic grew from a small and U.K.-dominated forum into a large, international newsgroup including thousands of readers and, in the mid- and late 1990s, an average of 250 to 300 posts a day—most submitted by U.S. participants. The subjects or “threads” of alt.gothic discourse were (and remain) diverse, ranging from goth self-definition (philosophy, fashion, music, literature, and art), to goth lifestyles (sexuality, relationships, work, leisure, education, drug use, interaction with “normals”), to practical concerns (clubs, concerts, specialty shopping), to humor (goth jokes, goth “tests,” flames, banter, gossip), to the extragothic (politics, social issues, current events). In response to increasingly heavy traffic, groups split off from alt.gothic to serve specific interests such as gothic music and fashion, while many U.K. goths, possibly put off by the large influx of American posters, switched to uk.people.gothic.

Splintering notwithstanding, in the mid- and late 1990s alt.gothic helped give rise to a thriving subcultural community both on- and offline. Participants on the newsgroup (and, since then, elsewhere in gothic cyberspace) came to refer to themselves as “net.goths,” a term popularized by, among others, London goth Count von Sexbat. Net.goth T-shirts, featur-

ing net.goth logos and mottoes, were produced and sold by various goths. Local net.goth meetings in many cities were publicized and made open to all readers, providing opportunities to supplement digital communication with face-to-face encounters. When individual net.goths traveled, they often posted their itineraries and arranged to meet their counterparts in other locales. In addition, larger and more formal meets were planned and publicized on the Net—a practice that continues to this day. U.K. goths and their guests from abroad now convene yearly in Whitby, a northern fishing town accustomed to gothic visitations since Stoker's Count Dracula landed there in 1897.¹¹ Net.goths in the United States organize annual “convergences”—goth conferences of a sort—in major cities such as Chicago, San Francisco, and Las Vegas.¹²

With the popularization of the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s, goth cyberculture multiplied. Today thousands of goth Web sites, produced by goths around the world, provide access to information, song lyrics, fiction, poetry, illustrations, photographs, humor, and zines. Web sites not only provide conduits for the sale and exchange of goth paraphernalia but also provide important sites for self-legitimizing narratives. Sites such as Carrie Carolin's *The Dark Side of the Net*, Alicia Porter's *A Study of Gothic Subculture*, Peter Scathe's *An Early History of Goth*, Gothgurl's *The Evolution of Gothic Music*, Joshua Gunn's *Gothstudies*, Count von Sexbat's *Principia Diabolocus*, Corey Nelson's *The Gothic Music Handbook*, and the multiauthored and continually updated *Encyclopedia Gothica* seek to tell and retell what goth is and what it means to be goth. As Paul Hodgkinson explains in his chapter in this volume, Internet use enables new modes of collectivity among goths—modes that coexist and, at times, compete with elements of individualism.

In all of these ways goth subculture's enduring vitality seems indisputable, despite phases of mainstream popularity that—according to Hebdige's model—ought to have proved fatal. Indeed, goth's “undead” condition was itself an object of media attention at the height of its second peak in the mid-1990s. “Ten years after its heyday,” wrote the *Alternative Press*, a U.S. music magazine, in a 1994 article titled “Bring Out Your Undead,” “gothic rock is scratching at the surface again” (Thompson and Greene 1994, 41). Goth's “new birth” was evidenced by a surge of publicity including a feature on the tabloid news show *Hard Copy* (45). In 1995, readers of the Toronto *Windsor Star*, a weekly magazine, learned that, unlike most subcultures, “goths keep breeding, underground, in the dark” (Pearson 1995, 12). The following year saw the “Lifestyle” section of the *Express*, a U.K. newspaper, announce

that "Goths are back in vogue—the white-faced, lifeless look is reincarnated" (Tayler 1996, 62). These and many similar articles published in the mid-1990s illustrate precisely the kind of media attention that, according to Hebdige, defuses a subculture's oppositional edge. Yet, in the intervening years, goth subculture, so far from fizzling in the wake of a mainstream crest, has, as we have seen, stabilized and thrived.

At the same time, since the mid-1990s, goth has increasingly been cast in the U.S. media as a dangerous youth phenomenon. The 1998 slaying of a Bellevue, Washington, family by two teens who, according to the *Seattle Times*, "shared an interest in . . . pop-Gothic culture" (Fryer 1998) compelled local goths and their fellows on the Internet to defend the subculture against charges of aberrant violence. The following year the Columbine High School tragedy drew national attention to the alleged dangers of gothic youth. A telling headline from the *San Francisco Chronicle* read, "Classmates Describe Shooters as Obsessed with Goth World," followed by "'Trench Coat Mafia' members treated as social outcasts." Rife with contradiction, the article seemed unable to decide whether the root of the violence was the "constant ribbing" by athletes and "popular cliques," or the shooters' status as "Gothic people," "into anarchy," "white supremacism," "Nostradamus stuff and Doomsday" (a description of the subculture that few self-identified goths would recognize). The subculture was portrayed both as a dangerous fringe of "outcasts" and "freaks," and a popular youth cult that has "fascinated" "many American high schoolers." Goths were represented as running the gamut from innocuous sporters of black nail polish to those ominously "immersed" in "a pseudo world of dark images." A "police expert" on goths was cited as saying that "by and large, they are nonviolent," yet he added that he "was always afraid something like this might happen" ("Classmates" 1999). As David Lenson notes in this volume, ambivalence of this kind reflects a general tendency in American culture to misunderstand what art is and does. Goth, that is, entails a profound aestheticization of everyday life that has nothing to do with violence or racial hatred, but that does, Lenson argues, violate the conventional barrier between object and representation. Thus news media, which claim to report only what is real, are easily nonplussed by goths' representations of the imaginary.

In the weeks after Columbine, a few voices on the Web and in the alternative press noted that whereas Marilyn Manson was forced to cancel concerts because of his association with gothic youth culture, gun shows took place uninterrupted. (This irony was nicely captured in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* [2002], in which Manson himself articulately addresses the issue.) That said, many self-identified goths do not recognize Mari-

lyn Manson as an exponent of the subculture and—more important—many more refuse the perception of Columbine as a goth-related phenomenon. As Rebecca Schraffenberger writes in her autoethnographic contribution to this volume, one of goth's characteristic features is to "externalize the world's destructiveness *stylistically*, without resorting to actual violence" (emphasis added). "I can't think of any goth capable of committing the atrocity at Columbine," she adds.

Hence, for the purposes of this volume, Columbine is most interesting for its impact on the subculture and on the subculture's relation to the mainstream. Several years after the event, goths such as Schraffenberger continue to feel compelled to distinguish between their nonviolent aestheticism and the media's ongoing interest in dangerous "gothic" youth. A "Need to Know" volume on "The Goth Scene," published in 2000, laments that "Goths became scapegoats after the Columbine murders," with students being sent home from school for "strange" attire, and authorities encouraging teens to call special hotlines to identify "odd" or "weird" peers (Acker 2000, 8). Yet what such accounts suggest overall is that goth subculture has been no more tamed by the surveillance of dominant institutions than it had been defused by the mainstream popularity of the 1980s and mid-1990s.

Thus, while goth is unquestionably a spectacular subculture, signifying difference through stylistic innovation, in many other respects, Hebdige's seminal account seems less applicable. As Simon Frith has argued, Hebdige's analysis of punk is symptomatic of a problematic realism—a tendency to regard subcultures as authentic expressions of working-class life rather than constructions in their own right (Frith 1980, 167–68; cf. Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003, 3–13; Cartledge 1999, 148–51). Hebdige here exemplifies a tendency, prevalent among some critics in the academy, to romanticize working-class subcultures that resonate with critics' own rebellious aspirations. That said, goth does not lend itself to precisely this mode of treatment since, despite its connections to U.K. punk and other urban scenes, goth is by no means reducible to a working-class phenomenon.

To the contrary, goths are often identified with, if not actual members of, the highly educated and professional middle classes (cf. Hodkinson 2002, 70–71). In the United States, college professors frequently assert admiration for their goth students, while goths in many countries, including several contributors to this volume, have pursued advanced degrees and careers in academia.¹³ In Britain, where class boundaries are more pronounced than in the United States, the goth tendency to develop literary, philosophical, and artistic interests sometimes leads working-class participants

in the subculture to acquire university degrees in the humanities. Thus, Hebdige's claim that subcultures express "a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives" (1979, 132) does not generally obtain for goth.

Instead, like the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gothic literature from which the term derives, goth offers a critique of bourgeois culture which originates within the very heart of the bourgeois. Romantic poets, Pre-Raphaelite painters, vampire-aristocrats, and decadent aesthetes are among the subculture's most hallowed icons. Goths also embrace many textual forms of stylistic expression. The attention to gothic rock lyrics, the production and reading of fanzines and Web sites, the focus on canonical and avant-garde gothic writing, all point to a subculture with, perhaps, unprecedented investment in its own literariness. Period authors such as Anne Radcliffe, Edgar Allan Poe, Sheridan Le Fanu, Bram Stoker, Oscar Wilde, and H. P. Lovecraft are frequently invoked alongside contemporary goth favorites such as Anne Rice, Storm Constantine, Ian McEwan, William Gibson, and Poppy Z. Brite. In this volume, Jason Friedman reconsiders the southern Gothic tradition from the vantage of its goth inflections. Carol Siegel shows how Brite's goth-inspired fiction enables young women to experiment with alternative s-m-generated sexualities. Like romantic literature, therefore, goth subculture tends to present itself as apolitical even as it makes its mark on culture, style, and aesthetics. According to journalist Mick Mercer, the author of several books on the subculture, goth, for all its textualism and display, is best understood as "a state of mind" (1988, 4). Bourgeois to their core, one might argue, goths delight in spectacular and discursive self-fashioning with a Baudelairean intensity while, in so doing, laying claim to romantic interiorities, beyond mere surface expression.

In all of these ways goth presents a very different challenge to mainstream norms than does a deliberately lumpen subculture such as punk. Indeed, one might question whether goth constitutes any sort of challenge at all. Jon Stratton's (1997) evocation of the "commodity-oriented" youth culture, although based on working-class subcultures with little resemblance to goth, offers pertinent food for thought. According to Stratton, short-lived spectacular subcultures such as punk use stylistic expression "to solve the inherent contradictions of capitalism," whereas long-enduring commodity-oriented subcultures such as the bikers and surfers tap directly into "the dominant post-war capitalist ideological theme of consumption." For Stratton, commodity-oriented subcultures do not so much resist or oppose the mainstream as recast it, offering optional "ways of living the American Dream of consumerism" (1997, 183-84). Such subcultures can-

not be defused or recuperated by commodification because they are, from the start, subject to late capitalism's consumerist obsessions.

Goth, we suggest, partakes of both subcultural modes. As a spectacular subculture, goth's most powerful "solution" to ideological contradictions is, we will argue, its resistance to gender and sexual norms that have upheld capitalism since the eighteenth century. At the same time, though, goth is unabashedly consumerist and commodity-oriented: as Michael du Plessis explains in the present volume, the performance of goth identities almost always involves the expressive potential of multifarious materiel, from corsets and dark lipstick to Sisters CDs, Byron anthologies, Celtic crosses, and bondage gear (see also Hodkinson 2002, chaps. 6 and 7). (As we write, there are 11,200 "goth" items for sale on eBay as well as many lists on Amazon and its ilk detailing key purchases for goth consumers.) If commodity-oriented subcultures such as Stratton's "surfies" thrive by enacting bourgeois myths, goth, we suggest, works more uncannily, proffering fetishized representations of past bourgeois social formations. Hence, like Freud's seminal concept, goth is both *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Though it strives to be alien to and subversive of bourgeois conventions, goth's uncanny otherness is always an otherness from within.

Of importance to understanding goth subculture, therefore, are its manifold appearances in the mainstream. In Hebdige's model the alleged divide between subcultural authenticity and commercial simulation becomes reified. As a result, as Sarah Thornton has argued, Hebdige fails to account for the ways in which media and marketing are "integral to," rather than destructive of, "the authentication of cultural practices" (1997, 9; cf. Thornton 1996, 162). Understanding goth's flourishing thus requires a nuanced approach to the relations between subculture and the marketplace.

Significantly, goth's initial mainstream success in the 1980s coincided with the consolidated ownership of the music and broadcasting industries, a phenomenon that, in the United States, was dramatically accelerated by two waves of telecommunications deregulation in the Reagan and Clinton eras (see McChesney 2000). Media consolidation was itself a manifestation of the aggressive transnationalization of corporate capitalism that, during this period, was producing "an increasingly tightly woven network" of investments in countries in Europe, North America, and East Asia (Miyoshi 1993, 736). Many of these countries became lucrative markets for commercialized gothic youth culture. As Masao Miyoshi has written, transnational corporatization produces a globalized cultural homogeneity that adeptly

translates variations from the norm into profitable commercial opportunities. In 1993, when Miyoshi's article was published, MTV's estimated audience numbered 204 million in fifty-five countries worldwide, a media phenomenon that developed simultaneously with what Lauren Goodlad (2003) has called the "packaged alternative." Previously alternative music and youth culture had operated through relatively independent, noncommercial, and underground channels (e.g., clubs, pirate and college radio, boutiques, record stores, fanzines, street practices). Ever eager to generate profits and dominate markets, the multinational media giants of the post-1980s era saw that music-related products could be marketed more efficiently through the deliberate cultivation of demographically specialized audiences. Alternative youth culture was thus appropriated in the paradoxical form of an institutionalized "alternative" to the industry's own mainstream fare, a strategy that enabled multinational corporations to create a mass global market for "subculture." This packaging of alternatives not only extended what Hebdige has described as the post-World War II practice of commodifying subcultures, it also exemplified a newer strategy of commodifying the very notion of subculture.

Hence, by the mid-1980s, a period that was favorable to and influenced by goth's gender fluidity, gothic-influenced music had become a discernible subgenre within such increasingly institutionalized marketing categories as "alternative," "independent," "modern," and "college" music—categories that position themselves as culturally and politically oppositional despite widespread commercial appeal. Significantly, the title of a 1985 Top 40 album by New Order, a band connected to the early goth scene, is *Subculture*. By the time grunge exploded in the late 1980s, it was clear that "alternative" music and youth culture had become an indispensable feature of the worldwide entertainment industry.

Yet while corporate media since that time have become ever more adept at marketing packaged alternatives of many kinds, gothic rock music has been relegated to a relatively noncommercial fringe—its androgynous style and sensibility marginalized by a mainstream youth culture that, since grunge, has favored ever-hardening gender divides.¹⁴ Moreover, the subculture's biggest commercial music successes, which occurred in the more hospitable climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s, involved bands whose status among insiders was and remains debatable. The Cure, for example, a band that most goths agree was formative in the early dissemination of gothic style, has never claimed goth status for itself, and is often seen to occupy the pop or "new wave" end of a diversely constituted range of goth-influenced musical genres.¹⁵ Other popular bands from the 1980s such as Depeche Mode,



Fig. 9: Depeche Mode

Dead or Alive, and Echo and the Bunnymen have an even more tenuous relation to goth subculture, although their stylistic and musical debts to the goth aesthetic are fairly obvious (see fig. 9). In the late 1980s, Nine Inch Nails became the premier commercial pioneers of a fusion between gothic rock and industrial dance music. Both the band and the genre continue to resonate with many fans of gothic culture, including self-styled goths. Yet, as with the Cure's Robert Smith, Nine Inch Nails' frontman, Trent Reznor, has no apparent interest in identifying himself with goth *per se*, while self-described goths, ever conscious of their claims to subcultural authenticity, generally choose less mainstream bands, or bands from the early gothic rock canon, to illustrate their musical preferences. Most debatable of all, perhaps, is Marilyn Manson, a 1990s performer whom older goths tend to see as a heavy metal artist with none but the most superficial interest in gothic—or, in the words of Count von Sexbat, as "Alice Cooper reincarnated."¹⁶ Still, Carol Siegel, a contributor to this volume, has found that many younger fans find Manson's stylistic experimentation with androgyny compellingly goth or gothic.

It is important to recognize that this contradictory picture—with goth's influence both marginalized in, but never quite absent from, mass-marketed "alternative" music culture—goes a long way in explaining goth's long-lasting subcultural currency. In 1994, the head of Cleopatra Records, an L.A.-based independent label that specializes in goth-oriented music, complained of industry majors' "considerable apathy" toward their artists

(Thompson and Greene 1994, 45). That apathy has increased over the last decade as harder-edged and deliberately masculine genres such as grunge and rap rock have dominated the market for so-called alternatives. Yet what is bad news for entrepreneurs seeking to expand the audience for goth-influenced music is not necessarily bad news for goths. As one Web site explains, "Nowadays there are more goth bands around than ever," even as goth has turned "from an '80s phenomenon" to an enduring "way of life for many people" (PreZ. n.d.). Such remarks indicate how the absence of a significant mainstream musical presence helps to preserve goth's perceived subcultural legitimacy, even while it is possible to claim that "there is now a gothic community in almost every major city around the world" (PreZ. n.d.). Indeed, that is possibly one reason so many goths vigorously discount the subcultural credentials of any commercially successful recording artist, even when the artists in question, such as the Cure or Nine Inch Nails, have many goth admirers. Self-identified goths—as though they were attentive readers of Dick Hebdige's work (as some undoubtedly are)—eagerly embrace the status of "subculture," policing goth boundaries through autoethnographic discourse to ward off processes of defusion or recuperation.¹⁷

For example, on a 2002 thread on the Goth.net message board, "What Gothic Is and Is Not," blood_rose, the opening poster, defined goth as a subculture based on noncommercial, "avant-garde" music. Asking, "What is not gothic music?," she excluded "[a]nything that has been part of mainstream music, ever." Offering Marilyn Manson as one of several examples of what does not fit the bill, she noted that gothic music "does not draw large outdoor crowds," "is not on ANY sort of rotation at a commercial rock station," and has no "sort of video airplay on MTV" ("What Gothic Is and Is Not," post dated March 26, 2002). When a poster called Teen_goth balked at such restrictions, Lilith, a poster in her twenties, explained that both she and blood_rose were responding to the "rise of misconceptions" about goth, including "the misconception that Hot Topic," a fixture of suburban shopping malls, "is the pillar of Gothic Fashion," and that popular contemporary bands such as Limp Bizkit and Korn are gothic, "which they're not" (post dated March 27, 2002). These sentiments were echoed by DarkHermes, who wrote, "This is a subculture. Which means that we are different from what is mainstream" (post dated March 26, 2002).

Although most participants agreed that goth identification neither is nor should be reducible to the acquisition of certain commodities, mainstream or otherwise, blood_rose's attempt to negate the subcultural credentials of any commercially successful band remained subject to debate. Popular 1980s bands such as the Cure and Depeche Mode, Lilith con-

ceded, are “widely loved in the scene and most definitely were influential,” yet they “are probably not Goth” for “myriad reasons” (reasons which, significantly, she chose not to specify) (post dated April 5, 2002). The problem with blood_rose’s prescription, wrote another poster, is the attempt to legitimate the goth status of a given musical artifact on the basis of its popularity rather than its characteristics. Given such a definition, any “song or band can lose [its] gothdom” simply because its fan base increases (StarvingStudent47, post dated May 16, 2002; cf. post dated May 23, 2002). Lilith agreed that “there are always exceptions to the rules” but held to the idea that even popular gothic bands such as the Cure are “not massively mainstream” (posts dated May 16 and May 15, 2002). (At twenty-four, Lilith may not have realized that, at the peak of their popularity, touring with their 1989 *Disintegration* album, the Cure were playing huge venues such as London’s Wembley and New Jersey’s Giants Stadium.) Blood_rose returned to concur that a definition based on “gothic sound” would be preferable to one subject to the vagaries of the fan base (May 23, 2002).

Like so many other electronic discussions of what gothic is and is not—countless examples of which proliferated on alt.gothic throughout the 1990s—such debates are driven as much by a desire for authenticity as by particular musical or stylistic preferences. This underlying quest links goth discourse to the concept of aura discussed in Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” For Benjamin, aura describes the experience of authenticity enabled by unique works of art, an experience rendered all but impossible by mass production. Goths, we might say, negotiate the ever more pervasive commodifying effects of advanced capitalism by positing themselves and their subculture as works of art.¹⁸ Although there are “always exceptions to the rules,” many goths doubtless believe, or wish to believe, that the auratic experiences to which they tie their subcultural affiliation correspond to a realm of artistic production or “way of life” rigorously distinct from the cultural mainstream.

Goths’ determination to stage a radical break from the mainstream is closely tied to the subculture’s resistance toward normative masculinity. In this respect, goth resembles punk less than a mutual antecedent, glam rock—a connection explored by David Shumway and Heather Arnet in this volume. Glam icons such as David Bowie, Roxy Music, Lou Reed, and the New York Dolls anticipated the intense aestheticism and gender-blurring style of many goths (see figs. 10 and 11). Like goths, moreover, glam’s adherents were frequently educated and middle-class. Thus, according to Hebdige, in



Fig. 10: David Bowie,
ca. 1974

glam “the subversive emphasis was shifted away from class and youth onto sexuality and gender typing” (1979, 62).

At its most utopian, goth subculture helps to cultivate antiheteronormative sexualities, unconventional genders, and nonbinaristic social relations between the sexes. Lesbians and gays are a substantial presence in the subculture, and goth “queercore” communities, such as that discussed by Michael du Plessis in this volume, flourish in many cities. Still, most goths are straight or bisexual. And while many insiders regard bisexuality as a staple feature of the subculture, goth should not be conflated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identities of any kind. As one goth explains, lots of female goths are bisexual, but “most of them have boyfriends.”¹⁹ For many goths, in other words, bisexuality, which often figures in a context of multiple partners, provides an additive to heterosexual encounters—a complement to the general goth proclivity to subvert bourgeois mores and seek out forbidden sensations.²⁰

On the other hand, it is possible to argue that the androgynous style of many goth men troubles the very foundations of straight sexuality, suggesting an all but inevitable goth queerness. Gender confusion—the inability to discern anatomical secrets beneath androgynous gothic display—is a prized effect within the subculture. Hence, in goth circles, it is not uncommon to



Fig. II: Lou Reed

find heterosexual men discussing their attraction to cross-dressers whom they initially took to be women. Conversely, many goth women deliberately seek out such “pretty” male partners. If, at the end of the day (or night), the object of the goth woman’s erotic desire is, anatomically, male, it is—one might argue—in every other sense androgynous or “third.”²¹ Thus, when the cross-dressed goth reveals his male body to his female partner, the feminized surface remains a part of their coupling, challenging normative sexuality in some fashion.

It is also important to recognize that male goths’ supposed androgyny is more than a matter of stylistic or sexual role playing. Rather, for goths, style is the mark of substance and subjectivity, so that androgynous surface is seen to stand for feminized depths. Indeed, goth men often lay claim to androgyny whether or not they take part in cross-dressing. Such unconventional modes of gender and sexuality are regarded as integral to what Mercer calls the goth “state of mind.” Of course, one may ask whether goth male counterculture constitutes a bona fide androgyny (just as one may doubt that a flirtation with bisexuality and cross-dressing amounts to queer identity). Still, the emphasis on affective qualities—which have been associated with women since the onset of capitalist social relations—means that, at the very least, men who identify as goths simultaneously identify as partly feminine.

In fact, men are drawn to the subculture by its rich opportunities to display sensitivity, emotion, theatricality, and artiness—behaviors that, in today’s hypermasculine culture, are not only associated with women, but often invidiously relegated to them. Likewise, goth women seek out the sub-

culture partly to enjoy the companionship of such like-minded men. If, in the parlance of today's gender-obsessed culture, men are from Mars and women are from Venus, then goths may be said to originate from a different planet entirely; for goths, that is, the sexes are less divided by reproductive function or consumer-driven norms than they are unified by an overarching commitment to goth aesthetics. In this sense the subculture may be said, pace Stratton, to offer symbolic solutions to the contradictions of capitalism. In a world in which rigid conformity to sexual norms has become integral to capitalist function, goth marries a resistant practice of gender-bending and erotic experimentation to a Benjaminian privileging of aura.

It is interesting, though, to evaluate this account of goth's oppositionality from the vantage of Thomas Laqueur's 1987 analysis of post-Enlightenment sex or gender. Laqueur has argued that premodern understandings of sexual difference supported the idea of human androgyny, positing a state of nature in which men and women were essentially homologous, only men were "hotter" and more "perfect" (3–24). With the political agitation of the eighteenth century came the need to refigure the natural order, producing a view of incommensurable sexual difference predicated on reproductive function, and a concomitant split between public and private spheres. Western modernity was thus founded on a mythic gender divide that, for centuries, has helped to stabilize capitalist social relations and—in our own time—has found new vitality in a hypergendered consumer culture. From such a standpoint, goth's oppositionality consists in its refusal to submit to the logic of incommensurable sexual difference—in particular, its determination to rescue men's feminine potential from the prohibitions of normative masculinity.

Yet in thus focusing on the feminization of male mind and body, goth's supposed androgyny is inevitably preoccupied with men. Although goth is a numerically balanced subculture, attracting men and women more or less equally, there is no question that in gothic rock (as in most rock-inflected cultures) male performers tend to prevail.²² The specter of male domination casts goth in a different light, potentially aligning it with the working-class subcultures described by Hebdige, or the heavy metal subcultures studied by Robert Walser (1993). In her contribution to this volume, Kristin Schilt takes up the question of male domination and finds that goth's potential equalitarianism depends on specific material conditions such as place: small goth communities like Austin's Faerieland offer full participation to female members, whereas urban club scenes are more conducive to female marginalization.

According to Josh Gunn, also writing in this volume, goth's subtle ca-

pitulations to mainstream gender hierarchies result in misogyny. Walser has argued that glam metal's variation on androgynous style invites men to appropriate traditionally female "powers of spectacularity" (129), a practice that, for Gunn, illuminates the way that goth male display occurs at women's expense.²³ Gunn further argues that goth's idealization of an emaciated "death chic" is rooted in, and perpetuates, misogynistic attitudes toward the female body. In yet another account of goth's gender dynamics, Lauren Goodlad finds that, in goth-inflected narratives of masculinity, male feminization depends on a disturbing absence of women. Her analysis invites comparison to Walser's description of heavy metal's "exscription" of the feminine—its creation of "fantastic worlds without women" (110). That said, metal's exscription aims to neutralize women's perceived threat to men's tenuous hold on power; it involves barriers to female participation that are more disabling than those noted in Schilt's analysis of goth. The exscription Goodlad finds in James O'Barr's graphic novel *The Crow* and the music of the Cure is, moreover, less to do with men's powerlessness per se than with crises of male subjectivity occasioned by the proscription on male feeling.

Although goth subculture thus rearticulates mainstream gender differences in various ways, it seems equally clear that goth is not, as is metal (and arguably punk), a subculture that defends men against the perceived dangers of women. To the contrary, goth attempts to combat a pernicious gendered curb on male affect that is harmful to both sexes.²⁴ Nonetheless, goth's consequent stress on men's defiant reclamation of the feminine cannot but entail certain ironies. Although goth retains the potential to create equalitarian communities in which men and women cultivate transgender identities, the subculture can also be seen to restore the premodern logic that saw men's superiority as a difference in degree rather than kind. Goth, that is, suggests a new homology in which goths of both sexes share a common goth sensibility, but men more actively so.

That is not to say, however, that goth does not also provide ways for women to resist gender hierarchies inside and outside the subculture. Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees is, perhaps, the foremost female icon in gothic rock as well as the primary exemplar of a female mode of androgynous style. Siouxsie's goth-dominatrix look and infamous ice queen persona hardens the surface of the female body while, at the same time, signifying an impenetrable, even passionless, female interiority. In the flexible, DIY zine format, which, like the Internet, affords rich opportunities for self-representation, goth women produce their own resistant discourses. Althea Morin's zine, *tongue of the serpent*, provides an interesting

example. Explaining her interest in the figure of Lilith, the vampiric witch of medieval demonology, Morin describes "a female . . . [with] her own opinions, passions, and desires," "sexually active, even sexually dominant," unafraid "to protect her interests," "the mother . . . of all kinds of creatures which are dangerous, because they are independent and free-thinking" (*Raven* 1994, 41). In her intriguing essay on goth-influenced music culture and fiction, Carol Siegel sees the goth emphasis on male subjectivities as providing opportunities for young women's pleasure and empowerment. For Siegel, that is, such representations of goth men are characterized by masochism, inviting female voyeurs to savor the spectacle of men's eroticized powerlessness. Like Siouxi's dominatrix and Morin's invocation of the medieval witch, Siegel's reading thus articulates a female mode of goth gender troubling quite distinct from the male feminization with which the subculture is often associated.

In theorizing postwar British subcultures, Hebdige identifies a "frozen dialectic between black and white": white youth movements reinvent themselves through "arrested" encounters with black cultures, a key example of which is punk's "petrified" relation to reggae (1979, 68–70).²⁵ Hebdige thus attributes to black British culture a role like that which African American culture has been seen to play in the United States—inspiring transformative movements through a "surplus symbolic value" that accrues when people of color are made to "stand for something besides themselves" (Rogin 1992, 417). One perceives a variation on this dynamic at play in music journalist Simon Price's claim that goth "was the first form of rock which couldn't be traced back to rhythm and blues. There is no line connecting Sisters of Mercy to the Mississippi swamps. Instead, the likes of Bauhaus, Sisters and Sex Gang Children imagined themselves as heirs to both the Wagnerian/Teutonic classical lineage and the Arabic mysticist tradition" (36). As a writer and reviewer for *Melody Maker*, a U.K. music weekly, Price undoubtedly knows that any branch of rock music is tied to the "Mississippi swamps"—and the often gospel-like sound of Sisters of Mercy is an unlikely exception. Yet, precisely for that reason, his telling description of how goth bands "imagine themselves" offers a gothic variation on the arrested encounter. In claiming a Romantic-Orientalist genealogy for goth, as distinct from the African roots of rock, Price situates goth as the product of European (rather than United States) cultural and colonial projects. As "the first form" of music allegedly to transcend rock's African descent, goth appropriates the symbolic capital of racialized others through romantic strategies of self-invention, avowing and disavowing what it chooses.

In this as in several other respects goth is complicit with the normative status of whiteness in mainstream culture. Theorists such as Ruth Frankenberg (1997) have shown how whiteness tends to constitute itself as an “unmarked marker,” a racial status that stands outside of racial discourses. Thus, whereas color is seen to stand for difference and particularity, whiteness signifies a transparency that requires no notice—as though it were “unqualified, essential, homogenous, seemingly self-fashioned, and apparently unmarked by history or practice” (1). To be sure, though they are sometimes mistaken for skinheads (see Schraffenberger in this volume), white goths are generally averse to racism. The goth fascination with extreme pallor is not rooted in ideologies of white supremacy but, rather, in the Gothic’s representation of the dead, the dying, and the undead. Thus, though the subculture is, by definition, exclusive, goth qualifications focus on seemingly nonracial concerns such as style, aesthetics, and sensibility. Indeed, goth subculture arguably exemplifies an attractive form of non-racist inclusivity insofar as the experiences that militate toward the embrace of goth identity, and the performative practices that signify it, are seen to transcend all other identitarian categories. In actuality, however, though goth crosses boundaries of gender, sexuality, and (sometimes) nationality with relative ease, in other respects it is somewhat restrictive. Just as the subculture’s highly aestheticized and often literary mode of rebelliousness is most likely to appeal to middle-class and/or college-educated youth, so the premium placed on facial pallor poses an obvious stylistic difficulty for dark-skinned people. As Shanmonster (n.d.), a self-described Eskimo and “goth of colour” opines, “the cosmetic side of goth fashion does not seem to lend itself well to black skin.”

Goths of color do, nonetheless, exist. Just as there are, in the words of one self-pitying goth, “big hairy guys” in a subculture that privileges men’s androgynous style, so there are goths of Latin, African, South Asian, and Native American descent in a subculture that privileges extreme facial pallor. Such goths can predicate their belonging not only on various stylistic practices, but also on those romantic aspects of the subculture that assert radical powers of self-invention and authentic interiors far deeper than skin. Hence, for Christian, a British goth of Creole (French, Northeast African, and South Asian) descent, goth is “a romantic style” of the past, articulated best by those who both exteriorize and interiorize “antiquity.” Goth is so much a function of creativity, and so little dependent on race, that Christian feels “sadness and pity” for those who “make racism an issue” and indifference toward those who “paste white stuff on their faces.”²⁶

In contrast to Christian’s disregard of the prevalence of pallor in goth style and aesthetics is the experience of Jasper, an Asian American poster on

alt.gothic in the mid-1990s. Pale-skinned and dark-haired, Jasper's East Asian phenotype is regarded by many goths as the ideal template for gothic style. One Halloween, Jasper reported, "I painted my face white and blackened my eyes with eyeliner. I had some comments that I didn't look Asian anymore. I thought that was kinda cool. As an Asian American there is no homebase for me. I cannot go to Asia or America to blend in. I always feel like an outsider, but as a 'white' goth I at least feel part of that odd minority."²⁷ As an Asian American with no "homebase," Jasper thus regards the subculture as a community in which difference—though not racial difference—is the norm. His comments can thus be likened to those of Azrael, another alt.gothic poster, who reported that he loves the Toronto goth scene because of "its ready willingness to accept [him] as a bisexual person of colour." At any other rock bar, he added, he'd "probably get the shit kicked out of [him] by some drunk, Neanderthal klansman."²⁸ Yet Jasper's comments are also unlike Azrael's as well as unlike Christian's: while he regards goths of any race as an "odd minority," and while he is probably aware that goths tend to value the stylistic advantages of East Asian phenotype, what he alone narrates is an experience of passing. Though, by most accounts, Jasper need not efface his Asian appearance to claim goth identity, in the cited anecdote, he chooses to perform his belonging to this "odd minority" by performing whiteness, rather than pallor alone. The subculture thus provides him with an opportunity to embrace gothness, a relatively nonracialized mode of difference, by way of erasing Asianness, a difference that, in a U.S. context, is decidedly racialized.

Does Jasper's experience confirm goth inclusivity along with the transcendental possibilities embraced by Christian? Or is it more likely that any subculture that tempts a pale-skinned Asian to pass for white must harbor a deeper attachment to the normative status of whiteness? That both questions can be answered in the affirmative points to yet another distinctive aspect of goth's relation to race—one illuminated not only by Jasper's Halloween masquerade but also by Christian's ridicule of goths who "paste" on "white stuff" to exaggerate their pallor. Such pallor-heightening cosmetic practices are common among goths, very many of whom make regular use of a variety of products, and a few of whom reputedly resort to such drastic measures as ingesting trace amounts of arsenic (Fortner 1991, 13).²⁹ In thus employing various techniques to lighten complexions that a mainstream culture already regards as white, white goths seem to reject the transparent status of whiteness—making skin tone a site of theatrics rather than nature. The subculture thus encourages those who might otherwise take their whiteness for granted to experience this key aspect of race as mutable and

constructed. Although goth's overtly performative approach to whiteness neither augurs a more representative role for goths of color nor neutralizes the ways in which white goths, like other whites, share a "possessive investment" in whiteness, it may well explain why white goths, for all their dominance in the subculture, are seldom intentionally racist.³⁰

Ironically, goths' perception of the subculture as a rare medium of anti-mainstream auratic experience helps to explain goth's simultaneous function as a "mainstream alternative." We have coined this paradoxical term to describe the ways in which elements of goth's style operate outside of the subculture as signifiers of countercultural possibility. To be sure, goth's androgynous proclivities have been marginalized since the late 1990s with the onset of popular culture's compulsive stress on sexual difference, a fact that helps to explain the commercial limitations of gothic rock. Nonetheless, as a mainstream alternative, aspects of the goth aesthetic continue to attract those who, while not avowedly goth, seek the special cachet of a subcultural style. For this reason, one finds evidence of goth's influence in haute couture, blockbuster movies such as *The Matrix* (1999), television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, "countercultural" shopping mall chains such as Hot Topic, and merchandising icons such as Emily the Strange, whose youth-oriented wares can be purchased on the Web and in retail outlets such as Borders.³¹ For producers and consumers alike, goth's stylistic imprimatur helps to imbue such commodities with a hint of the subculture's professed subversive and auratic potential.

Goth's twenty years' history as a mainstream alternative can be historicized through a consideration of its many manifestations in film. From the mid-1980s to mid-1990s—a period that opened and closed with strong mainstream interest in goth—many films, from small independents to Hollywood blockbusters, drew on recognizably goth motifs. One telling example was Alex Cox's *Sid and Nancy* (1986). Cox's first indie hit, *Repo Man* (1984), had advanced a representative punk attitude—nihilistic and anti-romantic. Thus, it is all the more telling that when Cox took punk legend Sid Vicious for his subject, the movie he made was not a punk story of anarchic working-class rebellion, but a goth tragicomedy about the destructive potential of love in an alienating world (fig. 12). Six years later, a comparable turn toward goth-inflected romanticism underlay Francis Ford Coppola's megabudget *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1993). Titular claims notwithstanding, Coppola's film substantially differs from Stoker's novel, not least because it recasts Dracula's incursion on late-Victorian Britain as a doomed



Fig. 12: *Sid and Nancy*

quest (like that of Cox's Sid) for romantic self-fulfillment (fig. 13).³² From the goth vantage, what is most interesting about this twist is not the romance itself, but its effect in transforming Dracula from a shadowy antagonist to a hero whose isolated but compelling interiority resembles goth's own privileged subject position. According to Nancy Gagnier, writing in this volume, this shift from Stoker's emphasis on human victims, to the idealized Dracula found in modern adaptations, illuminates a goth "fantasy of power": goths, that is, empower themselves by refusing to assimilate—a refusal staged partly through identification with the vampire's extreme alienation.

Goth subculture's special resonance with postmodern representations of the vampire is even more evident with respect to Anne Rice's vampire chronicles. Although Rice's first novel, *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), predated the subculture's emergence by a few years, the first wave of goths was among her most ardent fans. With their intense emotions, period garb, and cultured decadence, Rice's vampires were and remain attractive role models for participants in the subculture.³³ Though goths also hearken to the antique strains of James Polidori, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Bram Stoker, it was Rice whose vampires anticipated the subculture's portrayal of the late-capitalist goth as an alienated but stunningly attractive monster: a latter-day aesthete and ardent self-fashioner. Hence, when Rice's Lestat proclaimed, "I am the vampire for these times," he epitomized goth's emerging subcultural identity (Rice 1985, 229).

These goth propensities were intensified in Neil Jordan's Hollywood version of *Interview with the Vampire* (1994). Coppola's vampire film appealed to goth's retro fashion sense, but Jordan's went further by underscoring



Fig. 13: *Bram Stoker's Dracula*

the sexual ambiguities inherent in Rice's novel. Filmed directly after the cross-dressing coup of *The Crying Game* (1992), Jordan's adaptation cast three of Hollywood's most popular hunks—Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, and Antonio Banderas—in roles that played on the stylized androgyny, homoeroticism, and bisexuality that goth subculture was helping to popularize.³⁴

By far the most notable figure in the gothic cinema of this period is Tim Burton, who, from *Beetlejuice* (1988) on, has made films that goths often perceive as being for and about the subculture. On the Web, for example, many goth pages allude to Burton, while many Burton sites (and some film reviews) describe the director's oeuvre as archetypally goth. In the 1990s Burton was best known for his direction of the first two *Batman* movies, though the film that most directly speaks to the subculture is *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), a fable of gothic otherness.³⁵ In his contribution to this volume, Robert Markley argues that such films articulate a nostalgia for authenticity. Paradoxically, however, Burton locates this lost authenticity in the B movies of the 1950s and 1960s—cinematic precursors to which he pays homage in films such as *Ed Wood* (1994). In *Edward Scissorhands*, nostalgia for authenticity is, as Markley notes, tied to a plaintive coming-of-age narrative; Edward's trademark appendages "mark an alienation from others that is fundamental to the film's depiction of adolescent identity: to be is to cut and to be cut."

Edward Scissorhands thus transports the gothic aesthete to the U.S. suburbs. In so doing, this melancholy fable overlaps with a different mode of goth-inspired film that, in the 1980s and 1990s, was playing off the subculture's reputation for postpunk rebelliousness. In Joel Schumacher's *The Lost Boys* (1987), vampires are represented as a gang of goth-punk youths, dressed and coiffed to the nines, living on the fringe of a California suburb. Though the film is a comedy, its subversive move is to make these antagonists more attractive to young viewers than its conventional heroes, the teens who refuse to become "Lost Boys."³⁶ That subversive appeal is far more pronounced in *Heathers* (1989), a black comedy in which Christian Slater plays a dark-clad rebel who persuades Winona Ryder to help him murder her school's obnoxious social clique. In *Pump up the Volume* (1990), a more dramatic treatment of suburban alienation, Slater once again plays the young rebel-with-a-cause, only in this case, school officials rather than peers are the primary targets of resistance. In all of these films, goth style is integral to articulating a desire for—and the possibility of—alternatives to the suburban status quo. Thus, from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, fascination with the subculture and widespread emulation of its style meant that goth was, paradoxically, helping to normalize the idea of youthful resistance to mainstream norms.

In doing so, such movies could not but create an indelible association between goth style and social deviance, a fact that helps to explain the ease with which, in the late 1990s, gothic youth culture was seen as a sign, even an underlying cause, of Columbine-like violence. By now, with the "war on terror" exacerbating popular fears of many kinds, it seems unlikely that commercial movies will return anytime soon to glamorizing and heroizing antibourgeois rebelliousness. At the same time, the shift toward accentuated gender divisions and hypermasculinity has meant that, since the late 1990s, male sensitivity, gothic or otherwise, has figured less in popular media, including film.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of goth's continuing presence as a sign of countercultural possibility in mainstream film. A salient example is *The Matrix* (1999), in which goth style is deployed to represent authentic opposition to the simulated, mass-mediated reality of late-capitalist consumer society. Significantly, Thomas Anderson, the film's hacker-protagonist, keeps his secret cache in a copy of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations and Simulacra*. The movie thus signals its intention to dramatize Baudrillard's theorization of the postmodern condition through the metaphor of the Matrix, which, as Anderson is told, is not a real world but a "world that has been pulled over [his] eyes to blind [him]." Hence, while the Wachowski brothers' film does not evoke goths in the same way as *Edward Scissorhands* or *Heathers*, the unmis-

takable goth style of its black-clad heroes is crucial to figuring the auratic potential of unmediated reality.

If *The Matrix* may thus be said to detach goth style from a specifically goth sensibility, another film, *Donnie Darko* (2001), does the reverse. Richard Kelly's debut film can be seen as an imaginative response to Columbine and, therefore, an addendum to pre-Columbine movies such as *Heathers* in which adolescent violence was narrated through the domesticating frame of black comedy. Kelly's meditation on alienated youth incorporates several familiar features. *Donnie Darko* is a psychologically fragile teen whose prevision of impending apocalypse plays out in a disquieting California suburb. Yet what is absent from this manifestly gothic film is any significant element of personalized goth style. That is all the more remarkable since the movie is set in 1988, a time during which young iconoclasts such as Donnie, frequently adopted goth-inspired garb as a means of self-expression.³⁷ Why, then, does the film eschew goth fashion even while a discernibly goth sensibility—sensitive, morbid, creative, defiant—is made evident through other aspects of actor Jake Gyllenhaal's performance in the title role? Perhaps the goal of creating a counternarrative to the real-life tragedy of Columbine—one that restores to goth its characteristically nonviolent posture toward destructive impulses—required a distancing from the *Heathers*-era cliché of the black-clad rebel.

But that is not to say that goth style has lost its ability to communicate modes of goth sensibility to mainstream audiences. Although the trend toward hardcore masculinity has lessened goth's currency among young male consumers, the female gothic is, in some ways, trendier now than ever. One avenue for its flourishing is the popular television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which began airing in 1997 and continues to enjoy a devoted fandom in syndication. According to Lauren Stasiak, writing in this volume, the key to *Buffy*'s appeal, inside and outside of goth subculture, is its privileging of a communal ideal—a gothic variation on family values—to counter the decadent individualism of vampire narratives such as Rice's.³⁸ Thus, by Stasiak's account, creator Joss Whedon's invention of the public-spirited vampire slayer offers a civic humanist twist on the 1980s convention of the goth-inspired rebel.

By contrast, yet another recent goth icon to enter mainstream consciousness is Emily the Strange, a merchandising concept dreamed up by Cosmic Debris, a manufacturer and marketer of clothing and accessories for preteen and teenaged girls (fig. 14). Although the Cosmic Debris Web site (n.d.) describes Emily™ as "a subculture of one, and a follower of no one but herself," the thirteen-year-old's goth status is both implied and speci-



Fig. 14: Emily the Strange

fied. Goth credentials are illustrated, for example, by an interview with Patricia Morrison—former member of the Sisters of Mercy—in which Emily asks, “Are you my Mom?” Emily’s feisty persona riffs on the goth mode of empowerment found in many female-authored zines and Web sites. The marketing materials describe her as “the anti-hero for the ‘Do it Yourself’ movement”; her favorite phrase, “Get Lost,” we are told, “is both an invitation to travel to unknown places—and an instruction to ‘take a hike!’ ”

Clearly, Emily’s creators, who identify themselves as Do It Yourselves affiliated with “the punk scene” of 1992, have found an efficient strategy for turning goth’s status as a mainstream alternative into a profitable commercial venture.³⁹ Their marketing concept attempts to yoke goth’s punk-inspired voluntarism and romantic claims to authenticity directly to a line of youth products. Although all Emily merchandise plays on goth style, one of the Web site’s pages is devoted to “Goth Gear”: there one may purchase the “Bad Kitty Striped Hoody” for \$58, which, for the ease of international customers, is preconverted into Japanese yen, Swiss francs, Australian dollars, and other currencies. Thus, Emily the Strange is nothing so much as a brand name trading off the worldwide cachet of goth subculture.

Such attempts to turn goth into a brand are the all but inevitable sequels to the mid-1980s commodification of the concept of subculture. And while the advent of Emily the Strange can be read as the ne plus ultra of late-capitalist commodification, it is also continuous with the practices of a subculture that, long before goth lists were published on Amazon.com, anchored the constitution of goth identities to privileged forms of consumption. Cosmic Debris’s promotion of a class of well-heeled, teenybopper goth wannabes may well affront the sensibilities of some who, like blood_rose, equate goth with lived authenticity and subcultural purity. On the other hand, there is no telling how many goths experience pleasure in

finding the image of a little goth girl on a black diary for sale at Barnes and Noble, or how many young girls who acquire such goods will grow up to be self-styled goths with views like that of *blood_rose*.

If anything is clear about goth, therefore, it is the undeadness of its appeal even as the social and cultural formations of transnational capitalism become ever more totalizing and homogenous. Well into its third decade, goth's willful eclecticism—its dialectic with past gothic forms and its playful pastiche in the present day—continues to attract new audiences and new participants in countries around the world. Thus, goth's constitutive tension between resistance and consumerism has permeated the structure of postmodern culture and society. Late capitalism produces the desire for an aura that is felt to be prior to or beyond commodification, for a lived authenticity to be found in privileged forms of individual expression and collective identification. For as long as goth seems to answer that desire, it will thrive as an undead subculture: forging communities on the margins of cities, suburbs, campuses, and cyberworlds; defying constraints on gender and sexuality; performing whiteness as masquerade; and imbuing the stuff of everyday life with the allure of stylistic resistance.

Notes

1. The term *goth* is a noun describing both a subculture and an individual member of that subculture. It is also an adjective describing the characteristics of either or both. Throughout this volume, *goth* is used to describe particular constituents of the subculture, *gothic* when our meaning is more general, and *the Gothic* to connote the literary historical tradition that begins in the Middle Ages. That said, many cited sources use these terms indiscriminately.
2. The following 1995 description of a Seattle band illustrates gothic rock's multifarious musical influences: "We are interested in expressing ideas/sounds/atmospheres ranging from psychedelic, droning feedback dirges and intense[,] chaotic[,] incoherent folk songs to hypnotic, ritualistic beauty and ominous, insane[,] morbid[,] violent punk. From slow and minimal to dense walls of sound. Always emotional and melodic, often VERY weird and sometimes out of control—possibly annoying" (Greg Forschler, alt.gothic post, April 17, 1995).
3. Seminal Batcave bands included Specimen, Alien Sex Fiend, and Sex Gang Children, though as Pete Scathe (n.d.) remarks, the club's crucial contribution to goth's early formation was as much a matter of fashion and "scene" as of musical influence.
4. The *sfgoth.com* Web site provides a tongue-in-cheek catalogue of goth "types" including Romantic, Mopey, Fetish, Perky, Raver, Geek, Vampire, Pagan, and Ren Faire ("A Goth Primer" n.d.)

5. For examples, see Straw 1991, 368–88; Shank 1994; and Harris 2000, 13–30.
6. The film also starred David Bowie, whose distinctive prepunk glam rock theatrics influenced goth's androgynous style, as is discussed in this volume both by Shumway and Arnet and by du Plessis.
7. Razrblade, alt.gothic post, March 29, 1995.
8. The association between goth and teen violence, according to Paul Hodkinson, has made much less headway outside of the United States. Lauren Goodlad wishes to thank Hodkinson for sharing this information with her during an informal conversation in 2004.
9. Since its publication in 1979, Hebdige's approach has been questioned on various grounds, many of which we discuss below, yet it has also remained influential in the discussion of spectacular subcultures. See, for example, Blair's article on the commercialization of rap, which applies the Hebdige-influenced theories of Gottdiener, Goodwin, and Wicke and concludes that "once a subcultural form is totally removed from its original context, that subculture ceases to exist" (28). More recently theorists have begun to articulate a "post-subcultural" method of analysis (see Muggleton 2000 and Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003). Along with such theorists, we agree that analyses like Hebdige's, in which subcultures are seen to demarcate homogenous sites of heroic resistance to a monolithic mainstream, are unsustainable. That said, because of the genealogical tie between punk and goth, Hebdige's account of subculture retains a special importance for goth analysis—not least because many goths have embraced a notion of subculture much like that which Hebdige theorizes. In describing the subculture's longevity, we therefore stress the importance of participants' belief that goth expresses authentic opposition to normative social and stylistic practices; yet, in contrasting such longevity to the recuperative processes noted by Hebdige, we do not (as will be seen) argue that goth subculture was or remains resistant in the Hebdigean sense of that term. For a more recent consideration of punk, including reassessments of Hebdige, see the essays in Sabin 1999. For Hebdige's own reassessment, see Hebdige 1988, chapter 1.
10. Focusing on the United Kingdom, Hodkinson (2002) has observed a slightly later decline in mainstream interest (which he dates to 1990–91); though he noted a brief resurgence of interest in the mid-1990s, it fell short of a second peak per se (conversation with Goodlad, 2004). Note that in the United States as well as in the United Kingdom, the mid-1990s would have marked the beginning of the Internet's role in facilitating communication among goths both within and across national boundaries.
11. Anna Powell based part of her research for her contribution to this volume on interviews conducted at Whitby.
12. According to an alt.gothic.com Web page advertising the tenth annual convergence, held in Chicago in 2004, "Convergence has now become the longest running Goth festival in North America and has attracted people from at least three continents." As we go to press, the thirteenth convergence has been scheduled for May 2007 in Portland, Oregon.

13. In addition to students, who tend to dominate electronic discussion groups devoted to goth, the goth community in many large cities includes computer programmers, lawyers, psychologists, teachers, scientists, librarians, commercial artists, secretaries, and advertising executives. Many goths write fiction or play in bands while supporting themselves as waiters, clerks, baristas, salespeople, data processors, or cabdrivers. Many are full-time homemakers and parents. For an autobiographical discussion of the link between goth identity and upward mobility (in the form of higher education), see Butts's contribution to this volume.
14. On this trend and its relation to the gender-based marketing strategies of radio stations and related products, see Goodlad 2003.
15. The "Goth Primer" applies the label "New Wave" to the Cure, while describing other gothic musical categories such as "ambient," "death rock," "ethereal," "industrial," and "dark wave."
16. Count von Sexbat, interview with Lauren M. E. Goodlad, London, June 1997.
17. Thornton (1995) elucidates a similar strategy of defending "subcultural capital" (a term influenced by Pierre Bourdieu) on the part of club culture participants (see esp. chap. 3).
18. In so doing they aspire to the kind of self-aestheticization urged by Michel Foucault in "What Is Enlightenment?" (1984), a fact that is not surprising given that Baudelaire is an important precursor both for goths and for Foucault.
19. Molly, interview with Lauren Goodlad, Seattle, March 1996.
20. For a more complicated way of theorizing the relation between goth identity and nonnormative expressions of gender and sexuality, see du Plessis's contribution to this volume.
21. On the notion of "third" as "that which questions binary thinking" and marks "a space of possibility" beyond gender divides, see Garber 1993, 11.
22. According to Hodgkinson (2002, 11), however, women's participation in goth bands and deejaying, although unequal to men's, is still markedly greater than in other subcultures involving participants of both sexes.
23. Note that the glam *metal* subculture described by Walser is distinct from the glam subculture discussed earlier. As Walser himself notes, metal's variation on glam, unlike that of Bowie et al., is characterized by its lack of "ironic distance" (124).
24. James Hannaham (1997, 114) has similarly argued that while gothic rock and metal feature stylistic similarities, they are "divided along gender lines. Heavy metal [is] aggressive, sexist and therefore 'masculine,' while Goth ha[s] a softer, more accepting, 'feminine' cast.'" For a different take on the gender dynamics of "heavy" rock music, albeit based on the distinctive example of Led Zeppelin, see Susan Fast 2001. Fast disputes the perceived connection between aggressive rock and masculinism, arguing that hard-rocking bands such as Zeppelin offer experiences of eroticized pleasure and empowerment to their female fans.
25. Subsequent critics have noted both that black and white links predate the period on which Hebdige focuses and that such links are particularly evident in heavy metal, a cultural formation that Hebdige ignores (see Clarke 1990, 88–89, and Brown 2003, 213–15).

26. Christian, e-mail interviews with Lauren Goodlad, March 1995. For a range of more recent responses to the question of pallor among goths of color, see Shan-monster n.d. Firefox, a goth whose race is not disclosed, articulates a view much like Christian's: "I consider myself to be gothic," not because of skin color, but "because I tend to appreciate the darker side of all things around me." Akira, an African American goth, questions the assumption that dark-skinned goths would be tempted to apply whiteface but raises a related issue: "It's been difficult to find decent black eyeliner to use that shows up well on my complexion, or goes with my hair color. I had to use liquid for really stand-out lines, especially when trying to do a good 'eye of Ra.' It was suggested to me that I use white eyeliner one night before I went out to the local gothic club in D.C. I bought some a while back but hardly ever use it. The first time I did, everyone loved it. It really stood out, but, almost jokingly, I questioned if white eyeliner was goth."
27. Jasper, e-mail interview with Lauren Goodlad, February 1995.
28. Azrael, e-mail interview with Lauren Goodlad, February 1995.
29. For humorous advice relating to the quest for pallor, see Uber Goth n.d., in which goths seeking "über" status are advised to "avoid all nutrition for a few years, apply lemon juice to the face over a few months," or, at the risk of dermatological hazard, "apply as much white foundation and white powder as possible."
30. According to George Lipsitz (1998, 2), "Conscious and deliberate actions have institutionalized group identity in the United States," in part "through systematic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages through a possessive investment in whiteness for European Americans."
31. For a discussion of goth's influence on fashion, see Jessica Burstein's interview with curator Valerie Steele in this volume.
32. Not incidentally, the same actor, Gary Oldman, played both Sid and Dracula.
33. Thus, Jacqueline Brasfield's Amazon.com Web page, "So You'd Like to . . . Be an Old School Goth," featured twenty-nine recommended purchases including the *Complete Vampire Chronicles*, and videocassettes for *Sid and Nancy*, Todd Browning's *Dracula* (starring Bela Lugosi), and *The Hunger*, the goth-influenced cult movie mentioned above, which featured Bauhaus's gothic rock classic, "Bela Lugosi's Dead." The term *old school goth* is used in the subculture, sometimes ironically, to connote the kind of goth practice (debatable though that is) associated with goth's first wave.
34. The cast also included Christian Slater, one of a number of actors, including Gary Oldman, Winona Ryder, and Johnny Depp who, in the 1980s and 1990s, constituted a kind of goth-influenced Hollywood pack.
35. *Batman* (1989) was acclaimed for its innovative gothic style, "a triumph of design over story" according to Roger Ebert (1989); the script for *Batman Returns* (1992) was written by Daniel Waters, the writer of *Heathers*, another goth-influenced film we discuss. Although Tim Burton produced *Batman Forever* (1995), Joel Schumacher, the director of *The Lost Boys*, was brought in deliberately to produce a less lugubrious variation on the gothic. Schumacher also directed *Batman and Robin* (1997), but this fourth Batman movie has the least visible connection to the goth

aesthetic. Burton's *Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) is also a goth favorite, often described as the ideal gift for the children of goth parents.

36. According to Rushkoff 1995, the punkish Lost Boys became the basis for a rebellious clan in the *Camarilla*, a live-action vampire role playing game (39).
37. In contrast to the nondescript style of the movie's hero, the score of *Donnie Darko* features a telling homage to the goth-related music of the 1980s, especially "Love Will Tear Us Apart," the 1980 classic by Joy Division (a key precursor for goth music culture), and "Killing Moon," a dark 1984 recording by Echo and the Bunnymen, a band admired by many goths.
38. It is interesting to note how elements of goth style have helped to visually distinguish the critically acclaimed television show from the comparatively fluffy 1992 movie by the same name.
39. See the Cosmic Debris Web site. Note that the question of what kind of "punk scene" existed in 1992 is left for readers to ponder. Though bands such as Green Day were, at that time, recording a style of popular rock music heavily indebted to punk, the band and its ilk can hardly be said to have sparked a return of punk's subcultural heyday, nor even a youth culture as influential as the contemporaneous grunge.

Part I



GENDERS





DARK ADMISSIONS

Gothic Subculture and the Ambivalence of Misogyny and Resistance



You took delight in taking down
All my shielded pride
Until exposed becomes my darker side
Puckering up and down some avenue of sin
Too chapped to ride, they're worth a try
If only for the old times, cold times
Don't go waving your pretentious love
—"Dark Entries," Bauhaus

The lyrics of the opening track on Bauhaus's debut album, *In the Flat Field*, are a fitting opening, because they signal the characteristic ambivalence of the gothic "underground." As someone who has frequented the gothic scene for almost fifteen years, and as someone who has worked to provide a more sympathetic portrayal of the subculture elsewhere, I can easily say that the "shielding pride" of gothic performativity makes it difficult for those on the outside to understand the complexity of being goth, including a recognition of a *real* dark side (Gunn 1999a and 1999b).¹ Although the subculture is resistant stylistically, sexually, and sometimes politically, because goth's resistant gestures are premised on a kind of lifestyle irony, they often unwittingly succumb to other social ills. In this chapter, I argue that gothic performativity demonstrates the dynamic ways in which people resist the cultural mainstream in spaces of ambivalence.

In order to capture the ambivalence of resistance, I first suggest that one

must pursue subcultural research as an attempt to strike a balance between ethnographic portrayal and cultural critique. I then offer a description of gothic subculture constructed from interviews with self-identified goths. Next, I redescribe goth using recent theories of the gaze, which help to describe how gothic style is simultaneously a force of resistance and heteronormative recapitulation. I conclude by discussing the necessity of critical or dialectical ethnography.

Two Approaches to Subculture

As many subculture scholars are aware, there are two general approaches to the qualitative study of subcultural groups. What I will call the “anthropological” approach tends to emphasize ethnology and participant observation, often with an eye toward producing empathetic accounts of subcultural resistance from the bottom up. These accounts are usually highly descriptive and tend to venerate subcultural subjects as exhibiting behaviors typical and expected of them given the norms of their culture. The often criticized celebratory tincture of ethnography is in part a result of the reflexive and self-critical modes that began to emerge with the works of Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, and others in the mid- to late 1980s (see Geertz 1988; Clifford and Marcus 1986). Central to these new modes of ethnography is an emphasis on the inevitable rhetoricity of ethnographic descriptions, the inseparability of the “poetic and political,” the interpenetration of “academic and literary genres” of reportage, and the necessarily subjective, socially constructive nature of all descriptive writing (Clifford 1986, 2). Such commitments led to a profound interest in the reflexive modes of ethnography first introduced by feminist scholars, and a deep suspicion of the authoring self. Consequently, subcultural ethnography of music-centered subculture has tended to represent subjects with measured reverence and respect, frequently describing practices in which subjects actively resist dominant ideologies.²

On the other hand, what I will call the “sociological” approach tends to replace ethnography with abstract, structuralist (frequently Marxian or materialist) readings. Here the individual subject’s autonomy is muted in favor of underlying determinants such as ideology. These analyses proceed “textually” by reading the more spectacular emblems of subculture (e.g., “style”) as symptomatic of larger social arrangements. Of these sociological approaches, the most exemplary and widely read is Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Hebdige argues that once a subculture is made visible in mainstream society, it becomes commodified, diffused, and, as a result, is robbed of its resistant power. Hebdige shows how punk subculture’s emblems were stripped of oppositional potential as they were peddled

to mass audiences as “exotica” (95). Such a top-down approach often avoids consulting self-identified subcultural group members because they are not understood as being conscious participants in the process of commodification. Since top-down approaches are primarily interested in social structures and ideology, it is not necessary to consult individuals whose agency is compromised by their being unwitting members of the system.

Such Marxian or post-Marxian perspectives remain important to subcultural scholarship,³ much of which concerns the formation of social identities. Critics want to explore how, for example, a goth constructs a self that is counter to her interpellation in dominant culture, how she disidentifies with the mainstream, and whether such attempts are, in the long run, successful.⁴ In so doing, critics of the sociological stripe seek to articulate ideological effects that escape the conscious awareness of subcultural adherents. Unfortunately, however, the latter perspective has led many scholars to discount the value of ethnography. Lawrence Grossberg, one of the most vocal opponents of ethnography in the study of musical subcultures, argues that “the significance of music is not in the music, nor in the fan,” but in a framing social system or structure (1986, 52). Because music’s meaning is never “solely musical,” and music’s effects reside outside of specific acts of listening, one cannot, he argues, approach a music subculture “by using anyone’s experience of it, or even any collective definition of that experience” (52). Consequently, focus on individual members of a music subculture should give way to discussions of the group and its social and historical context.

Because both perspectives have obvious advantages and disadvantages, there have been many attempts to wed them. There is a way, for example, of incorporating individual ethnography without either reducing or reifying individual experience. Theoretical analysis should serve as a tool for understanding ethnographic particulars; it should not serve as a replacement for them. To be sure, one must be careful not to allow ethnography to lapse into unreflective thick description. What is needed is a balance between the top-down and bottom-up approaches to subcultural study, and this essay attempts to work toward such a synthesis by offering both ethnography and structural critique.

Enthymematic Darkness: Goth Self-Representation and Identity

In both research and recreation over the past several years, I have surveyed and interviewed a number of subcultural adherents about the meaning of *goth*.⁵ Most of those with whom I spoke tended to break down *goth* or *gothic* into the intimately intertwined categories of music, style, and scene (Gunn 1998, 64–104). The rhetorical trope that links these three elements

together is *dark* or *darkness*, which was ubiquitous in answers to questions such as, “What is gothic music?” or “What is gothic style?” For example, in a formal survey I conducted in 1996, descriptions of gothic music almost always included the term *dark*. Consider the following remarks from different individuals.

I describe [the music] as reflecting a dark side of one’s personality.

I would use the clichés of dark, angsty [*sic*], representing alienation from the majorities [*sic*] value system creating taste in music and art.

I guess it sounds kind of dark.

It’s darker, sadder, it has more tendencies toward free expression.

[Gothic music is] a darker version of progressive music.

The music could be described as being dark, lyrical, and usually quite intense.

[Gothic music is] dark, eerie . . . “gothic” is the perfect image of what it is.

Adjectives less frequently used to describe the music were *deep*, *depressing*, *romantic*, *passionate*, and *intense*.

In a musical context, the repetition of *dark* serves well to illustrate Roland Barthes’s observation that, when faced with the experience of music, we are doomed to “the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective” (1988, 179). Yet the adjective functions in a manner that Barthes perhaps overlooked: people tend to describe their favorite music with adjectives that they also use to describe themselves. When used to describe gothic music, *dark* is deliberately ambiguous because it functions *enthymematically*, or in a way that allows each individual fan to assign meanings to *dark* that reflect his or her individual experience and needs.⁶ At one level, the obscurity of *dark* speaks goths’ perception of themselves as unique and impervious to fixed labels. Dark music is seen to signify introspection, depth of thought, and, ultimately, intelligence: “The lyrics seem to have more depth than common ‘alternative music,’ ” says one fan. Another notes that gothic music is “dark, emotional, intelligent music. Generally [it is] more composed and creative.” Note how “dark” as a description of music becomes a larger category directly articulated to self in this person’s remarks: “I like gothic music because I have always been attracted to dark subject matters, and I feel [as though] I can relate to this genre better than the ‘alternative’ music that is out there. I like the passion, lyricism, and that the music is influenced by literature and philosophy.” Hence, descriptions of music are also self-

descriptions: the significations of darkness are drawn on to create fantasies of identity that help to sustain a persona distinct from a perceived mainstream.⁷

At another level, "dark" is inclusive of an experience of social alienation caused by one's intellectual, artistic, or sexual traits in a mainstream context. One fan notes that she is gothic because outside of the subcultural scene her intelligence is a handicap to acceptance by others: "I love and value the intellectualism that I've seen, especially among my goth friends (grad students) and some of the threads on alt.gothic [an Internet newsgroup] about films or books. It is a highly literate subculture. . . . The scene seems to attract people who are good readers. . . . there doesn't seem to be a stigma attached to being intelligent and there is a lot of creativity. . . . Intellectualism is an asset." Similarly, another fan notes that he enjoys the gothic community because it allows him to express his artistic tendencies. He said, "I'm into art, in general, you know, all kinds of art, I practice every type of art possible, and the gothic scene, well, the aesthetic is very appealing to me," all the while gesturing with overly dramatic flourishes for humorous effect.

This sense of feeling alien to or shunned by mainstream culture also bleeds into the perception that goths, particularly male goths, are gay, another category of identity that remains negatively coded in American society.⁸ Perhaps for this reason, many gothic club nights are held in "non-goth" gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered spaces across the country. In part, the mainstream recognition that goth is perceived as queer in general (that is, deviant from heteronormative notions of identity) inspires many goths to celebrate the subculture's inclusiveness of a broad range of sexual identities. Consider the following remarks:

I don't like to categorize myself. The only categories I would put myself in are female and bisexual. Being bisexual I have some difficulties in . . . [respondent does not finish her sentence]. Gender membership [that is, whether one is a "man" or a "woman"] does not play a role [in the gothic scene].

I consider myself one of the "freaks"; one of the "shunned by the popular kids" kind of people . . . I consider myself a feminist of sorts, I'm bisexual, so I consider myself part of the lesbian community.

Everyone's so worried about being called a homosexual and stuff, and there [referring to the Minneapolis club, Ground Zero] no one gives a shit. I mean, I'm dressed goth with my little black gloves and stuff, but I'm not gay.

In gothic scenes men find a space in which to alleviate anxieties about living up to masculine norms, as they provide opportunities to explore androgynous modes of dress and behavior. Self-described straight male goths often don the classic gothic ensemble of a black goth band T-shirt and a flowing black skirt. *Dark* thus signifies the ambiguities of goth gender and the polymorphous perversity of goth sexuality.⁹ The ambiguities of goth gender, and the (seeming) polymorphous perversity of goth sexuality, affords women a comfortable space in which to be intelligent and artistic as well—sometimes also “feminist” or sexually “aggressive.” Finally, gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transgender goths feel comfortable in the gothic scene because all kinds of sexual identity are embraced.

All kinds of identity are embraced, that is, except the most dogged, macho, active male/passive female varieties, particularly when dress or behavior do not comport with the dark goth aesthetic. When a gay man wearing a cowboy outfit appeared at a club during a gothic night in Minneapolis a few years ago, the usual regulars were visibly amused and annoyed. As the cowboy commenced to dance to the Tones on Tail song “Go!,” replete with a lasso prop, some black-lipsticked mouths were agape in (playful) horror; initially many of the club regulars thought that this individual’s blatant violation of the norms of the scene was funny, but it soon became an annoyance when the cowboy stayed to dance for more than one song. Similarly, when a very inebriated woman dressed provocatively in a red vinyl miniskirt (in a style more hard rock than goth) began writhing on the dance floor in sexually suggestive ways, the club regulars began laughing and heckling until she was escorted outside by the bouncers. She was heckled both for her drunkenness and for her inability to observe the “dark,” gothic dance-floor code; her style of sexual posturing was not gothic but more akin to the striptease movements of scantily clad women in hard rock videos. To be sure, women dancing provocatively (especially with other women) is permitted in gothic spaces, but their dancing should not resemble the postures and movements more typical of other scenes.

That some costumes and behavior are not welcome in gothic clubs speaks to the darkness of gothic style. Just as goths stress the darkness of gothic music or identity, so they describe gothic style (fashion and bodily movement in gothic spaces, such as dancing) as “black” or “dark” as well. Gothic modes of dance are typically described as “dramatic” and “creepy,” as are gothic fashions. One fan helpfully summarized gothic costuming:

there are a range of styles that you could consider gothic, but it’s a bit difficult to qualify exactly.

1) BLACK: All black or predominately black clothing.

- 2) **VICTORIAN:** Victorian-era styling or details—lace-up bodice, “pirate” shirts, hook-and-eye fasteners, hats, long coats, etc.
- 3) **FABRICS:** Sensuous fabrics—rich, textured, lace, velvet, netting, ruffles, leather.
- 4) **DARK SIDE:** Vampire-like or witch-like attire. However, Bela Lugosi’s tux and cape or a pointy witch hat would be very, very tacky in the extreme.
- 5) **MAKE-UP:** Using make-up to achieve the “death look”—pale white skin, black-eye liner, black nail polish. Could also avoid the sun to help with the pale white skin thing.
- 6) **HAIR:** dyed/bleached—especially black, auburn, or white-blond.
- 7) **FOOT WEAR:** Doc Martins [sic], combat boots, witch boots (pointy heel, laces), black shoes with silver buckles.
- 8) **EYE WEAR:** small, wire-framed glasses, possible tinted contact lenses in unnaturally vivid green, blue, or purple.

“[S]ome fashions can be ‘gothic by association,’ ” he continues. “Bars and night clubs that attract goths also attract other closely related groups of fun people,” such as the so-called rivetheads (those who enjoy industrial dance music and related styles).

That “other closely related groups of fun people” can occupy goth spaces brings me to the last component of “goth”: the scene, or the physical space in which goths converge to drink, talk, dance, or watch a live performance. Again, the decor of goth clubs is characteristically dark, often in a literal sense. In most of the gothic venues I have visited, first and foremost, the lighting is very dim. Venue walls are often painted black, and the art and decor sometimes reflect literary gothic themes: black iron candelabras, red candles, and paintings of demons and skulls are used to decorate the downstairs bar at the Castle in Tampa, Florida. Upstairs at the Castle is an immense, darkly lit bar and dance floor flanked by gothic stained windows. The gothic dance floor (one of many) at the Catwalk in Seattle is drenched in red light, and its dank, exposed, unpainted brick walls lend the room an emotionally cold feeling. The interior of Ground Zero in Minneapolis is completely black, as are the wrought-iron banisters and railings of the catwalk, dancing cages, stairs, and loft. At Ground Zero the decorating theme is a kind of go-go satanism, replete with a flashing XXX sign, a blinking, neon martini glass sculpture, and an inverted pentagram suspended above the dance floor.

I would be remiss not to mention, however, that the dark aesthetic of gothic venues functions as enthymematically as the trope “dark” itself, principally because these spaces are shared with other subcultural groups (for example, an old-school punk might similarly code dark interiors

“punk”). At most goth venues, one finds goths mingling with rivetheads, punks, fetishists of various sorts, and the transgendered (or “trannies”). Gawking normals or straights are also present, but they are usually actively ignored by the regulars. The music at most gothic venues varies from gothic, to glam rock, to industrial, to techno, thereby appealing to a range of patron preferences. The most well known gothic and industrial disk jockey in Minneapolis, DJ Panic, told me that subcultural overlap is an economic necessity, since a night devoted solely to gothic music and goths would not draw enough people. In larger cities such as San Francisco, however, the fan base is sufficiently large to merit a goth-only night. Some clubs, such as the Catwalk in Seattle (and a number of presently defunct clubs like Medusa in Chicago and Tracks in Washington, D.C.) have multiple dance floors and can cater to goths in one room or on a separate, isolated dance floor.

Dark Denials: (En)gendering Gothic Resistance

Admittedly, this description of goths, their music, and their spaces is not exhaustive and fails to capture the unique differences of discrete scenes. Instead, I have tried to provide a general description that many of those who frequent gothic venues would recognize (a number of those whom I interviewed had the opportunity to read this chapter and provide feedback). In sum, goth is a complex, lived experience of music, style, and scene, inseparably tied to notions of identity through “dark” or “darkness,” iterations of a gothic trope that becomes enthymematically meaningful in relation to the unique needs and experiences of individual goths. What I would like to do now is focus on the subcultural practice of gothic style—specifically, gothic androgyny and the celebration of an idealized, feminine gothic body. It is, I suggest, goth’s exceptional spectacle of the body that invites new members and marks the gothic scene as distinct from others. In discussing this element, I will also illustrate how resistant subcultural practices, particularly those born of ironic play, obscure a different kind of darkness: an unwitting recapitulation of mainstream misogyny.¹⁰

Unlike the male-centered, heteronormative subcultures that have been studied by other academics (e.g., Hebdige’s punks, Walser’s metal heads [1993], Reynolds’s ravers [1999]), goth subculture is equally open to women, men, and transgendered people. And, unlike the norms of sexual identity in the United States, particularly as they are inextricably related to sexual object-choice (the sex and gender of one’s partner, as opposed to the “sexual aim” or act desired), goths often conflate gender, sex, and sexuality with relative ease, precisely because they claim to embrace difference as a central mode of being. As a goth from Atlanta explained to me,

the gothic community accepts a “person as a person instead of a gender, or a race, or a creed, or a nationality,” or, s/he added humorously, as “a good [or] bad dancer.” Another goth notes that in “the Denver scene, gay men and lesbian women are quite common. It’s not uncommon to see two women being openly affectionate.” In Atlanta, a goth who goes by the name Fearscape is also quick to note that in the goth scene “Gender-bending is somewhat common.” But, significantly, s/he adds that it is “usually more a look than anything else.”

Fearscape’s last remark is telling because it indicates that the gothic rhetoric of inclusion can be somewhat duplicitous, particularly in relation to the paradoxical logic of stylistic resistance. In Fearscape’s account, the gothic look diverges from what s/he perceives to be gothic practice. As a deliberate look, gothic style is an active, playful attempt to circumvent the gifts of nature with a manufactured aesthetic that deliberately misleads outsiders. This duplicity derives from goth’s ironic spectacularity—an inevitable consequence of the subculture’s incessant flirtation with artifice, pageantry, and theatrics. Gothic style is consciously flamboyant and playful; it is a mindful, performative gesture in which liberation is thought to be achieved through a display of ironic indifference. This theatrical, ironic stance, which I call *gothic performativity*, is central to those stylistic practices that goths believe are culturally resistant.

In the context of the scene, gothic performativity functions as an ironic exercise in multiple senses, such as in the form of exaggerated, “creepy” dancing, the concealing work of heavy makeup, gender bending, and so on. All of these stylistic practices, however, collapse into a dialectical logic that attempts to pit appearances against themselves. For example, gender-bending practices attempt to resist heteronormative gender norms by making the body a site of culture jamming and play. Yet those who incorporate androgynous styles also behave *as if* the style were inconsequential—that gothic style is, in fact, “just a look.” This tension between resistance and indifference speaks to a very well known philosophical problematic most famously explored by Søren Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony* in 1841: How does one become a philosophical ironist, or how does one assume an ironic lifestyle, without potential danger? Kierkegaard’s answer is that one cannot be an ironist without this risk. Even worse, the philosophical, or what I shall term the “lifestyle ironist,” is always doomed to failure.

The philosopher points up two inevitable consequences of lifestyle irony. First, ironic modes of resistance are dangerous because of their politics: as is the case with verbal irony, there are those who are “in the know,” and those who are not. Yet unlike verbal irony, lived ironic practice involves

the physical presence of “readers” and living, bodily “texts,” as it were, and these readers have the potential to react in unfortunate ways. As Linda Hutcheon has written, “irony has an evaluative edge and manages to provoke emotional responses in those who ‘get’ it and those who don’t, as well as in its targets and in what some people call its victims” (1994, 2). The ironic style of the punks over twenty years ago, as much as that of “shock-rockers” Marilyn Manson today, continues to provoke fear, anger, and hatred among those who do not “get it.” Similarly, the embrace of “darkness” as a trope by goths provokes similar anxieties among outsiders, such as the brief moral panic over goths concerning the 1999 murders at Columbine High School (see Gunn and Beard 2003).

The second consequence of ironic resistance is the possibility, even likelihood, that one perpetuates that which one is attempting to resist. Kierkegaard argues that to effectively resist a defective culture, the playful ironist must continuously and ceaselessly navigate a contradiction between the inside and the outside. Public resistance in the form of play *must be* premised on private indifference or nihilism,¹¹ precisely because the ironic mode of resistance requires sustained engagement with that which one seeks to condemn. For example, as Judith Butler explains in her discussion of the ironic performativity of drag queens, the subject “who would oppose its construction is always in some sense drawing from that construction to articulate its opposition; further, the ‘I’ [or subject] draws what is called its ‘agency’ in part through being implicated in the very relations of power it seeks to oppose” (Butler 1993, 121–40). For drag to be meaningful, in other words, it must articulate the logic of heteronormativity in the act of resistance. Since one cannot simply leap outside of cultural norms, the only way to liberate oneself is to become a radical ironist in the Kierkegaardian sense—to achieve a stance of pure indifference. Of course, since absolute indifference is impossible, gothic performativity, like drag, is inevitably caught in a “space of ambivalence” that may reinscribe cultural norms even as it resists them (Butler 1993, 124). As lifestyle ironists, the indifferent goth, like the drag queen, is forced to continuously navigate a contradiction that could be summarized by the phrase, “caring enough not to give a damn.”

Given the contradiction of a gothic performativity rooted in the ironic, one should expect that many celebrated resistances are simultaneously complicities, drawing on the “very relations of power” that they seek to oppose. In other words, the strict ethnographer would be correct to characterize some elements of gothic style as “resistant,” if only for the existence of ironic practice itself. Yet the sociological materialist would also be correct in suggesting that goths are largely unaware of the ironies of their own resistances and of their own interpellation as subjects in Western society. Below,

I demonstrate how the ambivalence of resistance works in gothic subculture by examining three familiar elements of gothic style: the ironic embrace of sexual objectification, the celebration of androgyny, and the cultivation of “death chic.”

The Ambivalence of Resisting and Reclaiming the Gaze

Of central importance to gothic performativity is the imagistic deployment of the feminine, which is typically embraced by both sexes as a conscious strategy of resistance and liberation. In order to understand how feminine appearances are rendered into sites of resistance, it is helpful to briefly consider how the feminine has been conventionally deployed as an object of masculine desire, caught up in what has come to be known as “the gaze.” As described in Laura Mulvey’s classic feminist text “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975, 6–18) the gaze represents a socialized way of seeing people, most especially women. Basically, Mulvey’s is a psychoanalytic concept used to describe the voyeuristic pleasure experienced by spectators when they identify with images in the media. The problem for Mulvey and other feminist scholars is that these pleasurable identifications have been gendered historically in ways that masculinize the gaze and feminize its object.

Mulvey’s concept has been criticized for drawing on theory, such as psychoanalysis, that is itself misogynistic (Gaines 1988), and for overlooking the masculine body as an object of desire (see also Mulvey 1981). Yet the concept remains useful today because it helps us to describe the effects of sexual objectification in the mass media; images of both sexes, but especially women, are, as in advertising, made subject to a multiplicity of gazes, creating positive, libidinal associations to spur consumption. The gaze helps to explain how the impossible, thin body ideals projected in mass media serve to heighten and further exacerbate contradictions of identity (e.g., of ideal self and actual self).¹² These contradictions, once isolated to the negative body images of some women, are now common among men, thus demonstrating the widening multiplicity of gazes.¹³ Indeed, today’s media images invite characteristically gay and lesbian gazes too. “Masculine” bodies are frequently promoted as objects of desire, whether they be the bodies of male stars such as Brad Pitt or Tom Cruise, or of male advertising models, or the drag king and butch lesbian bodies discussed by Judith Halberstam (1998, 1–43; see also Traub 1993). Further, the emergence of androgyny in advertising and other media complicates the theorization of the gaze, primarily because the androgynous body pits the mobility of gender against the presumptive fixity of biological sex.

Although in contemporary media the gaze entails much more than the

simple objectification of the female body, the historical primacy of the masculinized gaze helps to explain why goths regard their deployments of gender as subversive and resistant. As one fan explains, gothic subculture encourages female images that seem to resist mainstream norms of feminine beauty:

What do we do with the image of the dominatrix? The heavy appropriation of the raiments of [fetish] culture, particularly among women, suggest sexual power. Don't forget about Bettie Page—this full figured look is still very popular [among goths]. Not very "waify." Could this be considered a form of resistance? It's almost as if women in the Goth scene make a conscious decision to subvert the "traditional" image of beauty. Maybe subvert isn't the right term. Parody, maybe? Anyway, they take the blonde, blue-eyed, tan image so prevalent on *Baywatch* and offer a dark, shadowy version. I get the feeling that women in the Goth scene are painfully aware of the beauty norms in Western culture. How many times have you seen a woman take on an image common to male sexual fantasy (the schoolgirl, the cheerleader, French maid, etc.), give it a dark spin, and turn it into a kind of sexual power. I can almost imagine a couple of my women friends saying, "You want to play this sexual power game? Fine. I'm going to play it so well I bring you to your knees. How do you like that, silly boy?"

In other words, gothic women deliberately warp dominant images of the female sex-object as a strategy of empowerment. As the goth female confronts woman's traditional role as an object of male fantasy, the subculture helps her to devise ways to gain more control. As the most conspicuous example of resistant femininity found in the goth scene (although it should be said that many goths would categorize her as belonging to the fetish subculture), the female dominatrix takes charge of her objectification by turning the sadistic gaze back upon itself, averaging voyeurism with (consensual) teasing and abuse.¹⁴ The fact that the dominatrix role can also be assumed by a transgendered person—or even a male androgyne—further enhances its subversive potential for women.

Gothic women are, thus, drawn to the scene because they believe that it is empowering and, insofar as they feel empowered, there is, of course, some truth to that belief. Goth's stylistic theater allows goth women to take charge of the beauty image through body art, fashion, and club ritual (such as dance). Of course, one could argue that women who resort to breast enhancements and tanning beds to achieve the *Baywatch* ideal also seek to claim sexual power. Yet goths would insist that their own beauty ideals, un-

like those of the *Baywatch* babe or Calvin Klein waif, are self-inventions, not capitulations to mainstream norms or what is presumed to be beautiful.

Insofar as resistance is an ironic negation, however, the negated is necessarily cued in a space of ambivalence. To assume her dominant sexual position with respect to a male partner, for example, the female dominatrix must simultaneously attract him, which is a conventional "feminine" behavior.¹⁵ To be sure, B-D/S-M fantasy in all its many variations has the potential further to trump sex with gender, as well as the potential to render *either* of these binaries subordinate to the prevailing logic of top/bottom. Nevertheless, the dominatrix resists only insofar as the traditional, heterosexual norm is present, however unconscious it may be in the minds of participants. Combined with the ambivalence of gothic androgynous practice, the limits on the transgressive potential of inviting, reclaiming, or warping the gaze become increasingly stark.

The Ambivalence of Androgyny

Many goths frequently celebrate their acceptance and promotion of androgyny as resistant gothic practice. Although androgynous styles do help to highlight the constructedness of gender, in the gothic scene androgynous practice is informally policed in a manner that continuously reinscribes what Carole Pateman (1988, 2) has termed a masculine sex-right, "the right of men to enjoy equal sexual access to women." As an ideological abstraction, one can argue that this sex-right is exercised not only over the real bodies of women (for Pateman, particularly in the "social contract"), but over the ideal of the feminine as well.

As a visit to any gothic nightclub makes clear, in gothic scenes, androgynous practices are, for the most part, exclusive to men. At the Castle, the famed gothic stronghold of Tampa, Florida, an apt exemplar of goth androgyny is a hired dancer known as Sex Pot. Sex Pot is a tall, long-haired goth with a strikingly feminine appearance, and a thin, well-toned body that is easily mistaken by interested straights (gawking "frat boys") as female. Like the much ballyhooed pin-ups of gothic crooner Peter Murphy, or young models like Christoph and Benny featured in *Propaganda* (figs. 2 and 4), Sex Pot typifies the most conspicuous gothic "boiz" found in "dark" clubs across the United States. Yet androgynous women are, for the most part, nowhere to be seen at the Castle, on the past pages of goth periodical *Propaganda*, or anywhere else in the nationwide scene that I have experienced.

According to "Reverend Carroll," a regular on the alt.goth Internet newsgroup, "androgyny in woman may not be as easy to spot due to the general 'rule' in the parent society that 'there's nothing masculine about a



Fig. 1: From the cover of *Propaganda*. Reproduced by permission of Fred Berger

woman in pants.’ Thus, the androgyny, while it may be present, gets overlooked in a female because of the prevailing norm.” Presumably, such an overlooked androgyny would be one that relates to interiors: what individuals *feel* inside, how they envision themselves moving through gothic spaces, and other subjective states of experience. Insofar as androgyny is almost always associated with appearances and spectacle, however, and insofar as feminine aesthetics (of a certain kind) are those privileged in the gothic scene, gothic subculture seems to preclude the possibility of stylistically androgynous women.

This said, some within the scene have sought to change the implicit prohibition against traditional masculine style: Fred H. Berger, the photographer and editor of the oldest and most widely read gothic fanzine in the United States, *Propaganda*, has sought to remedy the paucity of images of masculine women in the subcultural imagination by increasing their appearance in photo spreads in the last few years. In figure 3, for example, the female model appears as a traditional boy—replete with short, cropped hair and the requisite, pelvic bulge. Yet *Propaganda* has been historically dominated by images of male androgyny and, despite Berger’s recent efforts to diverge from that path, androgynous goth women (or, for that matter, “manly” goths of either sex) remain relatively rare.



Fig. 2: Christoph and Benny. Reproduced by permission of Fred Berger



Fig. 3: A female "boy," from *Propaganda*. Reproduced by permission of Fred Berger



Fig. 4: Benny and Lucrece.
Reproduced by permission of
Fred Berger

The captioned photograph of Benny and Lucrece (fig. 4) offers a telling commentary. The androgynous male, who is “pretty nelly,” rides the “authentic” woman, who is “all girl.” The implicit message is one of stylistic appropriation: the man exercises his sex-right, usurping the power of the feminine by claiming feminine beauty for himself. In so doing, he subjugates the “real” woman. This masculine appropriation of the feminine is even more complex when one learns that the “male” in the image is actually a female, the requisite phallus a fake. In talking with the photographer I learned that Benny is, in actuality, a female playing a man subjugating a woman. Although, on the one hand, this doubling irony communicates the instability and constructedness of gender, what is troubling about this play is that the reader is not alerted to the irony, in effect reinscribing masculinism despite the very constructedness of masculinism—that which the image was presumably composed to resist.

In light of its ambivalence, gothic androgyny echoes some feminist analyses of gay drag. Marilyn Frye, Janice Raymond, and bell hooks are among those who have argued that drag queens offend the idea of woman through facile imitation, a form of “ridicule and degradation” (Butler 1993, 126). The argument here is that male androgyny is “yet another tactic for deal-

ing with the anxieties of masculinity," another means of focusing the male gaze on the feminine body as an object of desire (Walser 1993, 128–29). As Robert Walser observes of male glam rockers, "Androgynous musicians and fans appropriate the visual signs of the feminine identity in order to claim the powers of spectacularity for themselves. . . . Teenage boys and young men chafe under patriarchal control even as women do, and boys often develop innovative ways of expressing control over women as simultaneous proof of their achievement of their manhood and their rebellion against dominant men" (129). In other words, androgyny offers men a means of contending with the domination of other men by appropriating the feminine power to invite and manipulate the masculine gaze. For Walser, the male gaze is turned inward in a kind of narcissistic and spectacular reflexivity, over and against the other of woman. As victims of patriarchal control, young men turn to androgyny as a therapeutic performance, unconscious of the ways in which women and the ideation of femininity are instrumentalized in this resistant play. In this sense, "dark" becomes a trope for the hidden, ideological work of masculinism.

The Ambivalence of Death Chic

Perhaps the most conspicuous example of gothic stylistic resistance for outsiders concerns the prominence of "death chic" in gothic subculture. Death chic is the stylistic ideal of a pale, deathlike pallor and a thin and (seemingly) sickly body. Many readers may recognize that death chic passed into mainstream advertising as "heroin chic" in the late 1980s and 1990s. Both heroin chic and death chic can be seen as modern iterations of the Victorian era's invalid feminine aesthetic (Murton 1995, 22–26). Yet whereas Victorian invalidism is now seen as an ideologically motivated disciplining of women, death chic is defended by goths as liberating.¹⁶ This emaciated, feminine body is rife in gothic culture, with models of that type gracing album covers and the glossy pages of *Propaganda*. In keeping with the gothic celebration of androgyny, death chic's "feminine" body types are an ideal to which many female and male goths aspire. Although most goths would, on musical grounds, deny that the infamous Marilyn Manson is a goth, his skinny, "druggie," feminized body epitomizes the idealized gothic body; Manson's death chic, like the female dominatrix, seems to represent a defiant subcultural style, challenging dominant beauty ideals in which attractiveness signifies healthiness, and femininity signifies female sex.

Yet this challenge is predictably ambivalent. Although male and female participation in death chic constitutes a challenge to mainstream gender and beauty norms, the style can also be said to participate in the centuries-

old pathologization of the feminine (and usually female) body. The most obvious feature of this pathologization is the celebration of emaciation—a sickly, seemingly “unhealthy” body is venerated by goths as an object of desire. Death chic thus extends familiar cultural norms that essentialize difference by rendering the female body a diseased object.¹⁷ For all their resistant intentions, goth men who aspire to the look join women in reproducing this fetishized femininity.

Further, death chic’s fetishization of a skinny, feminine corporeality is articulated to other gothic stylistic practices that evince a hatred of the body. Goth’s abject body is often adorned with much care and precision, as if it needs to be either elaborately erased in frilly Victorian clothing, or exquisitely prodded, poked, pierced, marked, and bled in ritual self-mortification. To goths, the ability to mortify or modify one’s body in gothic performance seems empowering because they are able to become beauty in ways that do not depend on the body. After all, mainstream beauty is very much focused on the body, and the ability to escape or evade beautiful codes that obsess over the body would seem to escape an impossible, media-made ideal. The popular use of heavy white foundation, eyeliner, and other cosmetics, however, simultaneously extends the mainstream obsession with beauty and the beautiful. Gothic self-mortification or self-modification can thus be said to be paradoxically somatophobic, party to a hatred of the body that first became fashionable in the Victorian era as invalidism. Michelle Mock Murton has argued that in the nineteenth century, invalidism as a beauty norm was a key ideological means by which the threat of the feminine to patriarchy was, literally, wasted away (1995, 22–26). Yet, in goth subculture, invalidism has reemerged as a somatophobia no longer specific to women. To wit, the pathologizing of the feminine underlying death chic is a recent illustration of how masculinized normativity is paradoxically achieved through indiscriminate, polymorphous victimization.¹⁸

Yet one need not locate misogyny in the material ideations of the goth body itself, for one needs only to hang around in gothic venues long enough to hear the brutal critiques of others’ appearances by the typical goth voyeur. Although most of the goths I have interviewed over the past five years would be quick to describe an all-encompassing embrace of all body types in the gothic scene—and to some extent, this is in fact the case when compared to other subcultures—there is nevertheless a strong tendency to discriminate against the obese. Even in light of the fact that there is no shortage of plus-sized individuals in gothic scenes across the country, to be in the least bit overweight is to fall far short of the gothic body ideal. One Denver goth reports, “My partner, who is in NO way overweight (she also doesn’t

sport the emaciated look), recently walked off the dance floor and said, 'I feel like a weed in the anorexia garden.' I can't count the number of times I've heard someone say, 'Some people shouldn't wear vinyl.' That some people shouldn't wear vinyl refers, of course, to the notion that some individuals are too fat to wear tight clothing, thus indirectly cueing the death chic of the gothic body ideal.

A disturbing and explicit articulation of this kind of body-focused misogyny is easily illustrated in a public e-mail post that was made recently to a Minneapolis gothic Listserv. In regard to fans who inquired about a gothic and industrial dance event that they could not attend, "ArseN" wrote, "What you really missed out on . . . is the chance to see way too much fat prodded into too little clothing, lots of ugly people being kissed and groped by elephantine women, and people generally behaving badly." In a follow-up message, ArseN mused that he "always wonder[s] how people can pack on 200 years worth of fat in only 20-some years. . . . There's a lot of fat punk chicks and goths. If anybody out there is a fatty lover, good for them, it's just my opinion not to be attracted to those voluminous rolls of flab."

Although ArseN's remarks are in no way a representative of the ideas or feelings of goths countrywide, his misogynistic condemnation of "fat women" is demonstrative of the extent to which mainstream prejudices inform goth's skinny ideals. Specifically, these remarks comprise a hyperbolic display of the implicit, unconscious logic that informs the idealized gothic body which comes from without: "beautiful people" are skinny. Although obesity seems characteristic of women and women only in ArseN's sexist remarks, it should be mentioned that obese men are often the object of scorn as well. In the Minneapolis gothic scene, for example, an obese man who is a regular at gothic events is known by other regulars as Mayor McCheese.

Conclusion: Toward a Dialectical Ethnography

In this chapter I have shown that despite its many resistances, gothic subculture takes part in and perpetuates a larger cultural misogyny in more complex ways than is observed in more "mainstream" practices. On the one hand, I have suggested that goth comprises a number of elements (music, style, and scene) that are interrelated through the trope of darkness. Stylistically, the "dark" practices of goths are deliberately resistant to mainstream culture by confronting heteronormativity with androgyny and a pale and sickly body ideal. Yet these visual codes obscure a different kind of ideological darkness, deriving their spectacular force from a more widespread, cultural misogyny premised on a fear and hatred of the feminine and the

female body. On the other hand, insofar as men aspire to the idealized gothic body, they are both party to, and victims of, misogyny as well.

As a dialectical interplay of appearances, gothic performativity demonstrates the cunning manner in which ironic forms of resistance simultaneously reinscribe what they seek to oppose. As a spectacular iteration of lifestyle irony, gothic performativity highlights the dynamic ways in which people confront their social realities in spaces of ambivalence. Strict anthropological or sociological approaches to the study of music subcultures fail to capture this ambivalence.

In this essay I have also focused on ironic performances. By suggesting that resistance is ironic and ambivalent, I have not intended to forward a defeatist attitude toward the politics of the marginal. Whenever one thinks about resistance in linear, progressive, or telic terms one will always find failure. The alternative is to examine resistant performance or practice within a heterogeneous temporality or “now time,” as Walter Benjamin urged (1968, 253–64). In other words, the successes and failures of resistance can be understood in terms of the dialectical interplay of two temporalities. For example, drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Naida Zukic (2001) has argued that the androgynous gothic body is a site of momentary emancipation. By celebrating the body’s androgynous possibilities, gothic style helps to destabilize heterosexist and misogynistic norms. Zukic argues that although such subcultural liberation may be fleeting, it is not without meaningful effect. Her compelling argument suggests an alternative, immanent way of thinking about resistance; as opposed to the Kierkegaardian notion that the success of ironic resistance is measured linearly, Zukic suggests liberation is achieved in momentary flashes of insight (or rather, in those moments in which a goth loses self-consciousness). Understood in a space of immanence, in the ever-present now of discrete moments, gothic performativity can achieve liberation; people celebrate goth and remain in the scene precisely because they experience such moments.

What is really at stake in the academic tussle over the critical approach to subcultures is, of course, the possibility of cultural change—the anthropological tending toward a disclosure of spaces of possibility and resistance, and the sociological tending toward a demystification of practices that seem resistant or defiant or liberatory. Both views seem to me essential. As critical ethnographers, locating spaces in which possibilities and potentialities are opened gives us a necessary, generative hope, but understanding the places where, and the ways in which, those possibilities and potentials are closed down gives us a sense of mission. There is always a space for hope, built

on the conditions of possibility enabled by the fact that people can and do learn. Hence my insisting that we consult those whom we claim to represent and critique. Hence my insisting that scholars share their work with those whom they write about. Hence my wanting the subjects of scrutiny to have the last word, however contrived the move.

Bruce, from central Virginia: I would be very careful about looking to *Propaganda* magazine as an indicator of anything about goths, from fashion to expressed or implicit ideology. Most goths I know enjoy *Propaganda* for amusement value as much as anything else, precisely because they are aware of the obvious contradictions it represents in terms of celebrating what you call resistance by way of taming it in terms "normal" culture would understand.

Julie, from parts unknown: I generally consider misogyny to represent actual active hatred, as opposed to prejudice; I don't believe in "implicit misogyny." . . . Using the same term for both is confusing and not politically expedient—we compromise the impact of claims of explicit misogyny. . . . I reject the notion that a woman cannot be purposely sexy, whatever sexy may mean to her, without being oppressed. You see, most goth women I know don't dress or do makeup or hair to please men, or to please their friends, or to fit a stereotype. They dress and do their makeup and hair to please or amuse themselves. But maybe you know different sorts of women.

Todd, from Minneapolis, Minnesota: I really couldn't agree more. I think your critique is dead-on in this respect, well-explained and fair to the "subjects." However, I'm willing to accept this as part of the "darkness" in this scene. As a celebration of badness, sickness, and the fallen, it seems too much to expect such utopian social concepts as reform or political resistance from this particular mutation of the punk subculture.

Sam, from parts unknown: Having only had time and inclination to read [a] snippet [of the chapter], I am pressed to ask only one question of your educated mind. Do you feel that there is ANY way to celebrate the obvious differences (both physical and psychological) between the sexes that would not obviate [*sic*] a moniker of misogyny by an observer such as yourself?

Jennifer, from Phoenix, Arizona: A fantastic read, if you can wade through the academic language. . . . Interesting insight to something that has been nagging the edge of my thoughts for a while. Perhaps a good clue as to why all our beautiful goth girls (and they are all beautiful) have such shitty

self-esteem. The knowledge of the ideal and how few actually achieve that ideal . . . causes . . . self-loathing and body hatred. . . . I still believe that goth girls have the lowest self-esteem of any of the sub-groups. The nitpicking of the body seems to be hyper-realized with the goth females; every minor deviation forms an unachievable archetype becomes an obsessive object of loathing. . . . I could go on for hours but I am trying to keep this short. Thank you for giving words to that which has been trying to get my attention.

Panurge, from parts unknown: I don't identify myself as Goth, but I'm not sure about the validity of associating the "death chic" idea with the feminine. Take out that concept and you've essentially taken out misogyny. Not that I'm attempting to put forth the final word on the subject, of course.

Notes

1. Although being an insider has its advantages, it can also be a grave disadvantage—particularly among goths. Paul Hodkinson's discussion of this problem is exemplary (2002, 9–33).
2. One of the most widely known critics, theorists, and ethnographers of youth cultures is John Fiske, who has been roundly criticized and often wrongly dismissed because of his celebration of resistant practices in popular culture; see Fiske 1989 and 1998.
3. In traditional Marxian criticism, the ability of the reigning class to impose its ideology, unconsciously, on the subaltern without direct coercion or force is called "hegemony." In the United States, the reigning class consists mostly of wealthy, white men, and the dominant ideology of our society is a socioeconomic belief system that tends to operate in ways that keep wealthy white men in power: patriarchal capitalism. The more recent trend in critical scholarship on subcultures, however, is post-Marxist or Althusserian in tone, holding that while dominant ideology does tend to support those in power, it has become a material force in and of itself that is perpetuated unconsciously in social institutions by means of overdetermination—not by propaganda or conspiracy, and not necessarily in ways that benefit wealthy white men.
4. For deeper understanding of the concept of disidentification, see Muñoz 1999.
5. This research began in 1996 as a set of interviews and surveys of thirty-three self-identified goths for a thesis project, and later in informal interviews conducted in March 2001 and August 2002 online and in the cities of Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Chicago, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Seattle, Tampa, and Washington.
6. An enthymeme is a truncated syllogism, such as "Socrates is a man, and therefore he will die," in which the missing premise is supplied by the reader or hearer ("All men are mortal"). The participatory logic of the enthymeme is one of the oldest explanations of persuasion. See Aristotle 1991, esp. 40–47.
7. In my "Rhetoric and Popular Music" course, I often have students write down

the adjectives that best describe their favorite three songs, and then have them read them aloud prefaced by "I am . . ." Students are frequently startled (and sometimes disturbed) by the similarity of their self-descriptions and their musical choices.

8. For an excellent extended study of how the homosexual is negatively coded in American discourse—particularly and interestingly in relation to the feminine—see Brooker 2002.
9. The concept of "polymorphous perversity" was introduced by Freud in 1905 in what is regarded, along with *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as one of his most important works, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Technically speaking, "polymorphous perversity" refers to the default state of infantile sexuality in which a child seeks pleasure irrelevant of the sex or gender of its source. In infancy, suggests Freud, there is "no resistance towards carrying . . . out" what most adults would consider "sexual irregularities" or "perversions." This is because "the mental dams against sexual excesses—shame, disgust and morality—have either not yet been constructed at all or are only in course of construction, according to the age of the child." Divorced from Freud, the concept of polymorphous perversity has come to signify desire unconstrained or undisciplined by social codes (heteronormativity, for example). See Freud 1962, 39–72.
10. Despite what has been described as the postfeminist turn in mass media, the consensus of many scholars is that the United States is a patriarchal culture that continues to oppress women and deny them social, legal, and economic equality; this is an axiomatic assumption throughout the essay. For a helpful discussion of postfeminism and its challenges, see Vavrus 2000, 413–28.
11. Kierkegaard illustrates how Socrates navigates this contradiction (1989, 167–83). An excellent discussion of this problem is Cross 1999, 125–53.
12. See, for example, Harrison 1997 and 2000.
13. Research concerning the changes of the male or masculine body ideal is just beginning to emerge. See, for example, Chesbro 2000. Chesbro is one of those working to develop social-scientific measurements to empirically verify these shifts; see Chesbro and Fuse 2001 and Chesbro 2001.
14. It is not inconsequential that in the Freudian register the fetish (in this case, leather clothing, shoes, whips, chains, and so forth) is conceived as a surrogate for the mother's absent penis (hence fetishism is premised on male anxiety). For a discussion of the resistances of fetish culture, see Weinberg 1995; and Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 1996.
15. I should stress again that many goths understand B-D/S-M culture as somewhat distinct from gothic subculture—even though both cultures typically coexist in the same "dark" scene.
16. In her analysis of the more mainstream modeling of death chic, Christine L. Harold (1999, 65–66) argues that the skinny, deathlike pall of select Calvin Klein models "presents a challenge to dominant standards of beauty by embracing and repeating images that transgress and thus reconfigure these standards. By privileging 'ugly' rather than 'beautiful' or 'sickly' rather than 'healthy,' heroin chic,

in effect, destabilizes sanctioned norms and calls attention to their arbitrary nature.”

17. This is by no means a new thing, as centuries-old myths about the “curse” of menstruation serve to illustrate that women have been socialized into a profound alienation from their bodies on the basis of their dissimilarity from the male body; see de Beauvoir 1989, 22–33 and 276–327. The most extreme form of this body hatred that I have found recently is a new book by reproductive experts that argues “recurrent menstruation is unnecessary and can be harmful to the health of women” (Coutinho and Segal 1999).
18. See Foucault 1984a, 179–87, and Bartky 1988, 61–86. It should also be mentioned that the mainstream alienation from one’s body is primarily perpetuated in contemporary Western society in the service of capital. The diet industry is a \$50 billion industry, and it currently shows no signs of slowing growth. See Poulton 1997 and Kimbrell 1992, 52–65.



QUEENS OF THE DAMNED

Women and Girls' Participation in Two Gothic Subcultures



Studies of subcultures have focused predominantly on the way subcultures operate as “magical” solutions to a host of problems experienced by working-class youth (Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1997). Though subcultures usually include both men and women, Mike Brake has argued that most existing subcultures are organized around masculine focal concerns, leaving female participants in marginal roles. However, as researchers such as Angela McRobbie and Lauraine LeBlanc have shown, women and girls are often quite integral to male-dominated subcultures and can use their participation to resist traditional female roles. Researchers have also begun to look at female-dominated subcultures (Gottlieb and Wald 1994; Kearney 1998; Leonard 1998). Focusing on these gender-related dynamics, I explore girls’ and women’s participation in gothic subcultures.¹

Due to fairly even distribution of male and female participants, it is not an easy task to classify goth as either a male-dominated or a female-dominated subculture. Based on participant observation of *Perversion*, a gothic/industrial club night that occurs weekly at the Ruby in Los Angeles, California, and *Faerieland*, a “dark-culture” collective in Austin, Texas, that existed from 1996 to 1999,² I argue that women’s and girls’ participation in gothic subcultures varies in regard to the subcultural spaces in which they are situated. Thus, rather than viewing goth as either male or female-dominated, I seek to explore the ways in which girls and women in Los Angeles and Austin participate in their local scene or community, and to determine how the locations themselves may aid or hinder this participation.

Early subculture research emerged from delinquency studies, which focused predominantly on the milieu of men perceived as delinquents (Whyte 1943; Cohen 1955; Becker 1963). In the 1970s, sociologists from the Birmingham School adopted structural modes of analysis, viewing subcultures as responses to working-class material conditions, rather than as delinquency. Yet, in doing so, such analyses continued to focus on male participants (Clarke et al. 1975; Jefferson 1975; Willis 1977; Hebdige 1979). McRobbie and Garber took issue with much of the Birmingham School's early work, noting that girls' participation in subcultures was neglected, even when female participation was almost equal to male. McRobbie and Garber (1975) added that male researchers usually did not interview girls directly but relied on male participants' accounts of girls' activities to talk about the female subcultural experience. They called for sociologists to investigate not only how girls negotiate participation in male-dominated subcultures, but also how they form their own subcultures.

In his work on youth subcultures, Mike Brake (1980) agreed that subculture studies focused predominantly on male participation. He argued, however, that this male emphasis was largely justified, since subcultures, in his reading, function as locations for the affirmation of masculinity. For example, Brake analyzed skinhead subcultures and found that violence and fighting were an integral part of how male participants reaffirmed a tough, masculine, working-class identity. Dick Hebdige (1979) did a similar analysis of masculinity in subcultures but focused more on how masculinity could be rejected or challenged in subcultural locations. For example, focusing on men's participation in glam rock, he noted: "In sharp contrast to their skinhead predecessors, the Bowie-ites were confronting the more obvious chauvinisms (sexual, class, territorial) and seeking, with greater or lesser enthusiasm, to avoid, subvert, or overthrow them" (88). In contrast to Brake, Hebdige argued that subcultures like glam rock offered strategies of resistance to both men and women through the creation of "a new sexually ambiguous image for those youngsters willing and brave enough to challenge the notoriously pedestrian stereotypes conventionally available to working class men and women" (60). However, while Brake acknowledged women's active participation in glam and other youth subcultures, he maintained that women were ultimately unable to form new female identities via subcultural participation because youth subcultures remain centered on "masculine focal concerns," such as proving masculinity through sexual conquest or violence (82). Additionally, he argued that women were too tied to the "culture of romance," which kept them anchored in traditional feminine roles even as they participated in rebellious subcultures.

Other researchers, however, have seen more opportunities for girls to break gender norms in male-dominated subcultures. For example, Lauraine LeBlanc (1999), working on punk subcultures, argued that, "for punk girls, entry into the punk subculture is a way to circumvent the process of internalizing and enacting femininity" (102). While she acknowledged that punk was organized around male concerns, she added that the subculture provided girls with a "place to be aggressive and assertive and therefore, less feminine" (8). In the 1990s, researchers documented how participants in the Riot Grrrl subculture broke off from the larger punk scene to form their own punk feminist community. As a female-focused subculture, Riot Grrrls encouraged members to take on subversive female identities that rebelled against the norm that "good girls" are quiet and sexually passive (Kearney 1998). Thus, while men in subcultures have been traditionally perceived as more able to use their participation to accentuate or attack male identities, LeBlanc's analysis of girls in the punk scene and recent studies of Riot Grrrl (e.g., Leonard 1998; Kearney 1998) reveal that girls are able to use their subcultural participation to try out new female identities that resist traditional femininity. In the next section, I will examine identity and girls' participation in gothic subcultures in Los Angeles, California, and Austin, Texas.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles long has been an appealing location for subcultures, as it has a strong and varied music and club scene and, in comparison to other large cities, cheap housing can still be found. Los Angeles was a mecca for punk in the late 1970s, with L.A. punks developing their own fashion and music separate from the imported U.K. version. Goth was another subcultural import, brought to Los Angeles by Joseph Brooks, quick on the tail of the development of the London scene. Brooks opened the first gothic club in Los Angeles in 1981, which he called the Veil.³ When the Veil closed in the mid-1980s, he opened another club, Fetish, on Melrose Avenue. Fetish was connected to the record store Vinyl Fetish, which still exists today. Fetish eventually also closed and gothic subculture declined in visibility and numbers in the early 1990s. In 1996, Brooks, along with longtime Vinyl Fetish patron and employee Jason Lavitt, attempted to revitalize the gothic scene through the creation of Coven 13, a roving club that held "nights" at different locations. Originally starting out at the Mogus Club in Hollywood, Coven 13 moved to the El Rey in mid-Wilshire in the late 1990s and finally relocated to the Ruby, back in Hollywood. By 2000, the frequency of the "nights" had declined, with most Coven 13 activities being "special events,"

such as the Gothic Fashion Show hosted in August 2000 in conjunction with E! television. The declining frequency of Coven 13 signals the difficulty of maintaining a space devoted to one specific subcultural group in the current market. To be economically viable, clubs increasingly are diversifying in terms of bands and DJ music. The last home of Coven 13, the Ruby, exemplifies this new diversification, as it is a restaurant by day and a myriad of different subcultural spaces by night. The Ruby is well suited for this type of musical diversification, since it contains three separate dance floors. These three dance floors allow the Ruby to host subculturally specific "nights" on two dance floors—such as Saturday's Britpop/Northern Soul night, Bang!—while still attracting a wider, more mainstream audience with 1980s music or techno on the third floor.

This shift away from dedicated subcultural spaces to "nights" has altered the gothic community in Los Angeles, since there is no longer one specific location for goths to congregate, as there was with the Veil or Fetish. Instead, there are club nights like Perversion, another creation from Brooks and Lavitt, which occurs on Thursdays at the Ruby. Like the other nights at the Ruby, the club caters to specific subcultures, goths and industrial "rivetheads," but still maintains the 1980s new wave room popular with tourists who happen to wander in from Hollywood Boulevard. Hosting this mix of gothic and industrial music makes Perversion less of a purely gothic "scene" and more of what Sarah Thornton (1995) has labeled a "club culture," that is, a space in which a variety of subcultures exist in one location. While they share their "territorial affiliation," the subcultures maintain their distinct identities through an increased emphasis on specific style and rituals (Thornton 1995, 200). Thus, the shared space at the Ruby for both gothic and industrial scenes—two scenes with some overlapping stylistic signifiers—increased the necessity of boundary heightening to separate out which participants belonged to which subculture.

The boundaries between the two subcultures emerged in my fieldwork almost immediately. A mutual friend introduced me to a woman in the L.A. scene who agreed to introduce me around the club. Upon telling her via e-mail that I was interested in the goth scene in Los Angeles, she quickly replied that she was "industrial" and admonished me for applying the goth label to her. "The goth label," she explained, "is a problem. It has such negative connotations associated with it. A long time ago, it was just a catch phrase for dark culture, now it's evolved into describing some sort of vampire, role playing, bad make-up dork . . . The rest of us who get slapped with that label spend all of our time trying to explain why we are not goth!" This quotation demonstrates how "dark culture" participants react to the

popular media construction of gothic, as well as to the distinction between industrial and gothic subcultures, a topic that I do not explore at length in this chapter. More generally, however, it illustrates the importance of policing the boundaries when two similar subcultures are thrown into close proximity. While she and her friends, the rivetheads, attended the same club as people who identified as goths, they attempted to maintain a distance from what they perceived as the cheesiness of the "gothic" label, as well as to construct symbolic boundaries between two different subcultural affiliations.

In maintaining these boundaries within such a small social space, representations of style, which varied by gender, became especially important at Perversion. The most conspicuous form of stylistic differentiation between gothic and industrial men involved goth cross-dressing. It was not uncommon to see gothic men in long, flowing black skirts and corsets. Additionally, gothic men wore eyeliner, lipstick, and white face powder in an effort to challenge mainstream views on male attractiveness. They also wore a great deal of leather and vinyl. Women in the gothic scene applied makeup in a similar fashion. Of course, the traditional societal view on makeup, popularized by women's magazines and talk show makeovers, is that it works as an accessory that either hides blemishes or accentuates women's features. Female goths took this idea of accentuation to an extreme through the application of white face makeup and dark lipstick colors, such as black, blue, or dark red. The total effect of such gothic makeup served to challenge and almost to parody what a "beautiful" woman looks like. Women in the L.A. gothic scene also favored a dominatrix style, involving fishnets, vinyl, and spiked high-heel boots. Long velvet dresses or corsets were also quite common. Through this hyperbolic use of stereotypical sexy clothing for women and the use of makeup, female goths were able to subvert gender stereotypes through an exaggerated femininity. Male goths, by contrast, subverted masculine stereotypes by cross-dressing.

Women involved in the industrial scene wore less makeup, particularly less elaborate eye makeup. They also adopted a much more traditionally punk look, with shorter skirts made of leather or vinyl and combat boots. Because of the athletics required of industrial dancing, it was rare to see women in this scene with spike heels, as it would constrain their movement on the dance floor. The male industrial style also was much closer to punk, with men wearing shorts, big boots, and adopting partially shaved hairstyles. Unlike their gothic counterparts, the male industrials did not wear makeup. These stylistic differences not only allowed the goths and industrials to distinguish themselves from each other, but also to separate themselves from

the denizens of the eighties room, who did not seem to have any particular subcultural affiliation.

Yet style was not the only means by which industrial, gothic, and mainstream participants differentiated themselves within the same club. The Ruby is arranged in three different zones, each encompassing its own dance floor and bar. The industrials were in the largest dance area, the main ballroom, while the goths had the run of the smaller dance floor immediately to the right of the entrance. While the goths had a smaller physical location, they also had access to the outdoor smoking lounge, a coveted area as L.A. clubs are smoke-free. Additionally, the gothic floor had a small side entrance, which meant participants could, if they chose, enter the room without going through the industrial ballroom. The third floor, the eighties room, was located at the far left and required a walk through the industrial room. While gothics and industrials often moved between the first two rooms, either to go outside for a smoke or to sit in the large lounge area in the industrial room, both groups rarely entered the eighties room. Conversely, members of the eighties room rarely ventured onto the gothic or industrial dance floors. On the rare occasions when this mixing did occur, the offending party usually left relatively quickly. For example, during one visit to Perversion, I witnessed a young man dressed in a white button-down shirt and khaki pants step onto the industrial dance floor. Intent on dancing with one of the industrial women, he moved closer and began attempting to dance with her. He was clearly marked as an outsider to the industrial floor, as he did not know the industrial dancing style or the norms of the dance floor (people dance alone). The industrial woman finally walked off the dance floor, leaving the man alone. He quickly left the floor and returned to the eighties room.

The divides between the gothics and the industrials were maintained, for the most part, on the different dance floors as well. While both scenes appeared to have equal numbers of male and female participants, the ways in which women appeared on the dance floor in these two scenes varied. In the gothic room, women made up the bulk of the dance floor participants for the entire night. It was not uncommon to see three or four women dancing together in a circular pattern. This pattern is interesting to observe since, like the aggressive industrial dance, it allows for a departure from heterosexual dancing norms—women dance together in groups rather than with individual male partners—and makes it difficult for outsiders to break in. Men who danced in the gothic room tended to be those who adopted the most feminine style, with long skirts, corsets, and visible eyeliner and lipstick. While they occasionally danced in circles with women, these cross-dressed men usually stayed on their own.

By contrast, the industrial dance floor consisted mainly of men dancing alone. This was interesting to observe, as Birgit Richard and Heinz Hermann Kruger (1998) have argued that dancing has traditionally been a female form of sexual expression and the male role is usually to watch from the sidelines. Industrial dance culture thus involved a role reversal, with men providing the main spectacle on the floor, even taking over the many pedestals available for those wanting to display technical prowess for an audience. It is therefore possible to interpret industrial women's lack of presence on the dance floor as a desire to resist the mainstream patterns by turning the gaze back on men. Yet while this seems a plausible explanation for some female conduct, there also seemed to be an element of exclusion involved. For example, when I first arrived at the club, usually around 10:30 p.m., the dance floors of both rooms were usually quite empty. The people who were dancing on the industrial floor, however, were usually women. As the dance floor began to fill up around 11:30 and 12:00, the women slowly began to disappear from the floor. By 1:00, the floor was almost entirely male. Watching this slow disappearance of women from the dance floor, it seemed that the industrial floor became a male space once the club began to fill up with participants of both sexes.

This gender dynamic is a complex phenomenon. My observations suggest that once the club was crowded, the industrial floor was reserved for those with the greatest technical prowess, as timid dancers or newbies (those who appeared to be learning the dance moves), regardless of gender, were not apparent in large numbers on the dance floor after midnight. That those dominating the dance floor were male, however, should not lead to the conclusion that industrial women have less potential prowess or technical aptitude than their male counterparts. In the case of Perversion, women were moving aside for men, who were displaying a great deal of confidence in their performance (evidenced, for example, by their dancing on pedestals and on the stage area of the club). Whatever their precise motivations, leaving the dance floor meant that women got less floor time to practice and fine-tune their dance moves, and thus less time to cultivate the confidence that tends to come with technical competence. That women in the gothic room remained on the dance floor in large numbers throughout the evening could suggest that gothic dancing, which is more free-flowing and less technically demanding than industrial dancing, leads to greater female participation, or that dancing in the gothic room, which is populated primarily by other female goths, is a different experience for women.

Whichever explanation is correct, the difference between the participation of women in the industrial and gothic rooms raises interesting questions about subcultural participation and social space. As with the current

punk scene, industrial scenes tend to be more masculine-oriented, since they are organized around a specific type of aggressive, fast music. While women may be drawn to this aggression, their participation in core sub-cultural activities such as dancing seems to be marginalized as a result. In fact, similar restrictions on female participation are found in other sub-cultures, such as women's exclusion from violent mosh pits at punk shows (LeBlanc 1999) or their exclusion from being "up front," the space reserved for "true fans," at independent music shows (Fonarow 1997). In the gothic room, however, women and men tend to mix more freely and, at the same time, men often adopt a more feminine look within this scene.

While neither scene should be classified as male- or female-dominated, there are noteworthy differences. At Perversion the number of male and female participants in both the gothic and industrial scenes is roughly equal, yet industrial subculture seems to involve nonnumerical forms of male domination. Stylistically, the gothic subculture at Perversion features a particular feminine aesthetic in which traditionally female signifiers, such as skirts and makeup, are sported by goths of both sexes. The industrial scene, by contrast, takes on a more traditional masculine style partly borrowed from punk. Although female industrials pick up on elements of this masculine style (e.g., combat boots), they also make use of traditionally feminine accoutrements (e.g., makeup and skirts) that their male counterparts eschew entirely. Thus, at least in Los Angeles, it appears that gothic style and practice facilitate female participation on the dance floor—the main participatory mode in a dance club. By contrast, the industrial scene, with its more traditionally gendered aesthetic and its masculinizing focus on aggressively performed technical dancing prowess, seems to discourage female participation on the dance floor.

Austin

Located in the eastern edge of the Texas hill country, Austin has long been an oasis for those trying to escape the industrial sprawls of Houston and Dallas. Since the 1960s, Austin's relatively low cost of living has attracted musicians and made the city a central location for progressive country music. Austin is also home to a variety of punk, hippie, gothic, and raver subcultures, all of which manage to maintain their own cultural spaces and peacefully coexist. Touted as the "Live Music Capital of the World," the city has produced germinal punk bands such as the Big Boys, as well as rock legends such as Janis Joplin and Stevie Ray Vaughn. Alternative businesses and music venues flourish in Austin, mainly due to the influx of new students each year to the University of Texas at Austin, one of the largest pub-

lic universities in the country. On "the Drag," the main thoroughfare of the university, punk record stores exist alongside hippie shops selling tie-dye and Grateful Dead posters, each with their own niche customers. Such businesses allow subcultural participation to thrive, since they provide job opportunities that do not demand a normalized appearance or way of life.⁴

The dark-culture community in Austin is small but close-knit.⁵ At the time of my participant observation, much of the activity of the community occurred at Faerieland, a dark-culture collective. Faerieland was situated on the east side of Austin, one of the cheapest areas of town. Hidden in a small alley behind a high wooden fence and surrounded with heavy greenery, the space, though only a few miles away from the heart of downtown Austin, gave the impression of inhabiting a liminal enclave that was somehow outside the city boundaries. The location was referred to as "Little House on the Faerie" and "Faerieland" in an attempt to convey the magical, outside-of-time feeling the location and ambience created for visitors.⁶ Inside the gate, Faerieland consisted of three units: a small, one-room "shack"; a silver Airstream trailer; and a tourbus converted into a living space. Supporting the sense that Faerieland was a magical but temporary space, the electricity and plumbing were rigged in a quasi-legal arrangement between the current occupants, Angel, Brenda, and Creature, and their landlord, who was a longtime member of the Austin hippie community.

Angel lived in the one-room shack, which was filled with clothes, jewelry, remade dolls, mannequins, and presents from friends around the world. Having a deep interest in the Victorian appreciation of the "natural world," Angel also collected animal skeletons, taxidermied animals, and dried bugs and flowers. Brenda lived in the Airstream trailer and Creature lived in the tour bus. The girls at Faerieland redid the landscape of their small area so that baby dolls sprouted along the path that led to the house and Christmas lights outlined all of the structures, giving the location a carnival feeling.⁷ Across the alley from Faerieland was another small house where several other members of the dark-culture community lived. Both spaces were always open to visitors, and the two areas frequently hosted small tea parties, puppet shows, and other art events. Among the community, the DIY aesthetic was highly valued, with many participants making art, as well as their own clothes and jewelry. While there was no set style for the group, the girls favored black or red slips, handmade dresses, corsets, bloomers, and black-and-white-striped tights. They tended to wear their hair long or in small buns. As in many dark-culture sites, the predominant style of the community was neo-Victorian, only with a darker, more macabre edge. Many male participants adopted a dark, macabre style as well, with a great deal of

black clothing, fishnet stockings worn under skirts, black boots with many buckles, and a great deal of silver jewelry.

The Faerielanders were loosely linked, by taste and appearance, to the larger gothic community of Austin, a community that tended to center around the gothic/industrial nightclub, Ohms, and later, the Atomic Café. The gothic community was comprised predominantly of white, middle-class young people. Faerielanders kept their participation in the gothic scene to a minimum, however, as they were more interested in staying below the radar of the mainstream attention that was increasingly being focused on the goth scene. While they recognized that subcultural outsiders often misread their aesthetic and lumped them into a gothic category, the occupants of Faerieland considered themselves part of a small dark-culture network of about thirty men and women who conceived of themselves as a family.⁸ Participants ranged in age from thirteen to their late forties. Despite the presence of older members, however, the network was nonhierarchical, and younger members played an equal role to those of older members. Thus, in this context, the use of the term *family* implies a sibling-type relationship between the members in which all participants were equal. This creation of the sibling relationship allowed for the network to remain neither male- nor female-dominated; rather, each member participated with equal status, regardless of gender. Like the larger gothic scene in Austin, members were predominantly white and came from middle-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds. Due to the variation in age, educational attainment ranged from high school degrees to PhDs. While most of the members of the network were originally from Texas, the network was highly transitory; members were constantly moving back and forth between Austin, San Francisco, New Orleans, and New York.

Within this family, there was a core group of female "sisters," often referred to by family members as "the faeries," consisting of, among others, Faerieland's denizens.⁹ Most of the "sisters" were in their late teens and early twenties and had gravitated toward each other from a mutual sense of being of similar "breed." For example, Angel discovered Austin's dark community around the age of twelve and was attracted to the style and attitude of the women involved. With her friend Pandora, she befriended other dark-culture girls, forming the close-knit family that eventually centered around Faerieland. The space of Faerieland gave the girls and the larger family network a location that was theirs only, as opposed to the more accessible gothic nightclub spaces in downtown Austin, which were frequently invaded by drunk "mainstream" college students. Because the doors were always open, family members were welcome at all hours. It also operated as

a check-in location for out-of-town members who could drop by to announce their return to Austin.

While relationships between girls in subcultures are usually secondary, meaning they are formed through boyfriends (McRobbie 1991), the relationships between the girls involved in the family were primary. Within this gender-mixed, egalitarian space, girls were able to form close relationships with one another that were not predicated on their relationships with men. However, there were also close relationships with men, as many of the male participants had been in the community for many years and were looked upon as knowledgeable older brothers. There was also a great deal of dating within the community. Because the relationships were so strong, couples who broke up were easily incorporated back into the family and tended to maintain close brother and sister relationships post-breakup. The strength of the bonds also meant that that community was able to survive and transcend physical location when many of the faeries began to move to other parts of the country, making the Faerieland family a personal support network similar to the Riot Grrrl formations of the early 1990s (Leonard 1998; Schilt 2003).

The adoption of magic narratives surrounding the faeries and the wider community downplayed the focus on gender and age. The term *faeries* was used to evoke a magical state, somehow outside of time, as well as impishness and mischievousness. This magical identity also extended to male participants, though they were not referred to as "faeries." Obviously the label "faerie" takes on a different and potentially homophobic meaning when applied to men. The dark-culture community did incorporate gay and bisexual men, as well as bisexual women; however, while the faerie label might have provided a resistant identity for gay men to take on, similar to the appropriation of "queer" by some gay and lesbian activists, the title was generally reserved for the girls who actually lived, or had lived, at Faerieland. Even without this title, however, male participants were able to share the sense of existence in an otherworldly, liminal space and to participate in creating this dark-culture aesthetic. Thus, in the Austin community, male and female participants were able to take on a shared sense of otherworldly identity and make their own aesthetic, while still participating in a tightly bounded network.

Conclusion

It is interesting to consider what can be gleaned from the differences observed in women's participation in Los Angeles and Austin. As illustrated through my early interactions with club attendees, the two Los Angeles

scenes, gothic and industrial, work to create distinct groups within a shared subcultural space. Stylistically, both men and women in the gothic scene at Perversion rely heavily on feminine signifiers, such as makeup, skirts, and corsets, while the industrial scene adopts a much more masculine style that incorporates more traditionally punk elements, such as combat boots and leather pants. Beyond stylistic differences, however, the industrial and gothic scenes also differed with respect to the level of observable female involvement in the main subcultural space, the dance floor. While industrial women's dance floor participation seemed to be subject to an excluding process, gothic women were much more able to participate on an equal footing with men in their subculture, staying on the dance floor for the duration of the evening. This suggests that the adoption of a more feminine style by male and female gothic participants may signal more acceptance of female participation.¹⁰

The Austin dark-culture scene reveals yet another instance of a pattern in which the adoption of a feminine aesthetic coincides with more equal participation between sexes. This research thus suggests that in dark-culture and goth scenes that downplay stereotypical masculinity through male cross-dressing, women find more room for public participation, in both club cultures and communities. That these scenes see much greater female participation in key subcultural spaces (the dance floor, Faerieland events) than the L.A. industrial scene suggests that, for the latter, women's participation may be constrained by the more masculine orientation of the subculture. This means that while the fast, hard industrial music, coupled with the combative look, may appeal to many women, female industrials in Los Angeles have more difficulty carving out and maintaining public space, particularly once more male participants populate the dance floor.

It would be easy to look at this research and make claims that the industrial scene denies full participation to women, as women in both Los Angeles and Austin appear to be able to find more space for themselves to perform within the goth/dark-culture communities. That said, it is possible that women in the L.A. industrial scene participate in other ways, to which I was not privy, since my participant observation was limited to the club.¹¹ (It is also possible that the L.A. scene, influenced by its proximity to the goth scene, is a special case.) Clearly, further ethnographic study of particular gothic, industrial, and dark-culture scenes is needed to create a body of work that will enable a greater exploration of how women participate in scenes such as gothic and industrial, and under what conditions this participation may be enhanced or limited by subcultural style, aesthetics, location, or context.

Notes

1. Applying labels to subcultures and subcultural participants in academic writing always is a problematic endeavor, as people have many different and complex ways of self-labeling (or attempting not to label at all). I recognize that "gothic" does not fit the self-label of many of my respondents and discuss their own understanding of themselves and their subculture accordingly in this piece. However, I do use the term *gothic* generally throughout the piece for clarity. In doing so, I am invoking it as a catchall term for a wide variety of dark-culture subcultural affiliations that involve shared musical tastes and aesthetics, rather than the popular media construction of a depressed teenager who wears black and shops at Hot Topic.
2. Faerieland still exists in Austin, but without the original members.
3. As the history of the Los Angeles gothic scene has yet to be written, the information in this history comes from the Coven 13 Web site, <http://www.clubcoven13.net/history.shtml>.
4. That said, in the late 1990s, Austin became home to computer-industry giants, such as Apple and Dell. This entry into the high-tech economy has raised rents, forcing many alternative businesses and music venues to close. In the years ahead, it may become harder for subcultures to exist in Austin, as they lose space to new skyscrapers and chain stores.
5. In discussing Faerieland, describing participants becomes somewhat problematic. Faerieland members did not use the label "goth" or "gothic" to describe themselves, seeing these as media-created terms associated with Anne Rice fans and suburban teenagers. However, they were aware that participants in other subcultures saw them as gothic. Faerieland's rejection of the goth mantle can be seen as a form of resistance to the commodifying processes described by Hebdige. For the purposes of this paper, I use *dark culture* to describe the Faerieland subculture.
6. Because the entrance to Faerieland was in an unmarked alleyway, it could also be difficult to find at night, which added to the otherworldly quality of the location.
7. I use *girl* to describe women in their late teens and early twenties because the Faerielanders themselves preferred the term. On the retaining of "members' meanings," see Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995.
8. I use the term *family* to describe the network, as this is how participants described it to me.
9. The use of the term *faerie* here is complex. The "sisters" whom it referred to first accepted the label from family members in the understanding that it fit with an impish, mischievous, magical creature—an image that fit with the lifestyle they created in Faerieland. However, like *gothic*, *faerie* has increasingly been commodified and taken over by science fiction and *Lord of the Rings* aficionados, leading the sisters to move away from the label. I use the term here with its original meaning to the sisters.
10. I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that all gender-mixed subcultures that adopt a feminine aesthetic are more accepting of female participation. As

Hebdige has shown, the glam subculture remained male-oriented, despite its emphasis on makeup, dyed hair, and cross-dressing for male participants.

- II. My main reason for this limit was that Perversion attendees predominantly went clubbing Thursday through Sunday at different clubs with similar designs (gothic/industrial/eighties), so I opted to do my research at only one club.



TREVOR M. HOLMES

PERI GOTHOUS

On the Art of Gothicizing Gender



I'm a goth-identified subject. My interest in things horrific and gloomy, in a postromantic decadent aesthetic overdetermined by punk, in embodiment through gender transitivity, started around 1984. A friend lent me *Burning from the Inside*, a Bauhaus album. Then came Siouxsie and the Banshees' *JuJu*, then some Joy Division and Christian Death. Aficionados will note the dates and realize that I was somewhat belated in my goth becomings.¹ Although I followed a good deal of goth, techno-industrial, punk, new wave, and even pop, my personal experimentation with makeup, dancing style, and clothing didn't settle into a more obviously goth self-representation until I left my small town and moved away to attend university.

Some people think that goth is a pose, that it is for middle-class white kids dabbling in self-imposed otherness who can doff the accoutrements and become normalized in a second.² I disagree. That said, I am not the exception to this view: I was, after all, academia-bound and my engagement in social activist movements has been relatively risk-free since my undergraduate days. However, there are goths of a more radical stripe, whose identities are more directly determined by sexual politics, and even, it would seem, by the materiality of their own bodies. Previously I have written about goth as a space in which it is possible for gay males, lesbians, and bisexuals to come out safely (Holmes 1997); neither is it a space unfriendly to transsexual and intersexed bodies. Although I am aware that gender transitivity in literature and life often ends by privileging the male experience of becoming-other,³ it is worth considering the possibility of locating transgender and transsexual politics beyond the ostensible battle between social construction and

essentialism. By way of exploring this possibility, I will provide two representations of goth, one a narrative about a lived experience in sex work, and one a fictional narrative.

There are in the goth subculture—either as real human beings or as iconic precursor legends—bodies that seem to have a goth predilection, that signify goth materially even in postyouth manifestations and without the benefit of makeup or particularly intentional clothing. These bodies are living goth ideals, and they come in several genders, classes, and ethnicities. I make no claims on behalf of such a goth core identity, except to acknowledge that the central claims of a resistant postmodernism would be inimical to such romanticizations while refusing to ignore their power in a particular context. Bracketing for the moment the implications of a goth core identity or idealized goth bodies, then, consider *goth* as, rather than a static noun, an activity, an active becoming-other of straight, singular gender norms. Think of *goth* as a verb, as in *to goth*. Rather like *to queer*, the experimentation evoked by *gothing* in effect resists attempts to name a pure goth subject.

Goth is a gender perversion, and indeed a pedagogy of gender transgression. Although some people who “were once goths” would now identify as pin-straight and just as narrow, this does not disprove that goth has been and continues to be a space of coming out for young sexual minorities—dykes, fags, trannies, bisexuals, fetishists, cyberindustrial punks, queer hets. Over the next several pages I want to outline one way in which goth helped me to multiply possible identifications during my nine-month tenure as an exotic dancer at a gay male club in an urban setting in the early 1990s. In the social, political, material space of this club, my gothicization worked against monolithic definitions of “gay male”—worked against it enough to result in a kind of clampdown on difference by management. It is part of a larger argument—or experiment—against identity purity. Since then, I have found in the narratives of Poppy Z. Brite literary experiments with similar gothicizations. These will be taken into account as a way of, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari might put it, plugging an exotic dancing machine into a literary machine.

Sociospatial and identity context

Rules set down as an oral ultimatum shortly before I left the business of exotic dancing:

Get a tan/show us a receipt for ten tanning sessions

Work out more—pump up your biceps and chest

Flash some dick—tie off regularly

Dance more like the other guys and use pop music

Act more masculine—no swishing, no frilly clothes—and act straight

When asked why, the answer was, “That’s what our customers want.” If so, why did I have a small but intensely loyal following of regular customers? Why did I make the most money some nights, surrounded by beefcakes and without breaking any laws? Why did my most financially rewarding floor show involve goth theatrics and classical music?

The nightclub had two floors and catered pretty much exclusively to a gay male clientele. The top floor was open at night for beefcake or Chippendale-type shows and a private back room with screens for private shows. The main floor featured afternoon and evening dancing until specific hours, with continuous floor shows, some pole shows on the bar, and table dancing in several corners. Weekly drag shows and general dancing were also part of the downstairs fare, but the exotic dancers were expected not to mingle with people in this scene because it would ruin our “marketability” as young, possibly straight, hypermasculine males. During the day in the downstairs bar, women were shunned or outright insulted by one of the waiters and many of the customers resented the occasional pool-playing visits by a couple of butch dykes. One of the DJs had a straight, femme-ish roommate who hung out there almost daily, and customers tolerated her as long as none of the purportedly straight male dancers paid undue attention to her. This was by no means a promised land of diversity and rainbow respect, like that which the annual pride parade might have suggested could exist.

Juridico-Economic Context

Dancers were paid no wage and in fact had to pay a small fee for the privilege of dancing for the bar, a fee collected by an agent/manager who had, shall we say, other interests in the same block of buildings. Money was to be made by collecting tips after floor shows in the obligatory T-bar,⁴ and by table dancing, in effect private dances in corners on top of boxes for customers sitting in chairs. Due to a strange quirk of a very old law, full nudity was illegal on the bar’s side of the city’s main drag, though it was legal on the other side of the street. Sex of any kind—oral-genital, manual-genital, oral-anal—was illegal and officially discouraged (by the owner) but implicitly encouraged by the agent/manager. When there were no on-duty police officers around, we were allowed to and encouraged to “flash” the audience around the stage area by pulling our T-bars out from our bodies, discreetly (!).

The Boys

Some dancers were gay, some bi, and some straight. Most of the dancers claimed to be straight, and this identity wasn't troubled by the same-sex erotic activity in which they engaged. For some, dancing was a way to command five times the price that a street hustler could command for the same activities, and it was often thought to be safer than the street, with its greater vulnerability to police monitoring. For others it was a way to make money—sometimes pretty good money—while getting lots of exercise, adoration, and free drinks.

Most of the dancers were boy-next-door (with a gym membership) preppy types—tanned, buff, smiling, short-haired, well-oiled, and exuberant. There were others, though. There was a thirty-year-old balding guy with a very trim, well-built body and well-rehearsed show (he was considered ancient by most of the other dancers and by most of the customers). There was a heavy-metal-type guy—quite slim but tanned with spiky hair at the front and a mullet—a veteran of seven years whose urethra had collapsed from tying off too often (the practice of wrapping a rubber band around the base of the penis so tightly that blood keeps the erection extremely engorged even while focusing on dance moves rather than sexy thoughts—these were pre-Viagra days). There was a fairly steady stream of late adolescents new to the city who stuck around dancing for a few weeks and then moved on to other things.

Self-Narration

My trip was different. I had long hair and a short, compact, but well-developed hard body. I could play it grunge or goth, and I made the most of these two alternative poles. My music ranged from alternative/industrial/techno to slower 1990s metal and female alternative artists such as Kate Bush and Sinéad O'Connor. Shows were either two fast/one slow or one fast/one slow, and I incorporated into my act a whip, boots, torn denim, frilly or silky pirate shirts and black tights, buckles, and belts and studded leather T-bars, and even (in a vampire show to which I will return) a fencing foil.

I was pale—white as a ghost compared to the others—and I shaved off all my body hair except for my eyebrows and my head. I never flashed dick the way I was supposed to—I refused to tie off and I wanted to cater to those who wanted to dephallicize the desired object without going quite transy. I was into the skin as a sex organ, and anality, and fetishes. This was not the kind of thing the agent-manager or the owner wanted. They made it clear that segregation was the name of the game. Fetish belonged at another bar. Masochism was not for dancers, nor was sadism. Lestat-type costumes

were for sissies, not our dancers. And there were no drag queens allowed in the bar at all during the straight-acting dancer shows unless they could be quiet, which effectively banned them altogether. A couple of transsexuals hung out, and although I wasn't supposed to, I did get to know them. Once a colleague of mine came in wearing male drag, but the other time she came in as a woman I was warned to stop talking to her.

My actions sometimes transgressed the explicit and implicit codes of conduct at the bar. That I lasted so many months attests to the fact that there were people paying to see me perform. Some nights I actually made more money by far than each of my counterparts. One show, performed on two different nights, seemed particularly to ratify the notion that a becoming-goth perverts gender in unpredictable ways.

I cooked up a scene with one of the more sympathetic DJs during which smoke, strobes, and colored lights were deployed strategically in order to frame the death and vampiric resurrection of a fey, Lestat-like figure with a fencing blade. I acted the scene out as a parody of eighteenth-century male-female dance conventions mixed with the between-men competitiveness signaled by the mimed dropping of imaginary gloves. I lost my fencing duel against the imaginary opponent and died only to be reborn nearly naked in the leather studded T-bar, enthralled by my victor's kiss of undeath. That I had been a varsity fencer and a high school gymnast helped with the skills needed to pull off a balletic set of moves with imaginary partners. The accompanying music was from the soundtrack to *The Hunger* (Jaeger and Rubini 1990 [1983])—classical music mixed with horrifying roars—and some slow goth stuff.

The first night I performed the routine, the bar was about one-third full. When the classical music started, all the noise in the bar stopped and everyone, including the waiter, came to see me dance. Most of the regulars and the workers ignored me much of the time because I didn't fit the straight male norm they wanted the dancers to perform. This time, however, the space around the stage (which was level with the floor) was packed with people three deep. I had never had so many customers gathered around my show, and I had never seen so many around anyone else's. You might say it was just the novelty, but the inscribing of such difference in so unvarying an atmosphere proved to be worth a long ovation from the crowd and more than eighty dollars in small tips. Compare this to the typical six- to sixteen-dollar daytime tips, and you get a sense of the impact. Yet I hesitate to reduce the worth of such transgression to a matter of dollars, because to do so is to capitulate to an economistic view that is nothing like the whole picture.

A couple of months later, with a less supportive DJ, I decided to enter my

one-off resurrection show in the annual competition for best dancer. This time, the customers packed the bar for the competition and were pumped for an exciting evening. For various reasons, my show was anomalous in the wrong ways, enough to elicit forms of censure including customers leaving the stage area, commenting loudly and disapprovingly, and refusing to tip much at all (I think I pulled only twenty bucks this time). I can only assume that my parodic queering of a hetero-patriarchal, homosocial love duel and my rebirth as a gay, pale, thin vampire was not what the audience wanted to see in a bouncy, pop music-fed competition of straight-acting gym fellas. What disturbs me about this experience is not so much that I guessed wrong about my audience, but that they were so willing to align themselves with natural straight as against performed drag, with hypermasculinity as against transsexual embodiment, with proper musical accompaniment to desire as against postmodern irony, and so on. Categories of identity at this club were policed by management in ways that bore no necessary relation to the multiple identities of various customers. Most dancer types could find a role to play in either the upstairs or downstairs bars, but the set of significations constructed by the goth type was threatening enough to the image of normal gay male desiring subjects and desired objects that management told me I could never do that show again.

I have gone into such detail about my own sense of performed gender transgression because I believe in a queer politics of self-disclosure. I have experienced firsthand the effects of being-goth-in-the-world in terms of homosexual panic. Male goth androgyny threatens heteronormativity, even though, ironically, many male goths consider themselves straight. The point, though, is that in attempting to regularize gay male desire, the managers of the bar and some of its clientele were reifying gender norms as much as would any straight suburban culture. Male goth androgyny threatens normalized homosexuality as well as heteronormativity.⁵

Poppy Z. Brite's Minoritarian Politics of Gothicization

Rather than rereading my own history of goth performativity in terms of a politics of representation or identity, however, I want to situate it in terms of what I call a general minoritarian politics of gothicization. Poppy Z. Brite's extreme thematizations of goth exemplify the kinds of aesthetic work goth can do. Her literary and subjective narratives participate in the gothicization of gender and sexual norms. By foregrounding and universalizing perverse identifications and over-the-top violence, Brite challenges her readers to think gender differently. Due to its explicit transitivity, *The Crow: Lazarus Heart* (1998), Brite's novel based on James O'Barr's *The Crow* (1992,

the same graphic novel on which two movies and a television series were based), is of special concern here.

An old-fashioned revenge tale with several twists, this novel grounds its claims to authority in both Brite's usual self-representation ("candymaker, mouse caretaker, artist's model, short-order cook, and stripper," from his Web site, <http://www.poppyzbrite.com/bio.html>) and in its connection to O'Barr's goth classic. In the original series, a young man and his fiancée die untimely and violent deaths and the man is brought back through the agency of a supernatural crow in order to avenge the woman's death. Brite's rewriting of O'Barr's tragic narrative replaces the affianced heterosexual lovers with a gay couple, one of whom has an identical twin transsexual sister. Benny and Lucrece (formerly Lucas) are typical of Brite's goth characters in their transgressive sexualities (including s-m and incest) and their interest in the supernatural. Jared Poe,⁶ the undead hero of the novel, is conflicted about precisely where to direct his vengeful ire: should he take revenge on the judge, lawyer, and police officers who put him in jail for the murder of Benny (a jail term cut short by his own murder by another inmate), or should he find Benny's actual killer, who is still stalking transgender/transsexual people?

More clearly moralistic than Brite's *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), *Lazarus Heart* condemns the schizoid serial killer from the beginning, never situating his paranoid delusions about a conspiracy of transsexuals from another planet as sexy or desirable in any way. Jordan, the killer, almost never gratifies a specifically sexual desire by disemboweling and severing transsexual bodies: his desire is for knowledge, which is never attained, because he believes that there will be an implant in one of the bodies that will prove his alien invasion theory. Obviously the knowledge never attained could be a figure for sexual desire, a fetish on his part. But the narrative sets him up as the enemy in ways that are unequivocal in contrast to the ambiguous treatment of the killers in Brite's earlier novel. Jordan's bodies without organs are of a different order: despotic, reterritorialized, objects for a test of "degrees of deviance" from the norm (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 178). The hero, Jared, upon awakening from his death through the agency of the cryptic bird, has another kind of body without organs fashioned for him, one which might be the absolute deterritorialization that serves as an antidote to Jordan's cruel ones.

Jared's connection to the crow is libidinal, and it is a line of flight from the grounded Cartesian self. His heart and soul feel somehow connected to the bird by a "wire" (1998, 22, 24) now loose, now taut, that guides his physical path and his will. That this wire-drive is libidinal is clarified

by analogy: in a flashback memory to the night on which he met Benny and Lucrece, Jared's erection is described as being connected to them by a wire which is pulled taut. There are two possible readings: the erection and the doubled object of Jared's desire could signify that the heart and the crow/revenge quest are eroticized, or, to the contrary, the erection might be dephallicized in direct relation to the heart and other organic symbols of love. This would make sense with the doubling of the desired object and its triple-sexed subjectivity (male/female/transgoth), and it is the more radical reading suggested by Jared's thought, "*There are strings everywhere, . . . not just on the end of my dick*" (63). Deterritorialization of sex, sex without organs: there is a move away from the centrality of the genitalia in both pleasure and identity formations.

This brings up the questions: Is goth another sex? Another gender? Another sexuality? Is it a third, fourth, fifth, or sixth one? Is it a multiplication of sex/gender/sexuality arrangements? Csaba Toth (1997, 82) asks a similar question of gothic monstrosity in general, framing its appearance in a Nine Inch Nails video as, perhaps, a residual one-sex model or an instance of Deleuzian desiring machines. Brite's work would seem to indicate that at the very least goth is neither male nor female, although it seems to start from a position of male in all her narratives, with femininity represented either as a supplement or as an overdetermining force. A closer analysis of Benny and Lucrece (and Jared's relation through sexual and photographic desire to them both) demonstrates the complexity of this issue in both text and world.

Jared's photographs of Benny adorn the walls of their former bedroom, a space that along with their crypt has become a shrine for Lucrece in which to worship memory. Situating the photographs in an economy of aestheticism and class-based decadence is not unimportant: Jared's "first big gallery show . . . snagged him a write-up in the *Village Voice* . . . [and] caught the attention of collectors as far away as Amsterdam and Berlin: people with money to spend on art" (Brite 1998, 19). Calling to mind Mapplethorpe or Attila Lukacs, Brite positions transgressive art in a representational space of cultural desire. But Jared's portraits are gender transitive rather than homoerotic. The ones Lucrece keeps on the wall are "of Benny in his latex and lace wedding gown, the corset underneath pulled so tight that Benny looks like an insect, so fragile, so easy to break" (18), a phrase pregnant with echoes of how he was bound and broken by the serial killer Jordan.

There are also pictures of Lucrece "in that show too, of her and Benny together, but she couldn't look at those anymore" (19). One assumes that in the melancholia of loss, Lucrece cannot bear to see her brother's form now that he is dead. Does this suggest a special kind of mourning? For

"Jared had posed them together, the twins as inverted mirrors, dressed in restraining costumes that recklessly, elegantly swapped their genders back and forth, that rendered them even more interchangeable than the work of their genes" (19). After this particular shoot Lucrece "was nauseous, dizzy, and less certain of her tenuous identity than she'd been in years. . . . Benny held her until the world bled slowly into focus again" (19). In the novel's present, Lucrece wants to destroy this past by burning it and herself along with it. She "knows she doesn't have the nerve, the strength to make that final gesture" (19), a phrase that works by analogy with her early accusation that Benny "never had the balls" (63) to go ahead with his sex change and, in so doing, links sex change with suicide. Yet this analogy is not to be trusted, for as Jared plainly sees during the scene of his initial seduction by the pair, the accusation and all the business surrounding it are carefully rehearsed plottings "perfected in privacy and practice" (62). Brite calls attention to their performative intentionality in her allusive yokings of literary, pop cultural, and sexually radical figures: initially in their "impeccably tailored leather and latex Victorian costumes, their skin as white as chalk and their hair like black satin" (52–53), Benny and Lucrece look to Jared "like some fetish freak's vision of Jonathan and Mina Harker, an unlikely juxtaposition of the prim and perverse" (53), and "dressed up like some William Gibson version of 1890s London" (56). Dracula, cyberpunk, s-m, and decadence brought into playful relation with one another: it is in this pastiche of literature, pop culture, and dangerous sex that Brite situates goth subjectivity as creative reading and predatory desire.

By way of intertextuality, performed identification and desire, and a de-territorialization of phallicism, *Lazarus Heart* and other Brite novels do the work of disrupting the usual gender norms scripted by either straight or gay writers of horror. In this respect I want to mark an affinity between what she does and what I imagined myself to be doing in a somewhat different arena. I am not making claims for exotic dancing as a necessarily liberatory practice, especially given the policing of boundaries mentioned above. However, some of the potential for transformative perversions in that scene is roughly analogous to what I see happening in fiction and self-representations such as Brite's. The common thread is a conjugation of sexuality, gender, and goth, an active and shifting conjugation that sometimes works well and sometimes does not, but which is in any case a minoritarian rebellion against monolithic culture, a perverse strategy of becoming-other.

Notes

1. Some would argue that *goth* ought to be capitalized, as is the convention in, for example, Spooner 2004, Baddeley 2002, Hannaham 1997, and Toth 1997. In

this essay I deliberately deploy the lowercase for *goth* in order to foreground its minoritarian potential, its potential to perform a strategic diminutive undoing of its own and other binarized narratives (including gay versus straight).

2. For a convincing account of this dynamic that deserves to be attempted with subcultures other than late 1970s Los Angeles punk, see Traber 2001, in which the term *sub-urban space* appears to denote exactly this trajectory.
3. Even in the theoretical writings of Deleuze and Guattari, for example, the place of minoritarian otherness is feminine—see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, chapter 10, on molar and molecular becomings-animal.
4. *T-bar* was local terminology for a male thong, analogous to the women's G-string of yesteryear or women's thongs today, except that they often had on one or both sides a clip that would allow them to be removed or partially removed in a much more attractive way than the awkward bend-and-slide most guys seem to use when removing any kind of undergarment. I call it "obligatory" for legal reasons—due to very old nudity laws in the city, the west side of the city's core could not show full nudity, whereas the east side could. We were located on the former side.
5. Perhaps even more radically, female goth subjectivity, with its emphasis on high femme self-representation, threatens hetero- and homonormativity when these women turn out to be dykes. Potentially, at least, goth cuts across gender in ways similar to S-M scenes.
6. Playfully obvious allusions to significant names from literature, music, or other arts are the norm in both Brite's fiction and goth subcultures in general. It seems a form of pastiche, flat and unspectacular, yet it does support the argument that gothicization operates after the fashion of a rhizome rather than a tree. Using "Poe" in a story about a raven is typical of Brite's ambivalent relation to irony in goth representation: at once earnest and self-mocking, Brite's working of conventions is often foregrounded in her character namings. See, for example, Nothing in *Lost Souls* (1992).



LAUREN M. E. GOODLAD

MEN IN BLACK

Androgyny and Ethics in *The Crow* and *Fight Club*



The subject of this essay is popular gothic narratives of masculinity as they have appeared in mainstream culture over the last fifteen years or so. Although such narratives often take their cue from goth subculture, the modes of masculinity they articulate resonate beyond the limits of a particular sub-cultural time and place. Indeed, such narratives, I will argue, have been germinating ever since the culture of the Enlightenment began to impose new and deeply gendered understandings of heterosexual coupling, reproductive difference, and ethical dividedness onto our experience of modernity.

Gothic narratives obsessively rehearse a male desire for completion, dramatized by a male experience of pain—a pattern I will elucidate in the gothic rock music of the Cure; in James O’Barr’s 1992 graphic novel *The Crow*; and, finally, in Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel *Fight Club*, and David Fincher’s 1999 film adaptation. Motivating these narratives is a desire for androgyny, a term that in recent feminist and queer theory has, to a large extent, been eclipsed by alternative concepts such as transgender, gender preference, and gender performativity. Although *androgyny* has various meanings, not all of which warrant recuperation, the term, I will argue, has the potential to speak to the ethical cast of post-Enlightenment gender and sexuality in ways that these postmodern substitutes do not. Gothic narratives thus suggest the importance of reevaluating this underused notion.

Postmodern feminist and queer theorists understandably seek to overturn a coercive regime of heteronormative and complementary gender roles. In many respects their aims resonate with Donna Haraway’s provocative 1985 “Manifesto for Cyborgs.” The cyborg, wrote Haraway, “is a creature in a post-gender world. . . . Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein’s

monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; i.e., through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole" (67). My point in citing Haraway is not to dismiss her powerful insight into postmodernity. But I do want to emphasize that the male subject of goth-influenced narratives is not a creature of a postgender world, but is, rather, precisely like Frankenstein's monster. That is, he remains deeply wedded to a prelapsarian dream of heterosexual completion, produced in the special gothic form of an incorporation of the absent feminine—a scenario that I call "Frankenstein's Lost Brides." Although these gothic narratives do indeed spring from an identifiable postmodernity—including the late-capitalist and transnational modes of production that have dramatically proliferated since Haraway's "Manifesto"—the particular gender dilemma they rehearse is one of demonstrably romantic provenance. For this reason, gothic narratives of masculinity serve to instruct theorists of gender, sexuality, and postmodern ethics to return to questions of androgyny in what remains a starkly gender-divided world.

A single glance at any men's or women's magazine illustrates today's relentless stress on sexual difference: the banal but ubiquitous logic of women from Venus and men from Mars.¹ Men, wrote a columnist in a 1995 issue of *Men's Journal*, "feel outclassed in the feelings department." Biology dictates that they fixate on "ball," "beer," and "wimmin," while the other sex cultivates "poetry," "higher thoughts," and "feelings" (Blount 1995, 31, 34). Since the mid-1990s, gendered scripts of this kind have rigidified and proliferated. Incommensurable sexual difference has become the common sense of advice discourse on romance and marriage; has been legitimated by popular theories of evolutionary psychology (see Herrnstein Smith 2000); and, most important of all, perhaps, has become integral to a lucrative economic strategy in which gendered products are marketed to gendered audiences, via gendered media—all trends that serve to enhance the impression that what gender is, nature itself has dictated.

Yet for all its connections to today's allegedly postfeminist and neoliberal consumer culture, the idea of incommensurable sexual difference derives from the eighteenth century, when, as Thomas Laqueur has shown, it provided the foundation of a new "natural" order.² Female nerves, argued one mid-Victorian physician, "are smaller," "more delicate," and "endowed with greater sensibility" than male nerves (qtd. in Poovey 1988, 213–14). Such accounts of women's physiology helped to situate them as the ideal domestic complements for men in the public sphere. Male sensibility, by contrast, was subordinated as nineteenth-century masculine nature was in-

creasingly defined in terms of rational faculties, competitive instinct, and heterosexual desire. This ideology of incommensurable *sexual* difference coincided with an ideology of incommensurable *ethical* difference. As Seyla Benhabib (1992) has shown, Enlightenment theorists inserted a rift between male and female domains, masculinizing a public world of civilization and culture and feminizing a private world of nurture and reproduction. As the sphere of justice, the public sphere “move[d] into historicity,” while the private sphere of care and intimacy was viewed as “unchanging and timeless” (Benhabib 1992, 157).³ Moral and political theorists thus came to presume a deep-seated incompatibility, predicated on gender, between ethical relations as conceived in *generalized* terms (involving a universalized abstraction of rational and rights-bearing individuals), and as conceived in *concrete* terms (involving a particularized understanding of individuals based on their life history, personal views, and emotional constitution). The effect of this split between “justice” and the “good life” was to relegate considerations of difference and particularity to the private sphere and, in so doing, to undervalue intimacy, nurture, and care.⁴

This problematic ethical divide was also internalized as a split *within* privileged male subjectivities. Thus, according to Benhabib, the bourgeois-liberal male has, since the eighteenth century, been “divided into the public person and the private individual.” Caught in the conflict between incompatible gendered spheres, the bourgeois masculine subject “strives for unity” (158). Like Frankenstein’s monster searching for his lost bride, he longs for a dialogue that cannot take place, not least because a crucial aspect of his ethical competence—his ability to recognize the other in his or her particularity—has been denigrated, privatized, and, to a large extent, foreclosed.

Post-Enlightenment gender and sexuality in this dominant form has been vital to capitalist development for more than two centuries. Yet it has also bred a profound “gender dysphoria”⁵—a history of masculinity and its discontents—even among those straight, middle-class white men whose social preeminence it has authorized. Almost since its inception, therefore, normative masculinity has provoked concerted resistance of a particular kind. In the nineteenth century, gothic, romantic, and aesthetic discourses reclaimed aspects of the feminine as a foundation for male alternatives. So far from subordinating male sense perception, Charles Baudelaire, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde enjoined their readers “to linger” wherever there is “an echo of poetry” or “a quiver of life” (Baudelaire qtd. in Foucault 1984a, 41); to “get as many pulsations as possible” (Pater 1980 [1868], 190); and to “spiritualize” their senses (Wilde 1985 [1890], 161).

Nietzsche's Zarathustra spoke of his "pregnant" wisdom and described the new creator androgynously, as both life-bearing mother and newborn child (1954 [1891], 85, 87). Implicit in the parturient *Überman* and the Baudelairean aesthete is a desirable linkage between androgynous physiology and creative power. Yet women themselves are relegated by Nietzsche to reproductive functions.⁶ Likewise, the Baudelairean aesthete is never a bona fide androgyne, or masculine woman, but always a man—a man who, by way of liberating himself from bourgeois constraints, reinvents himself through androgynous possibility. As art historian Griselda Pollock (1987) has argued, cults of aestheticism, from the Romantics to Cocteau, present art as a kind of parthenogenesis to be harnessed for men's empowerment. *Art* is androgynous, but the *artist* is presumptively male (Pollock 1987, 87–88).⁷

In the late 1970s a new incarnation of androgynous masculinity claimed to represent what Wilde called "the artistic temperament in our inartistic age" (1985 [1890], 12). A bricolage of the hyperromantic, goth youth culture culls freely from subcultural antecedents such as glam and punk; from the works of Gothic literati such as Ann Radcliffe, Baudelaire, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Bram Stoker; and from taboo sexual cultures including queer, porn, B-D/S-M, drag, and blood sports. Although youth of both sexes are drawn to the subculture, goth's most arresting stylistic signature is, arguably, the conspicuous display of androgynous masculinity.⁸ Male goths' appropriation of various feminine signs—for example, long or teased hair, makeup, flowy skirts, bridal costumes, jewelry—aims to enunciate a correspondingly feminized (which is to say, gothicized) interior: a realm of forbidden depth, antirationality, and sensitivity stolen from the feminine.⁹ Goth-influenced narratives—in fiction, pop music, film, and graphic novels—thus cultivate a feeling, crying man: a postmodern evocation of aesthete, dandy, and tragedian.

For all of these reasons, goth masculinity is in many respects an ideal subject for a postmodern theory of gender performativity. Like the drag artist or lipstick lesbian, the male goth is a figure who troubles gender, "enact[ing]," in Judith Butler's words, "the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed" (1991, 21; cf. 1990, 145). As inveterate cross-dressers, goth men may be seen to occupy the "third" position described by Marjorie Garber (1992, 11): not a third sex, or third term, but "a space of possibility" that opens once the contingency of gendered identities has been exposed (11). More than a quintessential performer, the goth male is also ideally suited to take up the aesthetic mantle proposed by Michel Foucault in his final works on an ethics of the self. "To be modern," writes Foucault in an affirmative echo of Baudelaire, "is not to accept oneself as one is," but to practice a positive *dandysme*—"to take oneself as an object of

a complex and difficult elaboration" by turning one's body, feelings, and very existence into a "work of art" (1984a, 41–42). To be modern, one might argue with such thought in mind, is to be goth.

Yet these ways of reading goth masculinity are the ones I want, at the very least, to complicate. The problem is not only that goth's transgender moves, like many nineteenth-century precursors, are almost wholly centered on male performance. It is also that goth-influenced narratives of male subject constitution, with their fixation on loss and pain, cannot be fully grasped by an ontologically deficient postmodern theory of gender and an ethics of gender pluralism. Think of Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), a goth-inspired fable in which the artist-hero is, Frankenstein-like, driven out of the suburb, to mourn his lost love in creative isolation. Think of "Just Like Heaven," the 1987 video by the gothic rock band the Cure, in which a male speaker dances with a transparent bride. Although this evanescent beloved promises to "run away" with him, the speaker wakes to find that she has been "stolen" and—significantly—"drowned . . . deep inside of [him]." Hence, like *Edward Scissorhands*, the speaker is left, to quote another Cure lyric, "looking for something forever gone / but something [he] will always want" (1992).

Indeed, Cure lyrics provide a valuable key to exploring goth's subject-constituting narratives. On "Untitled," the final track off the band's brooding 1989 *Disintegration* album, the speaker laments: "I'll never lose this pain, never dream of you again." Notice that while the ostensible object of the speaker's yearning is irrevocably lost—" [I'll] never dream of you again"—what is found and concretized is the speaker's indelible "pain." In the next stanza, as though to enact an extravagantly romantic and anti-postmodern moment of possession, a "hungry" monster—"the devil futility"—"climb[s] deeper inside of" the speaker to vampirically "gnaw [his] heart away" (1989). In so doing, this pain monster achieves what the implicitly female object of the speaker's heterosexual desire has never done. Whereas she has disappeared, the gothic monster has filled—if not fulfilled—the desire for presence. Although the speaker can no longer even dream himself as the subject of romantic completion with a female counterpart, he is, nevertheless, unalterably and incurably fixed as the man who feels and cries. Pain has become the credential of his artistic parthenogenesis, his subject-constituting androgyny, and, therefore, of his masculine self-determination.¹⁰ But—and here is a crucial question for my analysis—can a theatrics of male suffering sustain such self-fashioning when pain is asked to compensate not only for proscribed male feeling, but also for that responsibility to otherness which has been split off from masculine ethics and ascribed to a feminized ethic of care?

In what follows I explore this question by contrasting a comparable goth narrative of masculinity—James O’Barr’s 1989 comic book series, *The Crow*—to a “postgoth” alternative, Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel, *Fight Club*, and David Fincher’s 1999 film adaptation. The context for such comparison is the mid-1990s shift away from the goth-influenced masculinity that flourished in late 1980s and early 1990s youth culture and toward the comparatively hardcore masculinity that still dominates today. The stakes of this shift, as I have elsewhere argued (Goodlad 2003), are not insignificant. Although the androgynous style and theatrics encouraged by goth-influenced youth culture are subject to the limitations of a male-centered aesthetics, such “alternative” commercial media nonetheless facilitated female co-participation, tolerated nonheterosexist and antibinarizing notions of gender and sexuality, and promoted progressive political causes of various kinds.

The goth-influenced narratives of the late 1980s and early 1990s thus foregrounded cross-gender styles and androgynous themes that are rarely pronounced in postgoth counterparts. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1996, 74) notes, “different historical moments” give rise to differing fantasies of masculinity. And yet, though goth and postgoth variations on masculinity offer many important contrasts, the point of the present analysis is that both kinds of narrative spectacularize male pain and—in so doing—both articulate a desire for androgyny that neither fulfills. In this way, both goth and postgoth narratives expose the tenuousness of any mode of androgyny that is imagined as a voluntary appropriation of feminized traits.¹¹ Clearly, notions of androgyny as an *ur-gender*, a duality of male and female, or a transcendent form of male identity are neither useful nor sustainable. Nonetheless, what do we make of the recurrent male desire for feminized feeling that gothic narratives of masculinity articulate—a desire rooted in a post-Enlightenment history of ethical impoverishment? With their tendency to embrace pluralistic understandings of gender and self-heroizing modes of expression, today’s queer and feminist theories do not lend themselves to answering or even posing such questions. The readings of *The Crow* and *Fight Club* that follow thus aim to elucidate the potential importance of conceptualizing androgyny, which may as yet have a useful part to play in theorizing gender and ethics at the turn of the millennium.

**“We do not recognize our souls until they are in pain”:
Blood and Tears in *The Crow***

First serialized in 1989, James O’Barr’s *The Crow* was republished as a graphic novel in 1992 and dramatized on film in 1994. O’Barr’s text borrows lyrics

and other tropes from the Cure, as well as many other gothic icons. In the film, a Cure song accompanies the scene in which the resurrected hero, Eric, applies cosmetics to complete his goth stylization. Yet there are also important differences between O'Barr's and the Cure's variations on the man who feels and cries. The loss and pain that, in the Cure's music, derive from communicative failure are, in *The Crow*, tied to atrocity. The human Eric was the victim of an appalling tragedy: his fiancée Shelly was brutally raped and murdered by a gang of drug-crazed thugs while he—helpless and half-dead—lay watching. This traumatic experience becomes the catalyst for his gothic transformation into a visibly androgynous, but deeply split, figure of the undead. Through the mediation of a supernatural crow, Eric rises from the grave to avenge and mourn his loss. Blood and tears signify the effluence of agonized feeling; yet, although both are exuded by the same body in pain, blood is the fluid of “masculine” vengeance, while tears bespeak “feminine” mourning.

Significantly, Eric's ostensible androgyny is constructed in opposition to the complementary gender roles of normative love. Obsessively flashing back to life before the atrocity, the undead Eric cherishes a romantic ideal that is conventional in the extreme. Shelly is a soft, blonde, and decidedly ungothic female: eager for marriage and family, moved to tears by *It's a Wonderful Life*, and dependent on Eric for protection. The Eric of the past is her strong, handsome, and handy fiancé, complete with toolbox. Shelly and Eric renovate a Victorian house, while he teases her about marriage only to surprise her with an engagement ring (figs. 1 and 2). In one flashback, Shelly says, “Eric, I feel so safe when I'm with you,” and Eric promises “never [to] let anything happen to” her.¹² Yet this telling remembrance is narrated just *after* the graphic depiction of Shelly's being beaten, repeatedly raped, shot in the head, and then raped again while dead—all of which occurred while the mortally wounded Eric looked on helplessly.

What is disturbingly clear, though, is that the traumatic obliteration of this romantic pairing, the loss of this perfect bride, has been all but inevitable. The multiple significations of the Crow—the Poe-like bird who enjoins Eric to forget the past, Eric's own undead persona, and the narrative as a whole—all depend on it. The very banality of Eric's relationship with Shelly—“so beautiful,” “so sweet and kind,” “so soft and innocent”—betrays an ideological construction fraught with instability. During one recollection of the atrocity, Eric “can not remember why” he failed to help his “sobbing” beloved. Such episodes suggest that Shelly, for all her hallowed perfection, is like the elusive woman in many Cure songs: a feminine simulacrum; a bride always already lost. The mocking crow amplifies this



Fig. 1: Eric and Shelly, from James O'Barr's *The Crow*



Fig. 2: Eric and Shelly, *The Crow*

effect, urging Eric not to “look” back at the violence, to “break . . . off” his compulsive mourning, all the while spurring further painful remembrance.

Here, as in so many gothic narratives, feeling is itself the ultimate object of male desire. Pain accommodates male will-to-feeling because it can be produced on the surface of the body and, at the same time, inscribed within the body, as intense subjectivity. Whether it is the futile yearning of the Cure’s speaker, the violent physical pain of Eric’s vengeful masculine persona, or the emotional pain of his feminized mourning, pain is the paradoxical hinge of male identity. As depicted in gothic narratives, feeling as pain is at once excruciating, excruciatingly desirable, and excruciatingly absent. In *The Crow* this paradox is emblemized by morphine (fig. 3)—the drug to which Funboy, the most sympathetic of the vicious gang wiped out by Eric, is addicted. Before forcing Funboy to overdose, Eric injects an entire cubic centimeter of morphine directly into his own heart. When Funboy exclaims, Eric replies, “We do not recognize our *souls* until they are in *pain*.” As in the Cure’s lyrics, pain is thus posited as the antidote to the existential emptiness left in the wake of failed heterosexual coupling. Ironically, however, morphine is a painkiller—productive of insensibility. Hence, when Eric plunges two hypodermic needles full of morphine into his breast, he reifies—by way of nullifying—the pain upon which his identity depends.

Androgyny is both the sign and the desired effect of this subject-constituting pain. The androgynous man who feels and cries was stifled by the gender conventions that made Shelly’s and Eric’s union so ostensibly perfect. Tears in particular, and pain more generally, were, in the paradisiacal world before atrocity, the special province of soft, vulnerable women like Shelly, not the strong men who idealize and protect them. O’Barr’s narrative resists this constraint on male feeling by annihilating—and deifying—women (figs. 4 and 5). Just as the transparent bride of the “Just Like Heaven” video materially disappears, so Eric’s fiancée becomes a lost angel and bride of death. Moreover, like the bride of the song—“drowned deep inside of” the male speaker—Shelly’s femininity is reincorporated in Eric’s androgynous gothic persona.

In *The Crow*, however, the androgynous body is, at least superficially, dissevered: the incommensurability of its masculine and feminine components graphically expressed in Eric’s polymorphous incarnations. While the masculine Eric is a hypermuscular, sometimes monstrous killing-and-bleeding machine, wreaking merciless vengeance with Rambo-like efficiency (fig. 6), the feminine Eric, crying for his lost love, is soft and pretty (fig. 7). What is interesting, however, is the degree to which the masculine Eric is himself androgynous. Although the body of the killing machine is

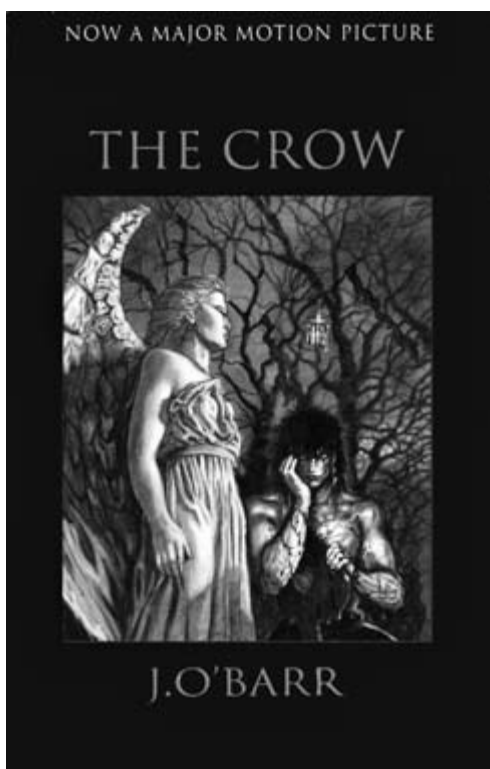


Fig. 5: Lost Angel,
The Crow



Fig. 6: Masculine Eric, *The Crow*



Fig. 7: Feminine Eric,
The Crow



Fig. 8: Eric swoons,
The Crow

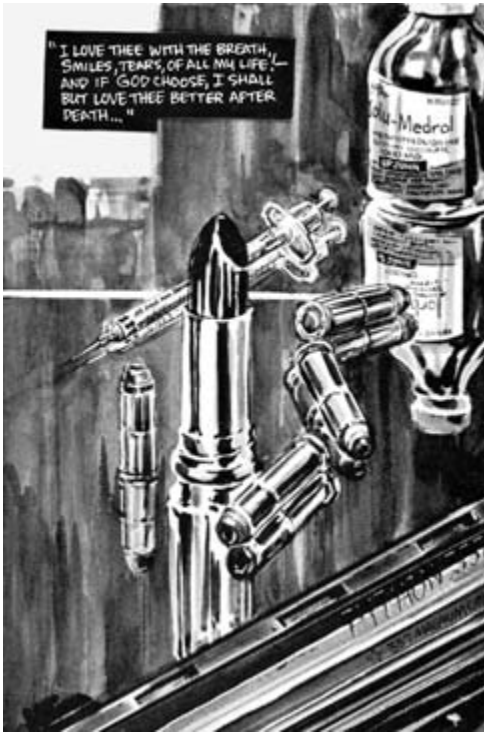


Fig. 9: Painlessness as pain,
The Crow

recognizably macho, the repeated, self-inflicted, and explicitly Christ-like mortification and penetration of Eric's flesh—the spectacularization of his wounds, his sentience, and his pain—blur the distinction between masculinized blood and feminized tears. In one particularly telling sequence of images (fig. 8), a flashback of the kissing lovers is followed by the loading of a gun: in the final image Eric—his muscular body scarred and penetrated by bullets—nearly swoons in an ecstasy of pain. In a sense, this is Eric's most purely androgynous moment: the apotheosis of his desire to fill and be filled; to be soft and invulnerable; to kill and to love; to conquer and to submit; to be and to feel. In a complementary image (fig. 9), lines from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poignant Sonnet 43—"and if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death"—are ironically epitomized by a hypodermic needle and a bottle of morphine, the butt of a gun and an array of bullets, and, in the center, an open tube of lipstick. The ostensible referents of these signifiers—painlessness as pain, violent death as penetration, androgyny as masquerade—are interchangeable; endlessly deconstructed and reconstructed by the romantic dream (never realized, but never relinquished) of transcending gender, death, and psychological emptiness.

In the final graphic sequence of *The Crow*, Eric returns to the cemetery

where his and Shelly's tombstones lie beside one another. Eric and Shelly kiss, only she is now, for the first time, visually marked as dead: dark-haired and dark-clad. Presumably Eric has joined Shelly at last, in death or eternity. But in the closing image an androgynous gothic figure walks off onto a dark and barren plain. He is very much alone.

Men in Black: Postgoth Masculinity in *Fight Club*

It is significant, perhaps, that the 1994 movie version of *The Crow*, for all its acclaimed goth aesthetic, focused on Eric's violent revenge, not his self-mortifying pain.¹³ Two years later, Chuck Palahniuk published a cult novel that signaled the dawn of a discernibly "postgoth" phase in gothic narratives of masculinity. Such narratives are gothic because they continue to figure an identifiably gothic style and counterculture, but they are also postgoth because the masculine persona they privilege is normatively, even excessively hard, and, as a result, only obliquely androgynous. Rather than feeling, crying men, the males of these narratives are embattled but tearless; rather than goths per se, they are men in black—men whose dark-clad style bespeaks a quest for self-determining power without obvious recourse to androgyny. Yet what most closely ties these postgoth men in black to their feeling, crying precursors—what gives the lie to their indifference to androgynous possibility—is their common relation to pain. By 1999, the year that Palahniuk's novel became the movie *Fight Club*, mainstream youth culture had drifted far away from goth's androgynous male style and toward a hardcore alternative in which pain—grueling, physical pain—offers the only viable medium of subject-constituting male feeling.¹⁴

Palahniuk's tale of two Tyler Durdens, dramatized onscreen by actors Ed Norton and Brad Pitt, is perhaps the most intriguing case of split personality since *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Both book and movie are narrated by an unnamed corporate minion (Norton's role) whose triangular relations with a rebellious male foil (Pitt's role) and a young woman named Marla (portrayed in gothlike fashion by Helena Bonham Carter) create the framework for the story. Only near the end do we learn that Tyler Durden, the subversive anarchist who launches Fight Club and becomes Marla's lover, is the narrator's own split-off personality. Hence, *Fight Club* offers a postgoth variation on *The Crow*, with each Tyler representing a different mode of masculinity, while the split itself dramatizes the ongoing quest for androgyny in some form.

When we first meet the narrator he is the emblem of soulless yuppie-dom: a low-ranking corporate cog who lives alone in an airtight condo, priding himself on IKEA decor. Corporate living is seen to entail an anes-

thetizing emasculation; a slow death-in-life that the narrator sardonically equates to effeminacy. Hence, *Fight Club*, a male counterculture centered on brutal fisticuffs, offers salvation to a world of disaffected sons abandoned by disaffected fathers—"a generation of men raised by women" (Palahniuk 1999 [1996], 50).¹⁵ But there is more than misogyny to Palahniuk's multi-layered critique of turn-of-the-millennium masculinity. Alongside disdain of marriage and mothering, there is working-class resentment directed against the male elite; there is anticorporate rebelliousness directed at the larger system; there is resistance to middle-class culture with its feminizing bent toward therapy, domestic consumption, and "PC" social movements; and there is also a more classically antibourgeois critique of materialism.¹⁶

In a representative passage, the narrator contrasts his newly adopted *Fight Club* persona to one "Walter from Microsoft":

Here's a young guy with perfect teeth and clear skin and the kind of job you bother to write the alumni magazine about getting. You know he was too young to fight in any wars, and if his parents weren't divorced, his father was never home, and here he's looking at me with half my face clean shaved and half a leering bruise hidden in the dark. Blood shining on my lips. And maybe Walter's thinking about a meatless, pain-free potluck he went to last weekend or the ozone or the Earth's desperate need to stop cruel product testing on animals, but probably he's not. (55)

A certain hesitancy notwithstanding ("but probably he's not"), Walter epitomizes everything that induces men's recourse to *Fight Club*. Late-twentieth-century consumer culture has deprived men of the chance to prove themselves on the battlefield, even as its demands on male labor have robbed them of paternal bonds.¹⁷ Worse still, the same culture subjects them to an emasculating discipline. This is not the desirable androgynous sensibility coveted by goths and aesthetes. Rather, this despised femininity—with its environmentalist concerns and sympathy for animals—recalls the other-directed ethic of care that feminists such as Benhabib have contrasted to the Enlightenment's masculinism.¹⁸ That said, there are clear links between the self-heroizing *Fight Club* member and his androgynous precursors. Although *Fight Club* is about redemption, not "looking good," six months in the subculture turns a man from "a loaf of white bread," into "carved . . . wood" (51). Pitting his bruises against Walter's "perfect teeth," the narrator brandishes his blood like the dandy of yore. While men like Walter languish in bondage to corporate bosses and "pain-free potluck[s]," *Fight Club* invites them to repudiate such a slave mentality and claim the "power [men] still have" (120)—the power, that is, to exchange effete "self-improvement"

for heroic “self-destruction” (49). This is the same voluntaristic power that enabled O’Barr’s Eric to turn pain into heroizing transcendence.

Nor is *Fight Club* absent its own variation on the man who feels and cries—though one purposely distinguished from the Frankenstein monster’s desire for heterosexual completion. Before his split into Tyler, the narrator found refuge in what we might see as the fetishized manifestation of a suppressed ethic of care: the subcultural world of therapeutic support groups. Posing as a victim of brain parasites or tuberculosis, he experienced mutual recognition within a close community of the sick and dying. Significantly, though, it was at Remaining Men Together, a support group for castrated survivors of testicular cancer, that he was able to cry. This special bond was made with Big Bob, an ex-body builder who, due to hormonal imbalance, possesses “bitch tits” (17): “new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God’s as big” (16).

In the Cure’s and O’Barr’s gothic narratives, romantic completion was endlessly deferred by the bride’s unattainability, with painful loss itself becoming the substitute. Male feminization was thus depicted as an isolated experience of emotional intensity—stoked by desire for an absent other, but never enacted as an experience of concrete otherness. *Fight Club*’s narrator thus experiences a blissful plenitude in Big Bob’s embrace that the goth heroes only yearn for: “Bob was closing in around me with his arms, and his head was folding down to cover me. Then I was lost inside oblivion, dark and silent and complete, and when I finally stepped away from his soft chest, the front of Bob’s shirt was a wet mask of how I looked crying. . . . This was freedom” (22; cf. figure 10).

With such passages in mind, one might argue that Palahniuk has not so much rejected the myth of romantic completion as shifted its parameters from heterosexual to same-sex bonds. Significantly, *Fight Club*’s prolific but “impersonal” male relations are explicitly presented as a substitute for deficient paternal bonds (54): a sign of the postgoth shift from mourning lost brides to mourning lost fathers. Certainly, in the wake of the movie’s success, fight club subcultures have sprung up in gay as well as straight male communities. Any reading of *Fight Club* that ignores its plea for homosocial intimacy, even homosexual love, would be shortsighted in the extreme.

Yet it is also important to recognize that Marla’s sudden appearance is what destroys the bond with Bob, triggering the split into Tyler Durden, and the shift from the support groups’ ethic of care to *Fight Club*’s Nietzschean self-heroization. At the start of the novel the narrator makes clear that the disturbing concluding events “[are] really about Marla Singer.” “I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me” (14). In one reading of this



Fig. 10: Scene from *Fight Club* (1999), directed by David Fincher.

triangle, the narrator's attraction to Marla threatens his misogynistic disdain for heterosexual marriage and the loss of male friendships to which he connects it (62). In another, the narrator longs for queer intimacy, which is inhibited by Tyler's heteronormative desire for Marla. Yet, since Tyler and the narrator are actually the same person, there is also a more Foucauldian level of meaning. Here the narrator's desire for Tyler speaks to the conditions for self-heroization: the self's relation to the self. For "modernity," writes Foucault, "does not 'liberate man in his own being,'" but rather "compels him"—much as Palahniuk's narrator is compelled—"to face the task of producing himself" (1984a, 42).

Whichever of these readings we prefer, Marla is always situated as interloper: a lone female figure in a male landscape; a figure whose overarching sexual alterity means, to the narrator, that "there's no way she can be my friend" (66).¹⁹ It is from Marla's perspective, therefore, that we can recognize Big Bob's castrated and tit-endowed body as pointing beyond the disabling antinomies of post-Enlightenment sex/gender. More than a feminized man, Bob is neither a voluntary gender troubler, like a goth or drag artist, nor an androgyne pure and simple. Rather, Bob might recall us to Freud's theory of fetishism (Freud 1927). The fetish object, Freud insists,

does not symbolize the fetishist's own phallus, but the phallus that his or her mother never had. This maternal phallus is uniquely powerful since unlike one's own phallus—which can always be lost—one's mother's phallus allows one to disavow the root difference that constituted the very possibility of loss (Freud 1927; cf. Grosz 1995). In Lacanian terms, Big Bob is thus identifiable as a variation on the phallic mother: what Tim Dean describes as a "position of plenitude, beyond division."²⁰ Paradoxically, then, as a castrato with "bitch tits," Big Bob is not just a transgender figure, but *the particular* transgender figure who, from the narrator's perspective, negates sexual difference entirely, enabling a rare experience of "freedom" beyond normative constraints. Marla's appearance, then, triggers the split into Tyler, a figure whose übermasculinity makes heterosexual relations with Marla tolerable. But gone with that split is the novel's most visionary response to masculine discontent: a vision in which Big Bob and the narrator paradoxically "remain men together" by facing down difference as androgynous subjects, "beyond division," across an intersubjective ethic of care—a point to which I will return.

Brutally self-destructive though it is, the spread of the Fight Club subculture provides a temporary stasis. Simply put, it allows men to "remain men together" by beating the shit out of each other, resolving the problem of their empty bourgeois lives, and enabling Tyler and Marla to have great sex. This fantasy of Fight Club as a permanent subcultural refuge from masculine discontent is, of course, deeply ironic (though it is perhaps not surprising that the irony is lost on the frat boys and gay men now beating the shit out of each other in real-life fight clubs across the land).²¹

Significantly, the novel's ugly turn, from black comedy to disturbing allegory, is triggered by another encounter with a gender-ambiguous man. "Put him in a dress," the narrator says of this "angel-faced" novice, "and he'd be a woman" (128, 123). His response is a sudden impulse "to destroy something beautiful" (123): to disfigure the newcomer's feminine visage. This unsettling turn toward destroying the other—as opposed to the emancipatory *self*-destruction that has hitherto characterized Fight Club—leads Tyler to "take [it] up a notch" (123). Within hours of the narrator's brutal assault on the feminine newcomer, Tyler (as though envious of the new relationship) invents Project Mayhem. In this militarized, fascistic spin-off from Fight Club, Tyler recruits cadres of black-clad disciples to join him in a Nietzschean effort "to blast the world free of history" (124), to raze civilization and begin anew. As the narrator looks on helplessly, Fight Club's self-heroization lapses into demagoguery and mass hero worship. By the time he realizes that he *is* Tyler Durden—responsible for murder, arson,

and a plan to blow up at least one major skyscraper—the narrator is unable to deter his fanatic followers, although he is nearly castrated and beaten to death as he tries. Significantly, it is also at this point, for the first time since Big Bob's embrace, that he cries.

Here is where book and movie diverge to offer two different conclusions to this disquieting postgoth narrative. In both cases the narrator "kills" Tyler through a kind of botched suicide. But in the movie, the narrator joins hands with Marla as a nearby skyscraper goes down and music from the gothic-punk band the Pixies plays in the background. Presumably anarchy has worked on some symbolic level. Although there is no certainty of a new civilization's dawning, what is clear is that, thanks to apocalypse, Frankenstein's monster has at long last found his bride. This romantic conclusion—with the happy couple suitably dressed in black—is doubtless of great appeal to fans of gothic youth culture. In the book, by contrast, there is more emphasis on Marla's companions, the support group members who have risked their lives to help her save the narrator. "All the bowel cancers, the brain parasites, the melanoma people, the tuberculosis people are walking, limping, wheelchairing toward me," chanting, "Let us help you" (204). Despite Marla's overtures, there is no bonding moment between her and the narrator. Instead the narrator ends up in an asylum where he refers to his male psychologist as God—as though having found his lost father at last. Although Marla writes to him, and awaits his return, he does not want to go back just yet. For every once in a while an orderly with a black eye says, "We miss you Mr. Durden"; or another "with a broken nose" whispers, "We look forward to getting you back" (208). *Fight Club* goes on, in other words, offering powerless men transcendence through self-destructive pain.

Androgyny and Ethics at the Turn of the Millennium

In this essay I have argued for a telling likeness between two kinds of gothic narrative. The conspicuously androgynous goth narratives of the 1980s and early 1990s delighted in figuring straight, male heroes who, in a pleasurable paradox of sorts, feminized themselves through painful mourning for their lost brides. In postgoth narratives such as *Fight Club*, an unacknowledged desire for the feminine is articulated more obliquely, through hypermasculine self-destruction. Both kinds of protagonist are ardent gender performers, practicing an intense "aesthetics of existence" predicated on a Nietzschean/Baudelairean "will to 'heroize' the present" (Foucault, 1984a, 40). Goth era and postgoth narratives of masculinity thus illustrate how Foucault's ethics of the self and Butler's theory of gender performativity are subject to the same dilemma. Both theorists enthusiastically endow

postmodern subjects with a potential for liberatory self-invention. Yet in thus exhorting individual performative breaks from the norm, both theorists evade crucial questions of social situatedness and ethical competence. Hence, neither theory can predict whether the emancipatory gender outlaw or self-inventing hero will be a lipstick lesbian, a masculinist athlete, a lachrymose goth, or—more ominously—an übermasculine fascist bent on nihilistic fantasies of destruction.

Recent critiques have begun to question the ontological coherence and political efficacy of the human subject theorized as either voluntary performer or self-heroizing aesthete. Thus, Pierre Bourdieu (2001) has argued that a resistance reduced to “individual acts” “expect[s] too much for the meager and uncertain results” it is likely to obtain (viii). Indeed, Bourdieu’s crucial concept of the *habitus*—which invites a rigorously historicized and material account of the situated human subject, encapsulates precisely what many critics find lacking in Butler’s theory of gender performativity.²² These include Joseph Valente and Molly Anne Rothenberg (1997) on the dearth of social context (289), Michael Warner (1999) on the metaphysical presumption of an otherwise unexplained queer resistance (155–7), Toril Moi (1999) on the resort to “theoreticism” (59), Jay Prosser (1999) on the dematerialization of the body (21–60), and Amanda Anderson (1998) on the “evasion of normative explicitness” (3). Indeed, Prosser’s “fleshy” focus invites us to read the gender dysphoria depicted in *Fight Club* as a kind of derailed transsexual experience: Palahniuk’s narrator rebels against his male anatomy first by identifying with Big Bob’s “beyond sex” alternative, and eventually by pulverizing his flesh one gruesome fight at a time.²³

It is also true that, for all their antiessentialism, Butler and Foucault remain curiously caught up in the same romantic dilemma that dooms Frankenstein’s monster to yearn for completion. The Enlightenment valorized the classical ideal of man as public citizen, while liberals such as Hegel theorized a more sociable man who thrived in civil society. Still other strains of romanticism asserted more privatistic notions of masculine individuality. For many romantics, “self-development, self-expression, and artistic creation” were predicated on a radical detachment “from mundane existence” (Rosenblum 1987, 69; cf. Kymlicka 1990, 258). Romanticism of this kind constructed a monadic subject whose privileged selfhood was constituted in opposition to society. Of course, Foucault and Butler do not explicitly posit a prediscursive authenticity; rather, Foucault follows the radical romantic moves of Baudelaire and Nietzsche, asserting private self-invention, whereas Butler proposes “disidentification” with “regulatory norms” (1993, 4). Still, by presuming that such resistant capacities are

somehow latent and ready to mobilize, both Foucault and Butler seem tacitly to depend on the prior existence of what Anthony Appiah (1994) calls an "authentic nugget of selfhood," which, like "the notion that I can simply make up any self I choose," fails to account for the social situations in which identities, resistant or otherwise, are formed (155).²⁴ For Appiah, selves are dialogically constituted through culture, social institutions, and relations with others. Although we "do make choices," Appiah writes in an echo of Karl Marx, "we do not determine the options among which we choose" (155).²⁵ Appiah thus asserts the same stress on "social conditions of possibility" that underwrites Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* and a materialist feminism such as Moi's (Bourdieu 2001, 9).

Stripped of such social embedding, the self-heroizing monad is ontologically deficient. What psychic resources, asks Benhabib (1992, 218), account for the resistant will that Butler describes? What kind of political agency, asks Tim Dean (2000, 71–72), can be exercised by subjects constituted in terms of the "imitative generation of reality effects"? For resistance to become politically effective, argues Michael Warner, "it has to find some articulacy, some scene of action, and some normative force of its own." Yet, in Butler's formulation, individual resistance is theorized as both the effect of and the antidote to the subjectivizing effects of a dehistoricized "power" (Warner 1999, 155).²⁶

The theory of gender performativity that provokes such questions is the same theory that authorizes *gender pluralism* as a progressive ethical and political strategy. Pluralism is the predictable response of any position that, like Butler's, construes the affirmation of two sexes—male and female—as entailing the metaphysical grounding of, and thus a capitulation to, biological determinism, gender binarism, and heterosexist oppression. Pluralism also provides an answer to the exclusion that is seen invariably to attend the constitution of subjects through "identification with the normative phantasm of 'sex'" (1993, 3). Of course, no one who supports tolerance, diversity, and sexual dissidence will wish to dissent from a politics enjoining preference. Yet, as the cited critiques suggest, the project of gender pluralism is not in itself adequate to describe the democratizing effects toward which it aspires.

More than a decade ago, Warner cautioned cultural critics against an "expressivist pluralism" that would fetishize difference for its own sake, aspiring to a "representational politics of inclusion and a drama of authentic embodiment." In such a politics, "marginal styles of embodiment" would take on a "hyper-allegorized form" in which their presumptive representation of "'race' or 'gender' or 'sexuality'" would be taken to signify

"inclusion and authenticity" (Warner 1993, xix). It is to counter such unabated expressivist tendencies that I urge the rethinking of androgyny as an ethical category. For such a notion of androgyny could, I believe, help to elucidate the ethical impoverishment of certain genders and to distinguish between mere representational politics and a substantive commitment to justice and care.

In her very smart book *Female Masculinity* (1998), Judith Halberstam provides an interesting example of how pluralist urges have come to underwrite some of the most provocative work in feminist and queer theory. Notably, Halberstam begins by rejecting the limitations of a prior conception of gender pluralism, Garber's notion of the third. As Halberstam sees it, "thirdness" merely balances the binary system, while "homogeniz[ing] many different gender[s] . . . under the banner of 'other'" (28). Instead, Halberstam seeks both to "make masculinity safe for women and girls" and to eradicate binarism completely: "to make gender optional," to cultivate "gender preference," "to account for the multiple genders that we already produce and sustain" (268, 27). This commendably ambitious program involves several unaddressed tensions. For one thing, the mission "to make masculinity safe for women and girls" contradicts the vision of infinitely variable genders.²⁷ The first begs the question of how masculinity can be made safe for women and girls when it is by no means clear that it has ever been safe for men and boys. The second project returns us to gender pluralism, the utopian potential of which Halberstam, like many others, tends to assume rather than elucidate.

Why theorize female masculinity as a multiplicity of genders rather than as a flexible form of androgynous self-fashioning? To be sure, when androgyny is understood as a normative gender—an obligatory synthesis of male and female identities—it risks further reifying a binary structure that is already too obdurate.²⁸ Yet it is worth noting that in Gayle Rubin's (1975) seminal feminist account, androgyny is not figured as a prescribed mixture of the masculine and feminine, but as the entire absence of gender. An androgynous society, writes Rubin, is "genderless (though not sexless)," for in it "one's sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love" (204).²⁹ For Rubin, androgyny is what is left when sex is stripped of its power to ascribe gender and when, as a result, gender withers away. By contrast, the project of gender pluralism is less concerned to discount gender than to eradicate the starting point of sex. Thus, for Halberstam, the recognition of "multiple genders" may at long last expose the "failure of 'male' and 'female' to exhaust the field of gender variation" (1998, 27). In Rubin, the delinking of sex and gender is seen

to render sex innocuous while consigning gender to the dustbin of history. In Halberstam, gender is harnessed—one might say reified—so that it may batter the dualism of sex with its freewheeling multiplicity. Ironically, then, whereas Rubin is ready to bid adieu to masculinity, Halberstam embraces it believing that, through its multifarious appropriations by queer women, masculinity can become the kind of gender to end males (and females) as we know them.

But what is the evidence for such belief? From the vantage of Warner's analysis one may note a curious likeness between Halberstam's expressivist utopia—"a system of gender preferences [that] would allow for gender neutrality until such a time [as a person] announces his or her or its gender" (Halberstam 1998, 27)—and the myth of the free market under neoliberalism. Both assume a neutral context that purports to allow individuals to exercise unfettered choices, and, in so doing, both tacitly subtend some variation on the romantic faith in the "authentic nugget" that presumably directs such choices. Yet, as Bourdieu, Moi, and Appiah want to remind us, the choices we make are limited by the options we find in our particular situations. The all too obvious fact is that female reproductive functions continue profoundly to delimit the choices of many (perhaps most) women.³⁰ Then too, under the reigning neoliberal governmentality, as Warner has demonstrated, choice tends to go hand in hand with intense normalization. In a world in which the corporate-backed powers that be promote a sanitized public sphere, alternative identities cannot be sustained by privatized choice alone. Rather, such identities require "the circulation and accessibility" of repressed knowledges, and "the public elaboration of a social world that can make less alienated relations possible" (Warner 1991, 171; cf. Warner 2002).

To be sure, Halberstam's claim that women's constitutive contributions to masculinity have been erased is a crucial one. Yet in redressing this historical lacuna she stresses the importance of pluralism: "What we recognize as female masculinity is actually a multiplicity of masculinities, indeed a proliferation of masculinities, and the more we identify the various forms of female masculinity, the more they multiply" (1998, 46). Such a claim is, of course, undeniable (by the same token, there are, doubtless, many gothic masculinities, female as well as male, beyond those described in this essay). Yet it is one thing to attend multiplicity in order to expose the contingent features of gender, and another to imply that the sheer multiplicity of a particular gender formation—in this case female masculinity—imbues its appropriation with a radicalizing potential. The danger of having it both ways, as I think Halberstam wants to do, is that one need then never bring

“masculinity” to book. Hence, while “the unholy union of femaleness and masculinity” can indeed “produce wildly unpredictable results,” many of them compelling, it remains the case that “masculinity” has functioned historically as a means to authorizing ethical and emotional impoverishment (46).³¹ Likewise, though “femininity” has never reliably warranted relations of care or attention to otherness, it has reliably exempted “masculine” subjects from burdening themselves with such concerns.

Of course, a world made safe for bull dykes, drag queens, goths, dandies, and other transgenders cannot but be preferable to one that represses the aesthetics of existence. At its best, pluralism is the product of a society that is committed to an ethic of tolerance, but it is not in itself a basis on which to promote such tolerance or, indeed, to promote any other ethical commitment that might underpin democratic social relations. In the absence of the transformative conditions specified by Warner, what—outside of some myth of the invisible hand—assures us that *more* genders will necessarily provide us with *better* genders? Is it not, after all, possible that a new proliferation of female masculinities might trigger an ever greater surge of hypermasculine cult identities among men? How can we be certain that stylistically performed gender preferences will liberate us? That their subversive effects will induce the kind of political culture that critics want but do not always specify? By contrast, a rethinking of androgyny invites us to visualize a positive ethical agency that gender pluralism, with its implicitly negative (neoliberal) conception of freedom, does not.

Whereas the theory of gender performativity has thus tended to promote pluralism, Foucault’s ethics of the self has exerted a somewhat different influence. The notion of self-aestheticization as a means of resistance is profoundly appealing, but without a rigorous account of gender (and other social situations), such a theory tends to reproduce the “substitutionalism” common to Western philosophy.³² Thus, the self-inventing subject does not pluralize gender but, rather, affects to transcend it in much the same way as did many nineteenth-century precursors. That the unencumbered *dandysme* Foucault valorizes is beyond the reach of many people suggests, at the very least, that ethical self-fashioning must be buttressed by commitment to substantive equality across lines of gender, race, and class. When Foucault proposes that “everyone’s life become a work of art,” he envisions a radical democratization of aesthetics (1984a, 350–51), yet his focus remains fixed on the practices of abstract individuals. Thus, like the self-fashioning heroes of gothic narratives, Foucault’s ethical subject lacks an attention to difference that would attach him (or her) to the aestheticizing projects of others.

Nonetheless, a notion of androgynous ethical competence could pro-

vide an opportunity to reconcile Foucault's ethics of the self with a recuperated universalist ideal.³³ Such a project could align Foucault's vision with Benhabib's efforts to revamp communicative ethics. What Benhabib values in the communicative approach is its determination to elucidate the conditions required for democratic dialogue and mutual respect. Yet this intersubjective project, which has been elaborately theorized by Jürgen Habermas, remains hampered by its attachment to the rights-bearing individual, or generalized other.³⁴ As a disembodied abstraction, the Habermasian subject lacks the competence to achieve mutual understanding, a goal which, for Benhabib, "requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective emotional constitution" (1992, 159; cf. Young 1987 and Fraser 1991). To achieve what Benhabib calls an "interactive universalism," communicative ethics must rid itself of its masculinist (and other dominant) biases, acknowledging the embodiment and embedding of human subjects. Thus, in a way that fuses a notion of habitus to a refigured ethics of the self, Benhabib defines universality as "the concrete process in politics and morals of the struggle of concrete, embodied selves, striving for autonomy" (1992, 153).

Gothic narratives of masculinity illuminate such a project. For centuries, philosophers, aesthetes, and gender dissidents of many kinds have struggled to overcome the disabling split between public and private selves. But their efforts have been thwarted by a chimerical ideal of universality, which is itself underwritten by a flawed rendering of sexual nature. Romanticism too often intensified the rift in masculine subjectivity by driving the male monad into an ever-more privatized struggle to realize his "authentic nugget"—a doomed monologue that is captured by the Cure's account of "hopelessly fighting the devil futility." Aestheticism too often offered the illusion of dialogue through a cult of male sensibility that, as expressed in gothic narratives, offers feminizing pain as a substitute for the unrecognized female other. Today's neoliberal society encourages rights-bearing monads to submit themselves to a normalized public sphere, limiting self-expression to private consumption. In *Fight Club* this leaves the masculine subject to find solace either in the support groups' fetishized feminine ethic, or in destructive subcultures of hypermasculine self-heroization.

Motivating all of these narratives, I believe, is an unmistakable desire for androgyny, by which I mean ethical undividedness. And that undividedness stands for the ethical competence to overcome centuries-old binarisms and their alienating effects. The androgyny toward which gothic narratives look forward may thus be compatible with the queer and Lacanian position "outsideseX" that Tim Dean (2000) exhorts us to think more

about.³⁵ Yet another framework for androgyny so conceived is found in Stephen K. White's (1991) attempt to integrate the feminist elucidation of care with the antimodernist critiques of Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, and Jacques Derrida. Both feminists and postmodernists, White explains, articulate "a moral-aesthetic" responsibility to otherness that is able to temper the Enlightenment tradition's "moral-prudential" responsibility to act. The latter responsibility, with its universalizing capacity to coordinate activity is indispensable, but it must never be permitted to displace the equally important responsibility to otherness, with its particularizing capacity to disclose worlds (20–22).

Although androgyny thus figured would seek to reclaim human competences from a bourgeois taxonomy that divides ethics along lines of gender, it need not take the form of a romantic quest for completion, sublation, or symmetry. In Bourdieu's account of sexism, the "social world constructs the body as a sexually defined reality and as the depository of sexually defining principles of vision and division" (2001, 11). It is in this way that the socialization of human subjects takes on a binaristic structure—as though the ethical underpinnings of a universal perspective were incommensurable with those of a concrete perspective, as though emotion were inconsistent with the ability to reason, as though attention to otherness need be a stumbling block to action. Deconstructing such ostensible binaries involves the disentangling of diverse ethical capacities from the sexual divisions that have organized them. Androgyny as I have conceived it is well suited for such demystifying labors: precisely because it is not itself a gender, it can function as a regulative ideal for the experimental play of genders. Androgyny so formulated culls from an ongoing history of desire for undividedness: its function is to render explicit the multidimensional and dialectical features of an ethical competence and the material and social conditions necessary for realizing them.

Such a notion of androgyny, which seeks to cross differences in sexual embodiment without prescribing a unitary gender as such, may fairly be thought of as a transitional term. That is, the ethical capacities that androgyny describes might eventually shed their present and historical association with gender. Under such circumstances the idea of an "androgynous" ethical competence would become obsolete—a vestigial marker of past ideologies in a genderless or postgender society like those envisioned by Rubin and Haraway. Yet in the far less utopian present, androgyny can provide a conceptual space for normative explication and social specification even as gender continues to operate as a category of resistant and multifarious play. Thus, whereas gender can be understood as a relatively plural category inviting freewheeling stylization and experimental modes of embodi-

ment, androgyny can be developed as the frame through which we imagine what we require of subjects when we long for intersubjective competence, democratic possibility, and publicly elaborated social worlds.

Notes

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1. John Gray's 1993 bestseller *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, has spawned a veritable cottage industry in commodifying the centuries-old ideology of incommensurable sexual difference. Gray's own most recent tome is *Truly Mars and Venus* (2003).
2. In the eighteenth century, as universalistic claims for human liberty and political equality threatened to disrupt traditional hierarchies, "arguments for fundamental sexual differences were shoved into the breach" (Laqueur 1987, 18).
3. Note that the perceived connection between an ethic of care and feminized spaces such as the home was itself ideologically constructed: as Rita Felski (1995) has argued, the domestic sphere, though "often portrayed as a domain where natural and timeless emotions hold sway," has been "radically implicated in patterns of modernization and processes of social change" (3).
4. For a discussion of the absolutized split between justice and the good life, which occurs with Kant, see Seligman 2002.
5. Dean, paraphrasing a recent edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, explains that "gender dysphoria . . . refers to persistent anxiety, depression and distress concerning one's gender identity" (2000, 64).
6. "Everything about a woman is a riddle," says Zarathustra, "and everything about woman has one solution: that is pregnancy" (Nietzsche 1954, 66).
7. Thus, according to Baudelaire, "Women cannot distinguish between soul and body, whereas the dandy creates a more and more perceptible divorce between the spirit and the brute" (qtd. in Gagnier 2000, 14).
8. Here, in the context of goth subculture, I use *androgyny* and *androgynous* in a conventional sense—to designate the perceived blending of so-called masculine and feminine styles and psychological attributes. This conventional usage is distinct from the particular ethical understanding of androgyny I develop later in this essay.
9. Note that what is appropriated is not only a fetishized "feminine" interior, but also an entire technology of the feminine, a range of self-fashioning techniques to which few modern men, apart from the nineteenth-century dandy, have had access. Writing about a similar (though not identical) appropriation in heavy

metal subculture, Robert Walser (1993) argues that by cultivating the "visual signs of androgyny," men claim women's "powers of spectularity for themselves" (128–29).

10. Compare to James Hannahan's (1997) description of the lead singer of Joy Division, another band tied to goth subculture, whose voice "said nothing if not that Ian Curtis was an ordinary man in extraordinary pain" (94).
11. On such grounds feminists have described androgyny as "a patriarchal desire for wholeness" and a male "fantasy of unity" (see Fayad 1997, 59–60). Fayad's first quotation is a paraphrase of Kristeva 1987; the second is a quotation from Cixous and Clement 1986 (84). Androgyny is also theorized as a patriarchal construction in Weil 1992.
12. All subsequent quotations are drawn from O'Barr, an unpaginated edition of *The Crow*.
13. On the whole, the movie is both more involved in staging violence and less involved in deifying women, though the trope of the lost bride remains a factor. The wedding is now set to have taken place the day after Shelly is killed, and her bridal dress and other bridal paraphernalia remain to remind Eric of his loss.
14. On the contemporaneous shift in alternative music, see Goodlad 2003. *Fight Club*'s postgoth resort to the subject-constituting properties of physical pain is anticipated in "Hurt," a song by the goth-influenced industrial band, Nine Inch Nails: "I hurt myself today / To see if I still feel / I focus on the pain / The only thing that's real." "Hurt" was memorably covered by Johnny Cash in 2002.
15. Note the shift from a goth mourning for lost brides to a postgoth mourning for lost fathers. "If you're male and you're Christian and living in America," the narrator explains, "your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?" (Palahniuk 1999 [1996], 141; see also 134, 186).
16. As the following analysis will make clear, I seek to expand upon Henry Giroux's (2000) reading in which Palahniuk's critique is shown to be reactionary and dangerously antifeminist (cf. Giroux 2001, chap. 3). Focusing almost entirely on David Fincher's film, Giroux rightly argues that *Fight Club* represents a white, heterosexual male "identity crisis of unparalleled proportions," a "generation of men condemned to corporate peonage whose emotional lives and investments are mediated through the allure of commodities and goods" (2000, 5, 7). *Fight Club* does indeed fall short of the progressive pedagogy to which Giroux looks forward: its critique of neoliberalism lacks nuanced attention to class and race, and the film undoubtedly glamorizes violence for some viewers. Yet Giroux goes further by arguing that Fincher offers an unironical and ultimately celebratory mirroring of the social pathologies the novel depicts.
17. Clearly, writing in 1996, Palahniuk did not regard the first Gulf War as having provided such an opportunity; one must assume that in the current post-9/11 climate, especially in the wake of the aggressive Bush doctrine and the war in Iraq, the possibility of battlefield heroism has been reintroduced in the minds of some contemporary youth.

18. On the ethic of care, see Gilligan 1982; Benhabib 1992, esp. chaps. 5 and 6; and White 1991, esp. chap. 5. Yet another way of reading the emasculation that *Fight Club* depicts would connect it to the masochistic white masculinity described by David Savran (1998). For Savran, such masochism works by providing a symbolic equivalence between femininity and blackness: "It allows the white male subject to take up the position of victim, to feminize and/or blacken himself fantastically, and to disavow the homosexual cathexes that are crucial to the process of (patriarchal) cultural reproduction, all the while asserting his unimpeachable virility" (33). See Locke (n.d.) for a reading of *Fight Club* that unpacks the representation of white masculinity, arguing that the film (especially through its depiction of the racially hybridized Tyler), "deploys the categories of black and Asian to serve as markers that signify either too much or too little virility" (2).
19. It should be noted, though, that Marla is also represented in the context of a range of gendered problems, including a disturbing obsession with aging and cosmetic surgery. Hence the narrator's misogynistic "flight from the feminine" (Giroux 2000, 7) is at least partly motivated by the alienating effects of commodified sexual difference. Giroux's claim that Marla exists purely to "make men unhappy, and to service their sexual needs" is more pertinent to the film, which is less involved than the novel with representing women's gender-related dilemmas. That said, the claim that Fincher is complicit in "sanctioning violence against women" (Giroux 2000, 7) may underestimate the film's potential to spark critical reflection on masculinity.
20. As a mythic figure, the phallic mother embodies "the phallus in the form of unlimited *jouissance*," and, therefore, is "ungendered in the sense of . . . not being subject to sexual division" (Dean 2000, 89).
21. Needless to say, such cults provide support for Giroux's argument that *Fight Club* fails utterly to "rupture conventional ways of thinking about violence" (2000, 10).
22. On the habitus, see Bourdieu 1991 and 2001.
23. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator is nearly castrated and, in a near-suicidal series of culminating fights, he is beaten until he cries and "his tongue drops to the floor" (Palahniuk 1999 [1996], 200–201).
24. Appiah is responding to Charles Taylor's formulation of authenticity and to the self-inventing strategies of Oscar Wilde, but his comments are also relevant to Butler and Foucault.
25. According to Marx's well-known dictum, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (1980 [1852], 97).
26. Warner goes on, "It is only a slight exaggeration to say that for Butler, people have all along resisted, just by having psyches and bodies, the norms that form them" (1999, 155; cf. Anderson 1998, 11).
27. This contradiction derives from a terminological ambiguity: Halberstam writes of female masculinity both as one among many genders, and, at the same time, as

an overarching rubric for a multiplicity of genders. By visualizing "masculinity" as pluralized and multifarious, it becomes possible to theorize it as a nonbinaristic gender formation. But can one adopt such a stance without simultaneously authorizing a panoply of male masculinities?

28. Halberstam rejects the concept on comparable grounds: "Androgyny always returns us to [a] humanist vision of the balanced binary in which maleness and femaleness are in complete accord" (1998, 215).
29. Note the similarity between Rubin's position and one aspect of Halberstam's multi-faceted utopian formulation: "to make gender optional" (Halberstam 1998, 27; cf. 273).
30. Although all feminists are doubtless aware of this fact, it is not clear how the project of pluralism articulates demands for the specific material resources that are necessary to warranting many female choices. For an interesting "thought experiment" on gender equity, see Fraser 1996, which argues that the only practicable way to achieve gender equity is to make sure that men do their share of "primary care-work" (235). Women's material conditions, in other words, depend not only on their own preferences but also on those of men.
31. Significantly, Halberstam recognizes that the "dual mechanism of a lack of care for the self and a callous disregard for the care of others seems to characterize much that we take for granted about white male masculinity"; yet, for her, the masculine tendency to inflict "extreme physical damage" on self and others makes it "hard to be very concerned about the burden of masculinity on males" (1998, 274). Halberstam thus appears to assume that femaleness and/or queerness automatically offsets the undesirable features of masculinity, an assumption that seems to me to entail the unintentional essentialization of female sex and/or lesbian sexuality.
32. Benhabib argues that the Western tradition is "substitutionalist" because the universalism it defends "is defined surreptitiously by identifying the experiences of a specific group"—white, male, property-owning adults—"as the paradigmatic case of the human" (1992, 152–53; cf. Brown 2001, 9).
33. Note that Butler (1996) has undertaken a comparable critical project. Yet, the radicalized inclusivity Butler hopes to achieve is looked for at the linguistic level, prior to the democratic conditions and ethical capabilities to which the concept of androgyny I am describing might be anchored.
34. See, for example, Habermas 1984 for this attempt to revise Enlightenment moral philosophy, shifting its grounding from the monologic reason of the Kantian subject to the communicative situation of subjects in dialogue.
35. The appeal of "an identification 'outsidesex,'" Dean explains, is its potential to elude "symbolic alienation and subjective division" (2000, 90–99)—in other words, the same perceived incompleteness that plagues the heroes of goth and post-goth narratives. For my purposes, what is most important about Dean's Lacanian argument is its skepticism toward any political strategy that relies exclusively on the diversification of performed gender and sexual norms (see also Dean 2000, chap. 6).

Part II



PERFORMANCES





REBECCA SCHRAFFENBERGER

THIS MODERN GOTH (EXPLAINS HERSELF)



What is it with you people, anyway,
with your dark shades and
your deathly accoutrements?
—*I Wanna Be Adored*, a dark comedy
in two acts by Marc Spitz (2000)

Last spring, I stage-managed a show about a goth band, Joy Division. Since I was the only dyed-in-the-wool goth involved, I was called upon to help members of the cast. There I was, trying to tell them how they'd walk, why they'd like such dark music, why they'd dress the way they do. Yet I could hardly explain what it was that made *me* that way.

I remember being around ten and shopping for school clothes late one summer with my mom. She was sick, so she sat down on a bench in the store and let me bring the clothes. I kept bringing her clothes, and she just kept saying no for what seemed like hours. Finally, my frustration peaked and I wailed, "Why *not*?!?"

"*Because . . .* little girls shouldn't wear black!" my mother said.

I was dumbfounded.

Although I was too young to be galled at her rejecting my personal taste, I remember feeling as though I'd been given a significant clue about myself.

And I remember ending up with several pairs of bright pink, turquoise, and red pants that year. I think I've been rebelling against that fall's school wardrobe ever since.

You're such a strange girl,
I think you come from another world.
—The Cure, 1987

One reason it may be difficult for me to place goth in a social context is that I had such an isolated adolescence. I was the reject, the social outcast, of my school. I was shy and bookish, and believed in being honest about my feelings. My peers saw this as vulnerability and, in their cruelty, made a game of preying upon it. I wasted a couple of years trying to conform and fit in, to wear the pastel clothes from Benetton and buy the ultra-trendy Guess jeans. By the time I was fifteen, I gave up. These weren't the kind of friends I wanted to have, anyway. I went into a long period of self-imposed isolation.

In retrospect, I think I pretty much invented myself by defining myself as the antithesis of my peers. Like many goths, I sought to negate those who had taunted, tricked, tripped, and rejected me.

I don't mean to claim that goths like me are perfect. Just that we use negativity in a very positive way.

And I dress this way just to keep them at bay,
'cause Halloween is every day.
—Ministry, 1985

It was the 1980s, and I was responding most to songs I was hearing on the radio by bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Cure, Duran Duran, and Joy Division, as well as punk bands such as the Clash. This music's quality of otherworldly stories only half-told fascinated me.

So I emerged from exile at about seventeen with a custom-tailored image and a set of beliefs, derived from gothic rock music and intense self-invention. I emerged as a goth although, at the time, I didn't yet know that goth, as such, existed.

It was around this time that I found a social group outside of school. I became friends with a group of young squatters who hung out around Tompkins Square Park. Some of them were runaways from abusive homes, some of them had been kicked out of their homes by their parents, some of them were junkies who couldn't afford housing, and some of them had come to New York to escape the quiet hell of suburbia or rural America.

A lot of them were punk rockers or hippies, and some didn't have any particular style at all. Among them, I found friendship on my own terms

for the first time. Crawling around in abandoned buildings with my squatter friends and seeing free concerts in Tompkins Square Park, I absorbed the history of punk—and a lot of acid, too.

Fashion at the time was doing strange and wonderful things. The New Romantic style incorporated flowing poet's shirts, faux-jeweled neck pins, cameos, chokers, paisley, tapestry, and big, decadent, punk hair. I flirted with the look for a while but was really more of a minimalist at heart. I dyed my hair black, and took to wearing all black.

I remember quite well the night the term *goth* first came to my attention. By then I was seeing more black-clad, pointy-shoed, teased-haired wraiths on the streets and wondering how they came to dress as I did.

I was roaming the streets of the West Village with my best friend. I was probably wearing my favorite black skirt, fitted around the waist, but very full from the hips down. No doubt, I was wearing a black T-shirt with some band's logo on it, cut off at the neck, my pointy black boots with skull buckles, black plastic bangle bracelets, rings piled up on each finger, bronze eye shadow, and that particular lipstick my dad always said made me look like a prostitute.

So there we were in the West Village, bored. I remember it was summer. We were either drunk or stoned. We lit cigarettes and sat on a stoop leafing through the *New York Free Press*. There, in one of those stupid features on fashion trends, was a heading called "Gothic." It described black-clad, somewhat macabre sorts such as myself. Though my first impression was laughter, the term stuck. *Goth*, I soon found, offered a convenient way to summarize myself to outsiders.

I quickly got used to all the goth jokes made at my expense on the street.

I've bled all I can, I won't bleed no more,

I don't need no one to understand.

—The Sisters of Mercy, 1987

A lot of goths (and punk rockers, and other self-styled rebels) have experienced social rejection like my own. They are the "different" kids, the artistic ones, the sensitive ones, the ones who didn't care about joining a sports team or cheerleading. The shy kids who don't know how to create protective facades. The ones who don't wear the right clothes. Mine could be the story of any "freak," a valid if painful process of coming into one's own. Lonely self-invention can yield dramatic results. From it emerges a person with a strong sense of individuality and a loyalty to one's fellows in suffering.

To my mind, there are several predominant qualities that make up the gothic psyche as such. One must be a romantic idealist—naïve and vulnerable enough to attract the predatory impulses of other teens. One must be introspective, analytical, intellectually curious, and generally thoughtful. Also, in goths you'll find a deep-rooted attraction to anything mysterious and supernatural. A goth generally feels a lot of anger, mostly directed at the past, and at the injustices and absurdities of the present. Akin to that is an acceptance of—and healthy respect for—all things sinister. A goth sees beauty in what is dreadful and forbidding. All this is bound up within a creative personality and an acute aesthetic sense. To be a goth is to blend graceful waltz and bad-ass swagger. It means ballet dancing to the fastest, harshest hardcore song in the pit at a punk show. It means understanding (as Siouxsie and the Banshees did) that Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" is eminently slam-danceable in its passion, violence, and intensity.

A goth's nature is fraught with contradictions. We're hard-core romantics, dreamy realists, and cynical idealists. We find beauty in the macabre, while seeking fairness and tenderness in our daily lives. We love all things ancient, while being modern and liberal in our social outlook. We're intelligent and creative without being cutthroat and competitive. We're angry yet peaceful. We're sure of ourselves but wary of strangers. We're funny but bitter.

Every day . . . There is some kind of darkness,
That just won't go away
—Curve, 1992

In a way, it's a form of realism, too. Your typical goth is all too aware that people are cruel and selfish and ready to deceive. The world is often harsh and unjust. Simply getting by is one of life's biggest challenges, especially for people who are different. A goth's embrace of the sinister is a form of acceptance, a way of dealing with this brutality. Perhaps the goth's love of all things fantastic and supernatural is part of this realism. We know it would take a miracle, something supernatural, to save people from their own mercilessness, to save the world from its own destructive forces.

Certainly, there's an element of escapism to the fantastic images we build for ourselves, the otherworldly music and literature in which we immerse ourselves. Yet goths also see very clearly the line between fantasy and reality. We are most of us, when we need to be, as capable of existing and functioning in "normal" society as the next person.

One thing you have to understand about goths is that we're mostly very shy. To be sure, some goths really do think they're too good to talk to "mundanes." But most of us are very intelligent, very gentle, *very* shy people. Take some time to draw a goth out of his or her shell and you'll usually find a very smart, sensitive, creative, liberal, and unusual person in there. Goths make great friends, if you can just get past all those barriers we've put up after our years of enduring ostracism and snap judgments from others.

It's one of our many ironies that we externalize the world's destructiveness stylistically, without resort to actual violence. I'd even hazard to say goths are better adjusted than most people are, despite the isolation and rejection they experienced as youths. A goth's anger, though rooted in personal suffering, is directed at widespread injustice and inhumanity. A goth will always root for the underdog: for the homosexual, the racial minority, the lone artist, the poor, the oppressed, the cheated, the outcast, the scorned and ignored. Enough injustice is done to so many different kinds of people in this world to make any goth pretty angry much of the time. But while our literature, music, and style express a disturbed and disturbing point of view, most goths are incredibly gentle people. We're not a bunch of murderous psychopaths. I can't think of any goth capable of committing the atrocity at Columbine.

DEATH: People don't bore me. I like people.

HAZEL: Really? All of them?

DEATH: All of them.

HAZEL: Even the creepy ones?

DEATH: Nobody's creepy from the inside, Hazel. . . . Some of them are sad, some of them hurt, and some of them think they're the only real thing in the whole world. But they're not creepy.

—Neil Gaiman, *Death: The Time of Your Life*, 1997

The best example of a quintessential goth is, oddly enough, a comic book character: Neil Gaiman's Death, from his *Sandman* series of graphic novels. Gaiman's Death is an adorable little goth girl. She is whimsical, practical, strong, and very human.

Gaiman's Death is compassionate. She sits and listens to everyone's stories, and why they think they shouldn't die yet. She always has a handkerchief ready for her "victims," and always truly sympathizes with their regrets, unfinished business, and their lives in general. She's a great therapist and

a wonderful listener, always helping people come to terms with themselves and their mortality.

Death always travels with an umbrella. She has the complexity and personal eccentricities of a human being. But in Gaiman's hands, Death is also truly an angel.

My spine is the bass line!

—Shriekback, 1990

The main ingredient for a classic gothic rock song is a dark, dominant bass line. On top of that, you need some really heavy-duty electric guitars. Drums are generally strong and basic. If the vocalist is male, he most often has a deep voice. If female, she either has a strident, rock-'n'-roller voice, or a softer, more ethereal and feminine one. Often, classical instruments and instrumentation will be interwoven around the heavy-duty bass and electric guitar lines.

From these classic features, many other styles of goth music have emerged. There are the prettier, trancelike songs by bands such as Dead Can Dance, the Cocteau Twins, and Bel Canto. There's also a variety of later, 1990s-era goth that relies more heavily on technology, samples, and clips from old horror movies. Rosetta Stone is a good example of the latter. There's a popular breed of goth music based in Germany that has a grinding, sinister, industrial feel to it. And then there is death metal, which predates goth, and sometimes appeals to a goth audience. It sounds like heavy metal, but darker and more morbid. There's even a branch of goth called "apocalyptic folk," which is mostly acoustic, but still dark and cynical.

Please say the right words

Or cry like the stone white clown.

—The Cure, 1981

Given the corpselike pallor that is part of the gothic image and the variety of subcultures to have emerged in the 1980s, I guess it would be pretty easy to assume that goths are a sect of white supremacists. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

One night, while wandering around the East Village in the wee hours of the morning, I was accosted by a group of African Americans. It started as a bunch of drunken taunting from the other side of the street, "Oh, look at

the little goth girl, thinks she's so tough, walking with her cigarette, thinks she's so cool.'" These soon turned into racial slurs, and the next thing I knew, I was being pelted by garbage. Hard. I got to Second Avenue, better lit and more populated, and disappeared into the nearest store. I waited a while, and went home, shaken and saddened by what had happened. I've heard other, similar attacks on goths who have been mistaken for skinheads or white supremacists.

In fact people of color have a strong presence in the goth scene. There are many Asians and African Americans in the goth community in New York. They are as accepted and welcome there as anyone else. And they make the most beautiful goths.

"What I think is," said Anna, . . . "that there are
as many minds as there are heads."

—Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

There are as many different ways of being goth as there are goths out there. I'm sure not all goths would agree with everything I've said here. And while I don't think any goth I know would be capable of Columbine, there are certainly some stupid goths in the world. Some become goths for shallow reasons, and some take the image and the lifestyle way too far (getting fang implants; ordering cow's blood from medical facilities for drinking). The goth scene is not devoid of pretension. To be human is to be flawed. There may be a couple of homicidal psychopaths lurking in our ranks, but there are far more, I believe, hiding in the most conventional guises.

The New York goth scene has had many waxings and wanings over the years, but it has never disappeared. Some goth nights and bands have gone bust, but many others have survived the sparse times. Every summer, a different city hosts a music and crafts festival just for goths. It's a lot of fun, and a great way to meet fellow "freaks" from other parts of the country and Canada. For me, it engenders a sort of comforting feeling of unity and solidarity, since there was a time in my life when I felt very alone and misunderstood in my "differentness."

These days, I'm not much of a goth fashion plate anymore. My career as a stage manager requires too much crawling around on floors, taping down set plans for rehearsals, scrubbing fake blood off floors, time on ladders hanging lights, and sweating over building and painting sets to allow for swirly dresses. Plus, I work at night now, so I'm not the clubgoing scenester I used to be.

Yet when theater life gets too complicated, I can still join my friends in a scene with its own brand of magic. To me it is much simpler, more natural, comforting, and reaffirming than any other place I could be. In my scene, I know I'll be surrounded by great music, intelligent, creative, independently minded people who understand and don't question me—and lots and lots of eye candy.

PLAYING DRESS UP

David Bowie and the Roots of Goth



David Bowie was the first star to develop fully the theatrical implications of rock and roll by engaging in what we call "playing dress up." Our task in this essay is to try to understand what this development meant for Bowie and for the goth culture that took up his theatricality. Bowie has been characteristically put in opposition to a rock tradition that highly valued authenticity (Frith 1988; Savage 1988). According to a typical reading, "rock & roll had always been about inspired impostures. But the pact made between rock performers and their listeners in the Fifties and Sixties was that those pretenses had conviction. Bowie's show, by contrast, was a *show*" (Carson 1992, 532). Other rock stars certainly participated in the invention of their own, usually more or less consistent, personae, but even when, like Bob Dylan, they played a series of roles, their fans were asked to believe that all of them were authentic, that is, that they were not roles at all. Dylan's case is a particularly striking contrast to Bowie's in that he began his career by becoming one of the many imitators of Woody Guthrie. Guthrie had long inspired such imitation by young men who, one must presume, believed that they were in some way putting themselves in touch with something genuine by playing at being Woody (Klein 1980, 364, 421). Guthrie was the original, Dylan only one of many copies, and yet he seemed to personify authenticity. The lesson sometimes drawn from this is that authenticity itself is inauthentic, and that performers like Bowie are credited with making us aware of this. Our contention is that this reading of Bowie as camp, while doubtless partly correct, fails to account either for his own fans' response to him or for the significance that playing dress up has for goth. In both cases, authenticity is not rejected but reinterpreted. Our larger claim is that dress up

comes to define goth subculture, distinguishing it from most other youth subcultures. David Bowie's explicit use of character, costume, and makeup altered the state of rock and roll and moved the center of gravity from the person to the performance. Once that Pandora's box was opened, once he admitted that what he was doing was a performance, once he celebrated the fiction rather than the fact, the doors were open for fans to do so as well. Bowie's stage performances empowered goth teens to take dress up beyond the bedroom and to bring it into the schools.

Unlike previous rock stars, Bowie didn't so much invent personae as play characters; he was an actor inhabiting the roles of Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, and the thin white duke. This theme was explicitly explored in Bowie's "Changes" where he sings,

So I turned myself to face me
But I've never caught a glimpse
Of how others must see the faker.

Here we find the singer divided from himself and announcing his own artificiality. By 1971, when this song was recorded, David Bowie had already gone through many changes in trying to make it as pop singer, most importantly the one in which David Jones became David Bowie. "Changes" forecasts with the line "turn and face the strange" the changes that Bowie initiated with his next album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972). That Bowie was also a film actor who played dramatic roles rather than simply appearing as a rock star allowed him to expand the range of his changes and to develop some of his characters beyond what a purely musical incarnation would allow. Musically, Bowie was always eclectic, so that while each persona involves a musical shift, such musical changes are much less striking and distinctive than the appearance of new characters.¹ *Appearance* here has the double meaning of coming on the scene and of a look or style, and the latter was the most important dimension of Bowie's characters. They are distinguished mainly by the clothes that they wear and the way they wear their hair.

Bowie's changes were play—playful, as well as being theater—in ways that typical rock and roll performance had not been. Instead of seeming to express himself, Bowie seemed intent on disguising the self. During most of the 1970s, each new album and tour could be counted on to feature new forms of dress up. His fans responded in kind. According to Simon Frith, "British pop fans have always liked to dress up like the stars, but the Bowie boys didn't just get ready on their nights out. Bowie-ism was a way of life—style as meaning—and no other idol has had such an intense influence on

his fans as David Bowie" (1988, 176). To dress up like Bowie was a different act than to dress up like the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. Imitating them meant copying the real thing; imitating Bowie meant playing a role that someone else had played. Fans who witnessed Bowie shedding his skin on stage and taking on other forms found such metamorphosis attractive. They too wanted to disguise themselves from the world and play dress up. When you are dressed up as another persona, no one can harm you, because the real you is hidden from view. Bowie understood this, as did his adolescent fans.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Bowie's fans did not desire to know or to be the "real" Bowie behind the changes. As David Marshall has argued, "the relationship that the audience builds with the film celebrity is configured through a tension between the possibility and impossibility of knowing the authentic individual" (1997, 234). One might think that such remarks do not apply to Bowie, a popular musician who did not appear to claim authenticity for his characters. But screen actors do not claim authenticity for the fictional roles they play either. Because he inhabits fictional characters, Bowie is more like a movie star than are most popular music celebrities. In both cases the issue of the star's authenticity is not erased by the role playing, but made more complex and perhaps more intense. Moreover, authenticity does not pertain merely to the individual behind the performance mask. It is also a category by which the fictional role itself may be judged.

Consider Humphrey Bogart. While most fans probably know something of his private life, it can be distilled into the following biographical synopsis: born into an upper-crust New York family, Humphrey Bogart started out playing minor roles as society fops until he found his niche, first as a heavy in the 1930s, and then as a hard-boiled leading man in the 1940s. His first three marriages ended in divorce, but he found true love with Lauren Bacall, whom he met on the set of *To Have and Have Not*. Yet, perhaps excepting the relationship with Bacall, none of this information is essential to Bogart's cultural significance—which rests almost entirely on the kinds of roles he began to play with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). These parts used his tough-guy persona but softened it and usually put it in the service of good. The result was a cult following that developed around the time of his death. While the role of Rick Blaine in *Casablanca* was the focus of the cult, there was, as Aljean Harmetz (1992) shows, a presumed identity between that character and Bogart the individual. The "Bogart" thus constructed is not the historical person about whom a biography might be written, but a composite persona who nevertheless is experienced as a real person.

The example of Bogart shows that even though a celebrity may play a series of fictional characters—some of which may contradict others—his fans will tend to construct an individual identity out of the multiplicity of roles. Our suspicion is that the Bowie cult worked the same way. Thus, the Bowie fan dressing up like Ziggy Stardust was something like the Bogart fan dressing up like Sam Spade or Phillip Marlowe: in each case the identification is ultimately not with the character, but with the one who inhabited the role.² If Bowie inspired only the act of dressing up, then the Bowie boys presumably would have invented their own characters. What distinguishes Bowie's characters from those played by actors in films or on stage is the very fact that Bowie did not present them in those media. The traditional presumption about the rock star, whether in concert or on record, is that he or she is not playing a role. Thus, Ziggy, Aladdin, and the thin white duke may have seemed less fictional, and more like aspects of Bowie's actual self. This sense would have been reinforced by the fact that Bowie not only played these roles but also invented them. Moreover, while Bowie dressed up as these characters, he did not proclaim himself in his lyrics to be these characters. "Ziggy Stardust" is sung in the third person, distancing Bowie from the role. However, Bowie announced himself and his band to be "Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars" to open his concerts in 1972, making the question of identity all the more slippery. The result was ambiguity about the performer's identity and his relationship to his inventions. Bowie was playing dress up in a way that mere actors do not.

The Bowie boys' imitation of their idol and the reaction of female fans at Bowie's concerts prevent us from understanding him simply as camp. *Camp* is notoriously hard to define, but in most conceptions it involves both a sense of doubleness—things are not merely what they seem to the naive viewer—and a preference for reversal—the very bad now reinterpreted as good. Camp makes most sense not as an aesthetic style—like classicism or modernism—but as a mode of apprehension or a hermeneutic. It is a way of understanding or interpreting the world. Historically, camp emerges in gay subculture where it functions as a kind of passive resistance to the straight world, much as the cynical humor of the Russians was a form of passive resistance to Stalinism. That Bowie plays with camp is unquestionable; that the majority of his fans experienced him in that mode seems unlikely. Transvestism for obvious reasons lends itself to camp interpretation, and the embrace of artifice over nature is a convention of camp taste. But camp interpretation requires a lack of seriousness and the rejections of sincerity that it is quite clear Bowie's fans do not share. For them, Bowie's performance is authentic, and their dressing up is sincere homage. Goth also,

though it involves transvestism and the explicit embrace of artifice, is not usually understood as camp by its devotees.

It was the fans' captivation with Bowie and with playing dress up that helped to open up the possibilities for goth. Indeed, many of the bands that would go on to establish the goth aesthetic came out of the London punk rock scene and were fans of Bowie themselves. Bowie's theatricality freed these punk rock performers (especially in London) to indulge their own impulses to dress up. Inspired by Bowie, they would create their own performance masks, costumes, and stage personae. As a result, their fans, rather than merely imitating the stars, would go on to create their own world of disguise—goth.

The Bowie role that had the greatest impact on goth was clearly Ziggy Stardust. This is true not only because Ziggy was the first character Bowie created, thus initiating dress up, but also because of the specific attributes of this character. First and foremost among these is male feminization. Bowie was hardly the first male rock star to feminize himself. Elvis Presley did it by displaying himself as a sexual object, the Beatles by the way they wore their hair, and the Rolling Stones, beginning with the "Jumping Jack Flash" video, by explicit cross-dressing (Shumway 1997). By the time Bowie invented Ziggy, he had already been photographed in a dress and had declared himself to be gay. But Ziggy was not a drag queen, a recognizable genre of transvestite. The character's appearance was designed to be androgynous, rather than purely feminine.³ It might be argued that Bowie as Ziggy falls exactly in the middle of what Marjorie Garber (1992) has dubbed the "transvestite continuum," incorporating enough of each gender's markers to be perceived to be almost equally masculine and feminine (353–54). It is "almost equally," because one is never in doubt that Ziggy is a man, and not because, as with traditional female impersonation, anatomy trumps costume despite the performer's best efforts.

In Bowie's case, there is no effort to disguise anatomy. There is nothing feminine about Ziggy's body, which lacks both breasts and hips, and which has a bulging crotch. Ziggy's costumes are neither clearly masculine nor clearly feminine but belong to a netherworld of performance dress that goes back to the attire of the court jester (fig. 1). The most feminine aspects of the Ziggy style are the lack of trousers and the knee-high boots, which, however, are less clearly gender-identified because they are so clearly stage attire. The fact that Ziggy wears makeup is feminine, but the makeover produces a face that is skull-like rather than beautiful. The red hair standing almost straight up also seems more like something from another planet than it does a woman's hairstyle. Indeed, perhaps the most feminine ele-



Fig. 1: David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust

ment of Ziggy's presentation is what is on his ears. The earrings are not the simple loops then becoming popular among male rock performers, but big and sometimes dangling pieces that would look just fine on a drag queen. Finally, Bowie's movement on stage is not especially feminine. While his performance style lacks the masculine energy of an Elvis or a Springsteen, and the overt display of masculine sexuality of Jagger and the tradition of cock rockers who follow him, Bowie is not passive on stage. He moves deliberately with a bearing that might be likened to that of an operatic tenor who, though trying to act, presents himself first and foremost as a singer. These mixed fashion messages suggest that Bowie created Ziggy to be a feminized man—precisely the version of transvestism taken up by goth men.

It is less clear that Bowie influenced the specifically gothic character of goth style. Bowie did wear the black mesh top that was one of goth men's first distinctive garments, but his range of costumes was far more varied in style and color than goth aesthetics tend to permit (fig. 2). His pale makeup may have influenced goth, though there are surely other, more obvious sources for gothic pallor. Bowie's songs lack the consistent somber tone typical of many goth bands. However, Bowie's most enduring subject as a lyricist,



Fig. 2: David Bowie
in prototh attire

alienation, is exactly what goth in its own way embodies. Bowie's first hit single, "Space Oddity," is a song about an astronaut abandoned in space, and perhaps, covertly, heroin addiction. In either case, alienation is embodied. If, as Bowie's biographer David Buckley (2000) has insisted, *Ziggy Stardust* is not a concept album, its songs are nevertheless thematically consistent, and alienation is the theme. Buckley's claim that the record is a critique of pop stardom gives it much more coherence than it is due (151). Pop stars are clearly the subjects of three songs ("Lady Stardust," "Star," and "Ziggy Stardust"), and the probable subject of a fourth, "Rock 'n' Roll Suicide." Together these songs paint a bleak picture of the rock star, but they don't explain that picture. Indeed, the songs on the record are elliptical, skirting around their putative subjects rather than focusing in on them. It makes more sense to think of *Ziggy Stardust* as dealing with the condition of alienation as expressed in a variety of contexts, from the "starman waiting in the sky" to the woman who kneels before the grave of her son in "Soul Love," to the rock 'n' roll suicide. Finally, there is Bowie's alienation from his own creation, his being unwilling to fully identify with Ziggy or to own the role of rock star even as he is already playing it.

All youth subcultures represent a certain degree of alienation from the larger, adult culture. In choosing to identify oneself with a subculture, one also explicitly rejects and distances oneself from the mainstream in an act of what might be called self-alienation. Youth presumably do this because this act symbolizes the state they already feel they inhabit and also because it is a

more powerful position to reject society than to be rejected by it. Rock and roll has from the beginning been about this aspect of adolescent experience and rebellion. Rockers have consistently identified themselves with alienated elements of society. Rock begins when white, more or less middle-class kids embrace the music of blacks and rural, working-class whites in an effort to rebel against their parents and prescribed expectations.⁴ Next, as early as Little Richard, the feminine is adopted, as women represent another subaltern group. With Bowie, homosexuality is added to the mix. Later rock stars take up various world musics for the same reason. Like rock and roll, goth is rooted in the embrace of alienation. But instead of merely alienating themselves, goths seek to embody in their dress and music the alienated state. Thus goth dress up is more than just another subcultural uniform like the ones worn by the mods or rockers of an earlier generation. It is a much more self-conscious commentary on the world and on the act of dressing up.

In *Subculture*, Dick Hebdige (1979) astutely observes that Bowie fans were “challenging at a symbolic level the inevitability, the naturalness, of class and gender stereotypes” through their employment of a Bowie-inspired androgynous way of dress (89). It is our argument that goth fans were similarly posing questions about middle and working-class “uniforms” through their rejection of those dress codes and adoption of their own forms of dressing up. Bands such as Bauhaus, the Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Depeche Mode, and Joy Division all include members who were Bowie fans turned punk club kids turned musicians turned goth icons (figs. 3 and 4). With each of these bands, aesthetic elements such as makeup and clothing were just as relevant—if not more so—to fans as the music they created. While their song lyrics would reflect what would come to be recognized as a goth aesthetic—alienation, unrequited sexual desire, images of rain and fog, death and sleep—their costumed performances on and off the stage would define and give birth to a goth subculture. It is this form of playing dress up—costumed performance by goth stars and their fans—that we will explore in the context of Bowie’s fans and his own crafted performances.

Goth musicians and songwriters continued Bowie’s exploration of isolation and fantasy in the content and style of their music while appropriating his passion for dress up and incorporated it into not only their stage personae but additionally into their public personae offstage. As mentioned earlier, their fans would take this dress up even further, creating a twenty-four-hour performance out of their lives. In this way Frith’s comment on the Bowie boys can be applied directly to goth: it became “a way of life—style as meaning.” Goth fans play dress up not just for a concert performance



Fig. 3: Siouxsie Sioux

or night on the town, but adopt a style of dress (inspired partly by late-1980s images of Bauhaus, Robert Smith of the Cure, and Siouxsie Sioux of the Banshees) that they wear twenty-four hours a day. Like the Bowie boys, goths would steadfastly adhere to a game of dress up as their primary way of presenting themselves to the world, making no necessary distinction between a visit to the grocery store or a club date.

The dramatic androgynous everyday dress typical of goth culture is a direct descendant of Bowie's stage performances and crafted characters. Sheila Whiteley (2000) cites the influence of "Roxy Music, David Bowie, and Stanley Kubrick's recently released film, *A Clockwork Orange*" on the Banshees and the elaborate eye makeup and bleached and dyed hair of Siouxsie Sioux in particular (107). The eye makeup is used as in opera to disguise the existence of the human eye and to replace it with a new, more elaborate fictitious one. When Robert Smith appeared on the scene in the early 1980s, at which point he was a guitarist with the Banshees as well as frontman for the Cure, he became the male counterpart to Siouxsie, and, thus, one of several prominent goth heirs (including Bauhaus's Peter Murphy and Daniel Ash) to Bowie's androgynous performance throne. Siouxsie herself was moving from a punk-inspired neo-Nazi rhetoric to a more extreme gothic way of displaying herself. Thus, she and Smith together represented a powerful



Fig. 4: The Cure

model—their styles are virtually indistinguishable—for both genders of goth fans to replicate. As they did so, a kabuki theater of pale-faced teenagers began to appear on the streets of London and, a bit later, of American cities.

By the end of the decade, the Cure's video for "Lullaby," featuring Smith's elaborate performance as the Spider Man, introduced goth dress-up to a huge mainstream audience. One might argue, therefore, that Smith's performance as the Spider Man, like Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, would prove to be as significant a moment in fan history for goth subculture as the appearance of Ziggy Stardust was for Bowie fans.

Just as Bowie, through his exaggerated use of costume and makeup, exposed the crafted performance of the rock star, goths expose mass culture's concept of the norm, especially in regard to gender. Goth costume code is conspicuous for its eclectic historical references, including the Renaissance, the eighteenth century, and, especially, the nineteenth-century gothic revival and Victorian styles (Hodkinson 2002, 46). These period influences combine with those of twentieth-century popular culture, especially the Hollywood horror film, in addition to Bowie and 1980s pop bands. Goth style thus bends not only gender, but also other codes as well, including historical and religious ones. The goth costume differentiates it from other youth subcultures not merely in style but in motive as well. Unlike many such subcultures that emerged in Britain, goth is not mainly a manifestation of the working class or an expression of its interests. Here again, Bowie led the way. Hebdige argues, "Not only was Bowie patently uninterested either in contemporary political and social issues or in working-class life in general, but his entire aesthetic was predicated upon a deliberate

avoidance of the 'real' world. . . . Bowie's meta-message was escape—from class, from sex, from personality, from obvious commitment—into a fantasy past . . . or a science fiction future'' (1979, 61).

The twentieth century had seen frequent episodes of youth adopting sub-cultural fashion codes, as the flappers of the 1920s and the hippies of the 1960s attest. What differentiates goth from these earlier fashion statements is the sense that goth style is a form of play. Flappers may not have been self-consciously feminist, but their style was understood as a social statement, representing increased sexual freedom and independence by means of short skirts and cropped hair.⁵ The hippies, on the contrary, sought to establish a counterculture, removing themselves from the "straight" world dominated by "the system." This was a utopian ambition, but one motivated by very real social and political conditions and events, including economic inequality and the Vietnam War, in addition to the desire to affirm the value of pleasures mainstream society was believed to repress. While the hippies' dress, unlike the flappers', was designed to set them apart from the larger culture, it nevertheless made a statement to that culture as a representation of the subculture's social and political beliefs. Neither the flappers nor the hippies thought of themselves as playing dress up, even though their critics may have; to the participants, it was merely a matter of getting dressed in a particular style in order to express a social statement.

In goth, however, costume and makeup are not representations of a collective political belief or agenda, and politics are not usually foregrounded in goth conversations or music. While their exaggerated style may expose the masks that individuals of all types choose to wear in daily life, the goth costume and subculture is aesthetically and not politically based. Appearance is an end in itself, and thus goth costume and makeup are adopted explicitly as a form of play. Dress and other aspects of appearance by themselves define what it means to be goth.⁶ Through goths' dress up games, they too raise social questions regarding conformity and middle-class repression. But at their core, most goths will argue that it is the aesthetic and camaraderie of the movement and not the social critique that attracted them to take on a goth mask.

Often the goth aesthetic is misunderstood as a coveting of death, but rather it is at most a representation of a desire to escape everyday life, which is often not very beautiful and too often intimidating and confusing for youth. The use of the macabre in goth should be understood as expressing a desire for some other world, rather than for the extinction of self that actual death implies. Goth style aestheticizes the world, permitting its adherents to live a fantasy of beauty and adventure where men can wear lace and women

can wear leather pants and corsets, where Renaissance and romantic-era clothing are seamlessly combined with piercings and tattoos. Goth's bricolage of fashion trends and periods is characteristically postmodern. The historical and cultural references are emptied of their original meanings in order to serve a subculture in which image is everything.

But if goth seems at first to confirm Jean Baudrillard's notion that we postmoderns cannot tell image from reality, the goths' own sense of the unreality of their performance prevents this. Indeed, one can argue that goth subculture is a response to the experience of being bombarded by popular culture, the enforcement of certain fashions and, yet, the unreality it purveys. In a sense, goths mirrored Bowie's commentary on rock and roll and celebrity, expanding it to include mainstream culture as a whole. Goth style is an obvious rejection of the dress codes to which youth are routinely subjected by their peers and the media. These codes are especially powerful within adolescent circles, and their enforcement is often much more capricious there than in the adult world. This system threatens to exclude the teen at any moment for straying or being perceived to stray from the fashion code. Goth teens reject the code before it can reject them. In so doing, they create a fashion foil exposing the daily dress up that normative popular fashion codes enforced. By explicitly playing dress up in daily life, goths reveal that the rest of us play this game unawares.

This is not to deny that goth entails its own code and norms. While adherents often cite the appeal of goth as its allowing the expression of one's individuality through playing dress up (Hodkinson 2002, 39), this belief is belied by the fact that goth costume quickly became tightly codified, varying little in the nearly twenty-five years of the subculture's existence: the predominance of black, especially mesh and leather, clothing; the dramatic makeup accenting the eyes, cheekbones, and lips, often coupled with pale face makeup; silver jewelry; dramatically dyed hair (midnight black, but also eventually more Bowiesque hues of platinum, neon pinks, purples, and blues); and ubiquitous black nail polish. These forms of makeup and erotically laced costumes are donned by both male and female goths interchangeably. As if members of an itinerant theatrical troupe, goths took their performance to the street and to the dinner table and created a community of like-minded—and like-dressed—individuals to socialize with. In their historical consistency and contemporary conformity, goths stray from the Bowie inheritance by failing to embrace changes. It might be argued that goth resembles religious subcultures like the Amish and Lubavitcher Jews who each retain clothing and hair styles of nineteenth-century Europe and who attempt to socialize only within the group.

How do we understand the appeal of dressing up goth? Theater director Julie Taymor, herself a master of masks and performance, may give us some insight. In *The Green Bird*, as in many Taymor productions, the actors performed behind partial masks. Taymor talked about how initially in rehearsal actors were intimidated by the masks and were fearful that they would not be able to connect with the audience because of them. The masks, they believed, would hide the actors' emotions and passions from the audience and hinder effective communication. But midway through the rehearsal period, Taymor said that the actors uniformly came to embrace the use of masks and realized that the masks in a sense freed them to reach more complex depths of emotion, and that the actors were able to communicate in a more honest way with each other and the audience as the mask freed them in a profound way. And so, through the employment of a mask, the actors were able to discover and expose themselves more fully.

Bowie used his characters and dress up to expose rock and roll in this way. His performances taught us about the constructedness of the rock star and the crafting of rock performance. His use of the mask revealed what Dylan's insistence on his own authenticity and Elvis's swagger hid. Likewise, goths seem to be able to connect with one another in a more real way through the safe shield of their masks. At goth weekends and at goth clubs, behind their crafted identities goth youth are able to establish real relationships and have honest conversations, which they would never attempt in their traditional suburban settings. They are able to honestly explore issues of sexuality and express their own identity in a way they would find uncomfortable without the shield of the mask. And it is their playing dress up, employing a conspicuous mask every day, that makes us question our own everyday costumes and masks.

Notes

1. See Paytress and Pafford 2000 for a visual record of these changes in style.
2. Did Bogart fans dress up like his characters? It is somewhat harder to tell, since the fedora and trench coat were standard elements of masculine dress. Still, anecdotal evidence suggests that fans wore those items in homage to the actor. One such bit of evidence is Michel (Jean-Paul Belmondo) in *Breathless* (dir. Jean-Luc Goddard, 1959), who does wear a fedora and smoke cigarettes in imitation of Bogart.
3. See Walser 1993, 128–36, for a discussion of the complexities of androgyny in heavy metal. Walser argues that it cannot be understood simply as homoerotic, observing that Bowie's androgyny differs because of its "ironic distance" (124).
4. Thus, blue jeans became the uniform of youth because they represented the antithesis of the middle-class dress code.

5. Flapperdom arguably did not operate at the level of subculture because the style developed as an aspect of the mainstream.
6. Hodkinson's research, conducted at goth festivals, clubs, and concerts, shows that members of the subculture usually understand belonging to it as a matter of personal appearance.

UNDEAD FASHION

Nineties Style and the Perennial Return of Goth



In March 1998, British style magazine *The Face* ran an advertisement for Smirnoff vodka depicting five women in gothic attire, checking their makeup in a nightclub bathroom (fig. 1). Although the same image also appeared on billboards and in other publications at around the same period, this chapter will use its particular context in the pages of *The Face* to illustrate the relationship between goth and nineties style. The woman seen through the distorting lens of the Smirnoff bottle is dressed with more sophistication than the others and—significantly—casts no reflection. The copy reads, “Pure Smirnoff—The difference is clear.” The implication is that the Smirnoff-enhanced woman is the real vampire, while the other four women are wannabes, aping the poses of the femme fatale but coming across as trying a bit too hard.

The ad depends on a certain level of knowledge in the viewer in order to work. The viewer must be familiar, for instance, with the conventions of horror films that demand vampires cast no reflection in mirrors. They must also be familiar with the existence of a goth subculture which is viewed by the mainstream as overdone and clichéd, and ultimately somewhat uncool. This basic knowledge is enough for the general viewer to receive the message of the ad, that real Smirnoff is sexy and dangerous while its competitors are, quite literally, pale imitations. The ironic suggestion is, of course, that if you are a real vampire you don’t have to dress like one.

This essay sets out to explore the way in which gothic conventions pervade discussions of gothic fashion, the language of style magazines repeating the clichés of gothic criticism. My argument is that goth, like most contemporary subcultures, is in a perpetual state of process and redefinition, a set of



Fig. 1: Smirnoff ad in *The Face*, March 1998. Reproduced by permission

discourses rather than a fixed identity. As such any attempt on the part of the popular media to characterize goth will inevitably fall into stereotype. I am interested, nevertheless, in the way in which these stereotypes function within fashion discourse; as we are all aware, convention and repetition are as intrinsic to the functioning of gothic discourses as they are to those of fashion.

It is arguable, however, that there is also another subtext to this ad, which would not work at any period in history other than the late 1990s. The readers of *The Face* in 1998 are well aware that gothic style is back in fashion, due to many fashion headlines throughout the previous few years. In May 1997, for example, *The Face* ran an article titled "Doom Generation: New Tales from the Dark Side," detailing the debt nineties fashion owed to eighties goth. These fashion stories make a point of both claiming a link with the goth subculture of the 1980s and emphasizing a progression, or—in the terms of the Smirnoff ad—a difference.

The appropriation of goth style by haute couture as described by *The Face* seems to illustrate Ted Polhemus's (1994) description in *Street Style* of the way in which subcultural style inevitably gets exploited in the "bubble up" rather than "trickle down" processes of contemporary fashion, whereby the catwalk derives its influence from the street rather than vice versa. Nevertheless, the article tends persistently to disparage goth subculture, even shying away from the term *goth* when discussing the new nineties model, preferring the phrases "Dark Side" or "Doom Generation." This movement is subtly redefined not as subcultural but as avant-garde, and is therefore permitted a degree of artistic credibility and subversive potential denied the goths of the 1980s. As the magazine states:

If you think of Gothic as being inextricably bound up with dyed black hair, The Mission and the Eighties . . . the Dark Side is thriving because it believes that it has a new relevance for the present: it is challenging preconceptions in a way Eighties Goth . . . always seemed too timid to attempt. Fashion may be turning to that decade for inspiration, but 1997's

Goth prototype is no longer the anorexic wallflower whose most provocative act was to apply a gash of black lipstick. (Gilbey 1997, 120, 122)

The function of clothes within goth subculture largely depends on who is wearing them: the middle-class goth of the 1980s can enact rebellion only through stereotyped and implicitly ridiculous dress codes, while the classless, avant-garde goth of the 1990s is stylishly subversive of convention. This new generation is "confident and glamorous" and is constructed as looking forward—toward the millennium—rather than at the past (Gilbey 1997, 122). In fact, it is constructed as a kind of utopian space where the forces of irrationality and intellectual critique can coexist happily. Read alongside this thesis, the Smirnoff ad apparently takes on a new significance for the magazine's readers. The implication seems to be that the four non-Smirnoff women are old school goths, while the enhanced woman is of the stylish new variety. In other words, drinking Smirnoff will transform you from a sad goth to a Gaultier goth.

The sell-line to the advertisement, as already noted, states "The difference is clear," presumably referring to the difference between the real vampire and the wannabes (besides, of course, the transparency of the vodka itself). Within the context of subcultural style, however, the word *difference* also takes on a more complex range of meanings. Subcultural style tends to enact a paradox, in that while it is predicated on looking different from the mainstream, it necessarily entails looking similar to other members of the subculture, the marking out of so-called tribal identity. While members of the subculture itself often vigorously assert their individual differences, to the outsider, the members of the style tribe usually all look the same. This is clearly demonstrated by the testimonies of individual goths interviewed in Mick Mercer's *Gothic Rock* (1991). An interviewee named Hemlock states, "Whilst some people see us and say we're all the same because we all wear black, you'd be hard pressed to find a few Goths looking exactly the same as each other" (67). Similarly, a goth named Lorraine insists "each Goth is different—even though to outsiders they may all look alike. It does annoy me when I hear people who dress differently—but not 'Gothically' being called Goths!" (115). The Smirnoff ad plays into this kind of subcultural anxiety, suggesting in particular the efforts of the "Real Vampyres" described by Katherine Ramsland (1999) and others to distinguish themselves from mere role-players and goths. Nevertheless, ironically the "real vampire" in the ad is recognizable only through appeal to stereotype.

So what are the origins of this gothic revival? Goth, according to its commentators, is always making a comeback, if it ever really went away. In 1988 the music journalist Mick Mercer could write, "Fresh impetus into



Fig. 2: "She's in Parties," David Sims, styling by Nancy Rohde, *The Face*, March 1995. Reproduced by permission

the Goth scene seems unlikely." Nevertheless, *The Face's* fashion report of May 1993 asked, "The return of goth?" (Heath 1993, 37), while in March 1995 the magazine ran a photographic sequence by David Sims captioned "She's in Parties: Early Madonna meets gothic melodrama," which showed a model mimicking a teenage goth hanging out in a graveyard (fig. 2). The *Guardian* ran a similar fashion spread titled "Goth Almighty" in June 1996, substituting Stonehenge for Abney Park. In August 1997, British music magazine *Vox* argued that goth had returned to the music scene through the likes of bands such as Garbage, Placebo, and Marilyn Manson, claiming "They've called it 'new grave,' 'miserabilism,' 'snakebite rock' . . . but when you've scraped away the hairspray and black nail varnish, it's all goth underneath"—a bizarre if appropriate metaphor apparently suggesting goth is in disguise as itself (Cigarettes and Oldham 1997, 64). According to Ted Polhemus, goth has displayed unusual longevity among subcultures. He suggests that "to a majority which fetishises happiness, Goth is by its very nature off-putting and therefore it has avoided the fate of being drawn into the mainstream. Thus, whereas a much-imitated styletribe like, for example, the Skaters has had constantly to chop and change in order to keep one step ahead of its trendy imitators, the Goths (like Dracula) have had the luxury of timelessness" (1994, 97–98).

Like Dracula, gothic fashion is constantly revisited by the trope of the undead. It is continually undergoing a "revival," despite the fact that according to popular perception it has never really died in the first place. *The Face*'s 1993 article on "the return of goth," for example, invokes "those girls at school (all schools, any school, 1983 or 1993)." Or, perhaps more appropriately, goth has always been dead anyway and simply requires reanimation: "The bats have left the belfry and Bela Lugosi is dead, but Paris wants to bring it all back again" (Heath 1993, 37).

If, as Polhemus argues, goth has retained its integrity as a subculture because it has never been taken up by the mainstream in the same way as punk or skater style, then surely the 1990s "gothic revival" in haute couture and lifestyle magazines might be a sign of its imminent demise. Yet there is a distinctive shift in tone to the pervasive claims that "gothic is back." To begin with, this is a curious assertion on the part of high fashion as goth has never been fashionable, as such, and therefore cannot be said to be undergoing a revival in the same way that seventies disco style, or even punk, for example, can. This is unless the revival is taken to be referring to the nineteenth-century fashion for Gothic, itself a revival. Gothic as defined today, whether as literature or subculture, has always been an implicit revival of something else, whether late nineteenth-century decadence, late eighteenth-century Romanticism, medieval architecture, or uncivilized pagans. *Gothic* as signifier is primarily a symbol of pastness, and pastness that is in the process of returning.

Second, the insistence on goth's return, rather than its development, presumes it is a monolithic entity not subject to historical contingency. Goth is not "timeless," but reflects the historical conditions of the decade in which it flourished, the 1980s. It may have continued to the present day but has inevitably adapted itself: Garbage and Marilyn Manson are radically different in style to the bands of the mid-1980s such as the Mission or the Sisters of Mercy, as well as far more successful in terms of records sold and international exposure. No doubt part of the reason for this change consists in the outdating of the oppositional subculture/mainstream model for a more widespread diffusion of "alternative" music and fashion styles through contemporary culture. There is, however, a sense in which subcultural commentators are often too eager to "fix" subcultural style, as part of their taxonomic project, and thus ignore the inherent fluidity of subcultural identities. As Caroline Evans (1997, 180) suggests, "Few writers have commented on the fact that people move *through* subcultures, and in the difficult process of studying and defining specific subcultures perhaps not enough emphasis has been put on the fact that subcultures themselves mutate constantly."

Similarly, gothic imagery in fashion has changed through the 1990s; earlier images are more obviously derived from goth subculture. In the "She's in Parties" sequence, which is named after a song by Bauhaus, model Jade wears fairly ordinary little black dresses that have been accessorized with features usually seen as the particularly lame or tasteless elements favored by goth subculture: winklepicker boots, crimped hair, fingerless gloves (fig. 2). Through the gawkiness of her pose and the outdoor location a semblance of realism is attempted, suggesting this is a real teenage girl posing in her local graveyard. Similarly in the *Guardian's* "Goth Almighty" story from a year later, the impression is of two dressed-up teenage girls messing around. More recent photographs, however, have a very different feel, having jettisoned the allusion to subculture for a deeper immersion in gothic imagery. The work of Sean Ellis with Isabella Blow in particular, in his "Taste of Arsenic" and "The Clinic" stories for *The Face* in October 1996 and March 1997 respectively, creates visual narratives that clearly reference the aesthetic and intellectual inheritance of the gothic tradition.

"Taste of Arsenic" conjoins two incongruous signifiers of the Victorian era—childhood and corsetry—in order to deconstruct the binary opposition of innocence and experience. The distortion of the child models' bodies caused by their corsets and masks makes them appear both disturbingly demonic and perversely androgynous. "The Clinic," on the other hand, reads like a trip to a terrifyingly Foucauldian institution under the influence of strong hallucinogens (figs. 3 and 4). The institutional feel is maintained in each shot with a background of discolored white tiles and grimy bathroom fittings. Props suggest surgical instruments and an anatomist's dummy, although it is unclear whether some of these are being used for punishment or cure. Against this backdrop a narrative of deviance unfolds: madness, lesbianism, vampirism, and satanism. Many of the women are doubled, in mirrors or in each other, suggesting the visual tradition of "the lesbian glass" (Dijkstra 1986) as well as fragmenting psyches. In one image, a model is suspended from strings like a broken puppet; however, the strings also look like heartstrings, musical strings, a child's swing. It is impossible to tell whether she is unraveling or being sewn back together, being held together or torn apart (fig. 3). Another image, of a model in an Owen Gastor waistcoat, suggestively references nineteenth-century photographer Hugh Diamond's portraits of the insane. The implication is that this is a clinic for producing insanity rather than curing it.

The complexity of Ellis's images is accompanied by an increasing sense of gothicism in the clothes themselves. A new wave of designers in the 1990s deliberately courted the gothic in their work, with Alexander McQueen in



Fig. 3: From "The Clinic," Sean Ellis, styling by Isabella Blow, *The Face*, March 1997. Reproduced by permission

particular basing collections on *The Birds*, *The Hunger*, and *The Shining* and frequently returning to themes of automata, dissection, and prosthesis. While the garments featured in photographs from earlier in the nineties would be reasonably wearable by a mainstream consumer once shorn of goth accessories, those of the slightly later images are increasingly esoteric and perverse. "The Clinic" further distorts a hunchbacked Comme des Garçons "distortion dress" by reflecting it in a doorknob to create a freakish effect. Similarly, the piece of Sean Leane jewelry that features in one of the most striking images for the shoot defies everyday wear by the average consumer (figure 4). It is, however, particularly resonant with gothic themes: not only with the characteristic motifs of imprisonment, torture, and vampirism, but also, on a more complex level, with the kind of structural conventions Eve Sedgwick has identified as characteristic of gothic literature. Vampirism in this image is ostentatiously a surface effect, produced through costume—there is no illusion of realism—rather than intrinsically a part of the self. By conflating the penetrating fangs with the penetrating gaze, moreover, the image seems to have undergone what Eve Sedgwick in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1986) refers to as "contagion," or the way in which within gothic texts, properties of one thing transfer themselves to another. Finally, there



Fig. 4: From "The Clinic," Sean Ellis, styling by Isabella Blow, *The Face*, March 1997. Reproduced by permission

is an element of black humor—the torture instrument resembles nothing so much as one of those flexible toy straws where the liquid gets sucked round a pair of spectacles before it goes into the mouth.

The increasing engagement with the literary and artistic elements of gothic, however, rather than its manifestation in subculture, have led to the perpetuation of a different kind of gothic cliché. In "Gothic Criticism," Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall identify the tendency of twentieth-century theorizations of the gothic to emphasize the irrational, the subversive, and even the spiritual at the expense of accurate historical analysis. The typical goth critic, they demonstrate, is preoccupied with psychology rather than history, and from the earliest critics such as Montague Summers and Devendra Varma attributes a spirituality to gothic literature derived from gothic's foundations in medieval architecture (Baldick and Mighall 2000, 213). Arguably, this is also the case in late-nineties gothic fashion. The language used to caption the more gothic of *The Face*'s fashion shoots is instructive: in "The Clinic," for example, "Welcome. We'll tear your soul apart" (1997, 98). Similarly, a spread titled "The Unexplained" by Lee Jenkins, another proponent of complex gothic fashion photography, puns in an almost Carlylean way on the possibilities of cloth for spiritual advancement:

"We are spirits. In the material world" (1999, 123). The attendant images, which allude to Victorian spirit photography and the crawling heroine of "The Yellow Wallpaper," show a model isolated and enclosed in a dark or twilight interior, alternately rapt, levitating, practicing telekinesis, manipulated by disembodied hands, and surrounded by superimposed spirit faces. The material world, of cloth and of photograph, suggests an index to a spiritual realm even as this realm appears to require the material world in order to manifest itself.

The conflation of gothic images with the spiritual is perhaps most evident in the video directed by Chris Cunningham for Madonna's single *Frozen* (1998). Madonna appears dressed in clothing from Jean-Paul Gaultier's gothic-inspired fall 1997 collection, an eclectic mixture of period styles that reflects the way in which goth subculture borrows anachronistically from the spectrum of nineteenth-century costume. However, she also wears black henna-style skin painting on her hands, which both echoes the texture of lace and evokes mystic Hindu patterns. Initially the video appears to be "straight" gothic: Madonna sits beside her doppelgänger and like Dracula transforms herself into a large black dog and a flock of crows. As the video progresses, however, a more mystical element comes to the fore: she levitates from the ground weaving her hands in an Oriental fashion, recalling images not only of Eastern spirituality but also of Renaissance saints or spirits in Symbolist art. The video thus comprises a sophisticated blend of western gothic and eastern spirituality. The gothic elements are, however, precisely those that most fit to the notion of a psychological or spiritual interpretation, evoking a surrealist rhetoric of symbol (the doppelgänger, the mysterious dog) that defies rationality.

Implicit in this focus on the irrational is a gender division. Madonna herself, commenting on the *Frozen* video, states that "I'm a mystical creature in the desert and I'm the embodiment of female angst" (*Inside Madonna* n.d.). Goth subculture is not particularly confined to women, although this is often how it is represented. A 1996 article by journalist Emma Forrest, for example, genders goths as definitively female: "For adolescent girls, the pull towards all things black velvet and mystical is especially strong. . . . Teenage girls *are* doomed romantics. Goths are just girls being true to their inner selves" (191). This evidently draws on a range of gender stereotypes (feminine mysticism, intuitiveness, romanticism, sentimentality). For Forrest, goth's reliance on "pantomime dress-up" for its identity finally becomes a means of trivializing it as a subculture and as a specifically female preoccupation: "Goths . . . are self-destructive, as opposed to Punks who are energetic and outward. Whatever extrovert qualities a goth might have only

ever manifests itself in their clothes.” Again this gendered distinction (she defines goths as “almost exclusively . . . pallid teenage girls”) falls into sexual stereotype: masculine punks as active, feminine goths as passive. Besides being a dubious distinction in the first place, this has the added effect of suggesting that the only way teenage girls have of asserting rebellion is through dress: “Who would have thought that a pair of black fishnet gloves and a hair crimper could be so liberating?” (191).

What is particularly interesting about Forrest’s article, which appeared in *The Face*, and the constructions of gothic fashion by that magazine, is that they tend to locate goth within the sphere of consumption, of purchasing clothes, rather than as a wider lifestyle choice. This appears to confirm Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber’s point that “within the repertoire of subcultural representations . . . girls and women have always been located nearer to the point of consumerism than to the ‘ritual of resistance’” (1997, 116). In contrast, texts privileged by the subculture itself—from Mick Mercer’s various guides to the scene to the novels of Anne Rice and Poppy Z. Brite—tend to focus on musical production and display a marked disposition toward male and in particular gay subjectivities. From these sources, it is evident that if goth is a “feminine” subculture, it is about teenage boys expressing “femininity” rather than girls. This is confirmed by the testimony of Phil Wills, a goth featured in Mick Mercer’s *Gothic Rock*: “The most important thing about the Goth/Alternative image for me is that it gives me a chance to show the feminine side” (Mercer 1991, 173).

The consensus among contemporary academic and journalistic commentators appears to be that goths are “faking it”—they’re not black or working-class, therefore they can’t really be miserable, and their clothing is a pretense, “gothic chic” rather than an authentic expression of the “gothic psyche.” Whether goths really are miserable or middle-class or not is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay. What is of concern here is the resort to gothic clichés in order to describe them. As Baldick and Mighall suggest of gothic literary criticism, the bourgeoisie or middle class becomes the ultimate enemy, conservative and deprived of agency. Furthermore, goths are cast in the role of Frankenstein, with the significant development that they constitute both creator and created, becoming monstrous through the processes of self-fashioning. James Hannaham wonders whether such artifice “doesn’t in fact cancel out the sincerity of the wearer by further obscuring his or her identity” (1997, 96). Such an assertion, however, assumes that there is an original, sincere identity being obscured—that the making monstrous of the self is artificial because it involves conscious and active self-fashioning. As Caroline Evans suggests, “one could argue that



Fig. 5: "Black White Red Magic," Paolo Roversi, styling by Edward Enninfal, *i-D*, May 1998. Reproduced by permission

such identities are not ontologically distinct, or preexistent, but are brought into being constructed . . . through everyday actions, dress, adornment and other cultural practices. So for example, I am not a skinhead before I get the clothes and haircut; rather, I constitute myself as a skinhead through the process of dressing and acting as one" (1997, 181). While all subcultural identities are based on this process of "making monstrous"—fashioning themselves as different from mainstream culture—goth in particular is situated within a signficatory space in which metaphors of monstrosity abound. Gothic literary and cinematic tradition provides a ready-made lexicon of otherness and difference through which the disaffected are able to articulate their alienation.

The dependence of goth subculture upon literary narratives, principally those of vampire fiction, ultimately leads to an ambiguous relationship with stereotype. Animating these kinds of narratives through dress is an important aspect of goth fantasy life: in Poppy Z. Brite's 1992 novel *Lost Souls*, for example, one of the characters owns a copy of *Dracula* in which "some passages were circled over and over, in pencil and lipstick and what looked like blood" (77). Similarly, goths in Mercer's selection of interviews testify to the importance of texts by Bram Stoker, J. S. Le Fanu, and Anne Rice in determining their identity. It could therefore be argued that the sub-

culture does, to a certain extent, invite homogenization or stereotype on the part of the mainstream media. Goths themselves, however, clearly see these images as a means of exploring identities not available to them through mainstream culture, and therefore invest them with notions of difference and unique self-identity. This form of imaginative escapism through dress at which goth subculture excels is not lost on the mainstream fashion press, some of whose presentations of gothic-influenced fashion play precisely on this fantasy potential. *i-D* magazine's "Supernatural" issue of May 1998, for example, featured a model dressed in Chanel playing a female vampire—precisely the upmarket vampire of the Smirnoff ad that had appeared in *The Face* two months previously (fig. 5). Luella Bartley writes of designer Oliver Theysken's work in *Dazed and Confused*, "We must all become princesses of the dark, or naive medieval lace maidens, practise the lovelorn frown and all get thee to a nunnery [*sic*]" ("Period Drama" 1998, 127). A similar feature in British *Elle* is titled "Cathy Come Home" (1999), which nominally invokes *Wuthering Heights*, although the clothes reference a range of period styles all subsequent to Emily Brontë, and the location work on St. Vincent results in a number of sea shots as well as the requisite moorland. Nevertheless, the copy promises, "New romantics are celebrating the return of Victorian drama to the catwalks. Swishing skirts, flouncy blouses and a shadow of black lace turn you into a real-life gothic heroine" (181). The difference between fantasy and "real-life" experience, it is implied, lies in wearing the appropriate clothes. While clearly, fashion doesn't come much more mainstream than on the pages of *Elle*, the copy writer seems here to have tapped into a key element of goth's sartorial appeal. Within gothic discourse, the clothes are the life: gothic chic is not a false surface for the gothic psyche, but an intrinsic part of it. Surely, therefore, within the world of fashion, it is this enduring potency of gothic images for imaginative self-identification that leads to their perennial revival.

Note

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MICHAEL DU PLESSIS

“GOTH DAMAGE” AND MELANCHOLIA

Reflections on Posthuman Gothic Identities



“Are you gay?”

“I’m not even human.”

—*Dance of the Damned*, 1988

In the 1994 issue of the “Networking” section of *Industrial Nation*, a fan magazine devoted to “exploring the music never played on the radio,” one fairly representative personal ad, from a “bored twenty three year old female who loves everything industrial and anything gothic,” went beyond inviting all sexes to respond, soliciting responses from the nonhuman as well as human: “Specifically vampires. All vampires/mortals write. Send anything human, subhuman, or cryptic” (93).

What is striking about such ads—which have changed very little in the last decade—is their emphasis on sexuality, eroticism, and gender variation. In addition to overtly bisexual entries, several ads named sexual practices such as blood sports, fetishism, bondage, domination and submission, and s-m. Any number of others used terms such as *deviance* or *perversion* to describe the erotic preferences of the advertiser. Whereas fan magazines for nongothic music subcultures tend to organize “networking” around the exchange of band-related information and artifacts, the tendency among goths is to organize such fan relations around practices of gender and sexuality. That said, in this essay I will argue that such practices are not primary for goth identities.

Since Angela McRobbie’s seminal early work the analysis of gender and

sexuality in subcultures has become commonplace.¹ Goth subculture complicates such analysis in surprising ways. Perusing their personal ads and other self-descriptions we find that goths do not just happen to be bisexual, but, rather, describe their bisexuality in specifically gothic ways. Erotic interest in fetishism, blood sports, and S-M seems also to extend directly from subcultural affiliation rather than to be either incidental or prior to it. This tendency to grasp gender and sexual identity through a more comprehensive gothic outlook seems to me to distinguish goths from the more conventional forms of straight, lesbian, bisexual, gay male, or even transsexual identity found outside the subculture.

Unlike the many lesbians or gay men for whom sexual identity is understood as largely separate from and prior to their particular lifestyle practices, goths articulate sexuality and gender directly through their gothic identifications—even though goth subculture is not preeminently about sexuality and gender. In this essay I suggest a possible reason by arguing that goth identities, which are performed through willfully morbid self-dramatization, configure sexuality and gender through privileged forms of affective signification, especially involving melancholia. In so doing, goths do “goth damage” to what is conventionally understood as sexuality and gender. Queering these categories beyond recognition, goths seek out new categories such as the “subhuman” or “cryptic.”² By way of elaborating this argument I focus especially on examples from the thriving urban goth subculture of the 1990s, a time during which exploding interest in gothic cultures of various kinds helped to create fecund conditions for the articulation of goth identities.

In the early 1990s, Danielle Willis, a writer and performer from San Francisco, described what drew her to the queercore scene. Queercore’s “core” was neither consistently lesbian, gay male, or straight; rather, it was a loose network of people who named themselves “queer” because of subcultural affiliation rather than sexual orientation (see Chapman and du Plessis 1997). As a term, *queercore* reinforced a sense of subcultural boundaries since it drew on an analogy with *hardcore*, a term used to describe postpunk allegiance to the “hard” ideals of punk. In a 1992 interview Willis described queercore as “really diverse,” listing a promiscuous mix of sexual and stylistic identities including “goth kids, straights, punks, bisexuals, rockers, fags, [and] dykes” (qtd. in Cooper 1992, 33). Goths, we may note, come first on the list, but they coexist with other subcultural affiliations such as punks and rockers, as well as with sexual identities such as straights, bisexuals, fags, and dykes. Willis offers herself as an example of a mixture of subcultural affiliation, sexual identity, and gender performance: “Look at me, I’m a female who dresses as a rocker boy so I can go out with transvestites” (33).

Like Willis, many other goths saw (and continue to see) the goth scene as a site in which multiple sexualities and genders come together to form uncategorizable gothic entities. As the cross-dressing lead singer of Specimen, Johnny Melton, remembers the Batcave, the legendary London goth club of the early 1980s: "[It] was a light bulb for all the freaks and all the people like me who were from the sticks and wanted a bit more from life. Freaks, weirdos, sexual deviants . . . just like now [c. 1988] there's a club called Kinky Kulinky, a transvestitey, carnivaly [sic] club . . . and that's very much the spirit of what the Batcave was" (qtd. in Mercer 1988, 102). Similarly, Storm Constantine, a goth writer, recalls the origins of goth in "the dangerously exciting melding of the gay and alternative scenes, the outrageous trannies who taught us where to buy our clothes, sex shops mainly. The fashion was everything, all death and horror motifs" (qtd. in Mercer 1988, 38). Clearly, Constantine sees goth as a mode of self-fashioning beyond the outward expression of an underlying sexual identity, although goth may draw indiscriminately from gay and "trannie" scenes among others.

Willis likewise connects goth and queerness without making goth merely derivative of either lesbianism or bisexuality. Her "Elegy for Andy Gibb," a section of *Dogs in Lingerie* (1990), is a coming-out story of sorts in which she describes how she became a goth.

I went to high school and started fucking girls and cutting classes on Friday so I could take the Long Island Railroad into the city and go to the East Village. I was very avant garde. I dressed like a medieval page and my favorite movie was *Eraserhead*. I listened to the Velvet Underground and wrote experimental poems with titles like *Love/Death/Dissolution*. My ambition was to be a performance artist. . . . eventually I moved to San Francisco and started dating transvestites and working as a stripper. I dyed my hair black, went through a can of Aqua Net Super Hold every day, fucked myself with dildos to songs about necrophilia and published a book of poetry called *Corpse Delectable*. (Willis 1990, 67)

In some respects, Willis's "coming out" follows a well-traveled sexual journey from the suburbs to the East Village and then to San Francisco, the Oz of gay self-realization. But is she lesbian, or bisexual, or straight? More important, does it matter in this context? The only consistent aspect of her story is goth, presented here as a welter of emblems, from necrophilia to black dye. She piles up cultural references, both archaic and cutting-edge (the Middle Ages, the avant-garde, the Velvet Underground), which collide with mundane consumer items (Aqua Net).³

Willis's 1993 performance *Breakfast in the Flesh District* (given at South of Market in February), attributes the failure of her relationship with Ome-

wenne Grimstone to their mutual “goth damage.” Grimstone, a transsexual goth performer, made an appearance as such in Steve Abbott’s novel *The Lizard Club* (1993), a roman à clef and posthumous tribute to the goth and queer scenes of San Francisco. In *Breakfast*, Willis tells Omewenne that in her dreams the two of them live in an Austrian castle, where they sip the blood of peacocks from tiny porcelain cups; Omewenne counters with a rather different, but no less gothic, fantasy. She does not want a relationship, and instead pictures herself as the faint memory of a childhood haunting, drifting in and out of other people’s lives. Willis ruefully sums up the realization of their incompatibility. “It’s hard when people’s goth damage collides,” she observes (Willis 1993). While goth damage, as Willis portrays it, may be responsible for this particular breakup, the very same goth damage, as I read it, fuses the scene of fandom and fantasy. That is, what is superficially recognizable as a mode of personal baggage also stands for and operates as the affect that produces both profusions of and alliances between goth identities.

Music theorist Barry Shank (1994) characterizes a subcultural “scene” by the “intensity of fan commitment and cultural production.” He writes: “A scene can be defined as an overproductive signifying community; that is, far more semiotic information is produced than can be rationally parsed. Such scenes remain a necessary condition for the production of exciting rock’n’roll music capable of moving past the mere expression of locally significant cultural values and generic development—that is, beyond stylistic permutation—toward an interrogation of dominant structures of identification, and potential transformation” (122). Shank’s analysis helps us to identify goth damage as a specific mode of interrogating the “dominant structures of identification” and one that highlights and challenges the place of gender and sexual identity in maintaining such hegemonic structures.

In her essay “Goth Damage” (1993), Willis demonstrates how goth creates a scene through the overload of signs. Significantly, in the same text she explicitly describes her sexual desires as gothic:

I was necrophilically skinny, worshiping Satan, and living on pharmaceutical grade morphine when I met this gorgeous little death rock heroin princess named Christabel in the Market Street Cinema dressing room. I usually dont [*sic*] like to pick up on other strippers but I have a terrible weakness for emaciated things with black, white or blood red hair who still do whiteface and severe black eyeliner in 1992 and who look a lot like me. Besides, she actually had a Joy Division lunch box. I asked her to go to Squids with me for coffee where she told me she really liked me because

she could tell I was “fully Gothic,” unlike her yuppie call girl lover who wouldn’t let her play her Christian Death tapes and who she was cheating on with this really cute Gothic guy who hung out at the Underground and read poetry to her on bended knee. Most of it was really sad, she said. I gave her a copy of my book and told her I looked really good in drag and that my boy name was Damian. (3–4)

Willis’s “fully Gothic” status may, perhaps, be narrated ironically, but the description is nonetheless at the heart of a seductively dense constellation of signs. As Shank notes, scenes are generated through the overproduction of meaning; thus, to begin glossing these signs is by no means to exhaust them. In the cited passage, Willis regales her reader with references to Christabel (recalling the vampiric temptress of Coleridge’s poem); heroin (offered in the form of an obvious pun that elaborates on the subjectivity of the “princess”); Joy Division (the legendary and infamously morbid postpunk and protogoth band); the lunch-box purse (a trend that goths helped to pioneer when they used lunch boxes as handbags and added gothic touches such as band-related stickers)⁴; the classic gothic look (whiteface, extreme eyeliner, and red, black, or white hair); Christian Death (another well-known band); *The Omen* (a kitsch horror movie); and satanism (understood to be at once outrageous and blasé).

Willis’s signifying overload involves the reader who is called upon to recognize, unpack and, ultimately, identify with the profusion of arcane subcultural references. In this way, “Goth Damage” works as a circulation of privileged signs through which subjects may constitute themselves. Not unlike the personal ads, Willis’s text locates a core of insiders who are “fully Gothic” enough to treat the very idea of such identity with the appropriate mixture of irony and high seriousness. This demarcation between outsiders and insiders creates a “system of distinction” which replicates in miniature the larger formations of taste that mark goth off as distinct from both the mainstream and from other subcultures and fandoms.⁵ In this way Willis makes narcissism—the privileging of those who “look a lot like me”—a source of community as well as individual desire. “Goth Damage” is a text that requires the goth reader to see her or his face, as if in a shattered looking glass that multiplies rather than merely reflects, proliferating the icy whitefaces of Christabel, Willis, the reader, and any number of additional unnamed goths.

In this way, goth aims to upset those models of identity that posit selfhood as either beneath or before the play of signs. Goths such as Willis, Melton, and Constantine grasp gender and sexuality as fashion, as style, as look—never as essence or interior. Goth identity works by means of perfor-

mative affiliation—through highly stylized forms of affect-producing bricolage. What would Willis's satanism mean, for example, without its allusive opposition to Christianity? What would goth be without the Gothic, and the latter's cobwebbed accumulation of meanings over two hundred years? In comparable fashion, the personal advertisers in zines such as *Industrial Nation* constitute their identity and lay claim to subcultural distinction by means of freighted allusions, knowing phrases, and privileged descriptions—in other words, through signifying activities calculated to produce certain *affective* responses.

I emphasize *affective* because goth signification would be meaningless without its emotional effects. The "goth damage" Willis evokes, however ironically, presupposes the specifically psychological damage of a certain kind of emotional state. Thus, no discussion of goth identity would be adequate without an examination of its most privileged signifier: its stubborn and all-pervasive gloom, its love of emotional darkness, in short, its *melancholia*. Theories of melancholia, beginning with Sigmund Freud's classic psychoanalytic account, throw goth's signature affect into relief. Indeed, there are remarkable correspondences between what Freud and Julia Kristeva say about melancholia and what goths say about themselves when they seek to elucidate the goth "state of mind" (Mercer 1988, 6). Significantly, though Kristeva devotes an entire tome, *Black Sun* (1989), to melancholy and depression, she ends by seeing melancholia as old-fashioned: "The postmodern is closer to the human comedy than abyssal discontent" (259). So much the better, then, for goths who revel in the archaic. Their relish for melancholia's worn prestige should be understood less as a "real" psychological condition than as an opportunistic deployment of privileged affect.

Goths affect to see the skull beneath the skin of the everyday: a T-shirt for Helter Skelter, a well-known club, shows a baroque skull emerging from a smiley face that has spilt in half—a perfect emblem for gothic rupture. Another T-shirt, promoting the goth zine *Propaganda*, shows a skull with the legend KEEP ON SMILING below it. Goth psychodrama thus steers clear of mundane psychobabble. The subculture's adherents take pleasure in flaunting black bile or spleen in a Prozac Nation; they are killjoys who take perverse cheer in propagating gloom. Goth melancholia marks not so much the diagnosis of a subculture as a mode of knowingly affective signification.

Freud's 1917 essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," has been taken up by many theorists to make sense of the cultural ramifications of gender. Feminist critics such as Juliana Schiesari have seen Freud as producing a troubling gendered distinction between (feminine) mourning and (masculine)

melancholia the effect of which is to elevate melancholia at the expense of mourning. Feminist responses to Freud have thus either asserted the historical importance of mourning as a female or feminist social practice, or have insisted on women's entitlement to the supposedly male prerogative of melancholia.⁶ More significant for goth identity, however, is Freud's temporal distinction: whereas mourning takes place over time, melancholia remains static, changeless, and fixated on itself.

Such fixated melancholia is not only goth's affective signature, it is also crucial to the subculture's cohesiveness. Thus, the members of The Cure, one of the oldest and most popular gothic rock bands, have been described as "angst-ridden messiahs of melancholy," with leader singer Robert Smith singled out as the "mouth-piece for a legion of lost souls in black" (Réné 1992, 5–6). In saying so, Réné, a music reviewer for *Propaganda*, imagines the Cure's fandom as a collectivity: "a legion" of "lost souls" unified by shared affect. The phrase "lost souls" also provides the title for a well-known goth novel by Poppy Z. Brite in which the title phrase simultaneously describes the name of a band, the fans who love and follow the band, the text that represents the band and its fans, and—undoubtedly—the goth self-identification of many readers of that text. Brite's naming thus initiates a widening series of concentric circles, all of which instance the potential for affective states of loss to produce collectivities. In Brite's novel, goth music becomes the "anthem of all the lost children who lived their lives at night, when the bars opened and the music began to play" (Brite 1992, 63). Thus, whereas Schiesari criticizes the individualistic and masculinist melancholia that she finds in various canonical texts, goth texts such as *Lost Souls* figure melancholic affect as a subcultural glue.

In thus taking melancholia for its affective signature, goth creates gender options that depart from the male/female dualism that Schiesari associates with more conventional variations on melancholia. Yet goth may also complicate the more fluid and performative gender identity that Judith Butler theorizes in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Building on her own readings of Freud, Butler argues that the acquisition of normative gender entails the disavowal of one's desire for one's own sex—a vestige of which desire is retained as melancholic loss. For Butler, heterosexual identity is thus shot through with loss and sadness, or "the melancholia of gender identifications" (1990, 57–65; 1993, 234–36). As is well known, Butler regards drag as a practice that is less an alternative to normative gender identity than a key to understanding the performative practices through which any and every gender identity is constituted (1990, 142–49; 1993, 230–36). Drag, according to such a view, is the lie that tells the truth. For

that very reason, drag bears an inescapable relation to “gender melancholia”; indeed, drag “allegorizes *heterosexual melancholy*” (1993, 234–35). Thus reduced to the allegorization of something outside itself, drag becomes the unwitting counterpart of straight gender. In Butler’s analysis, moreover, both drag and straight gender derive their melancholy from the proscription of homosexuality.

Goth, I suggest, complicates Butler’s account because goth’s melancholic affect does not refer primarily to gender. Rather, goth identification, as we have seen, is both prior to and productive of nonnormative gender and sexual expressions of many kinds. The proscription of homosexuality that is central to Butler’s account is thus displaced by a constitutive goth identification that entails no such proscription. Moreover, as a style, goth evokes depths of expression but, in actuality expresses nothing but itself. As we have seen, the subculture subordinates expressions of gender and sexuality to the signification of goth. In doing so, it reverses the relation that Butler sees, in which the “true” meanings of countercultural practices such as drag ultimately refer to gender. Goth plays up melancholia, looping it through all manner of unconventional gender performances in ways that always refer to goth’s own distinctiveness.

In so doing, melancholia allows goth to have its cake and eat it in the sense that goth melancholia can produce the kind of individualistic drama that Schiesari notes, but can do so in collective contexts. What does it mean to wear a skull on your shirt, like the one on *Propaganda*’s KEEP ON SMILING T-shirt? To sport your melancholic heart on your black lace sleeve in the manner of a “lost soul” (whether as the member of an imaginary band, the fan of that band, or the reader of the novel that produces those imaginary communities)? By flaunting melancholy, goth plays with the crucial relation between affect and gender; goth melancholy enables those who claim it for their primary identification to wear their skulls on their shirts, their hearts on their sleeves, and their favorite band on their lunch-box purses whether they are lost boys or lost girls. Goth thus makes melancholia constitutive of a quasi-joyous insubordination.

While it may thus seem that goth offers fluid identities, it is important to remember that such ostensible fluidity derives from a certain kind of frozenness or fixation. Brigit Brat, male-to-female transgender lead of the San Francisco band God’s Girlfriend and former lover of Danielle Willis, illustrates this point.⁷ In a 1993 interview with *Propaganda*, Brat was described variously as a “diva of doom,” a former dominatrix, and avowed “sex change junky”: she explained why there is a cover version of the classic goth song, “Bela Lugosi’s Dead” (originally performed by Bauhaus (1979) and fea-

tured in the opening scene of the 1983 cult vampire classic, *The Hunger*), on her own album, *Ritual Suicide Necrophiliac Blues*. "Who wouldn't want to live their life as the first twenty minutes of *The Hunger*," said Brat, "I know I would. There's a decadent mystery to it all. . . . I try to project that atmosphere in my shows" ("God's Girlfriend" 1993, 15).⁸ True to her word, Brat has been reported to exclaim during concerts, "Isn't this perfect?! A place for people who wish their whole lives were like the first 20 minutes of *The Hunger*" (Baird 1992). What is striking about Brat's desire is not its fluidity but its fixation. Brat wants to stop the narrative of *The Hunger* dead in its tracks to endlessly rehearse twenty minutes of cinematic perfection. In a way that evokes melancholic fixation, she chooses affective and signifying consistency over story and progression.

But what about *The Hunger*'s opening scenes is sufficiently compelling to prompt Brat to propose it as the foundation of a collective movement into fixity? As a haute couture vampire couple, Miriam (Catherine Deneuve) and her lover of the moment, John (David Bowie), cruise a younger punky/goth man and woman in a nightclub, Peter Murphy of Bauhaus contorts himself as he sings "Bela Lugosi's Dead." The vampires seduce, kill, and drain the other couple later that night. Rapid, nonchronological editing alternates cuts of the club and Murphy's performance, the murder of the couple, and one of the scientist's experiments that goes awry as a laboratory monkey dismembers and eats another. The scene fragments narrative: minor leaps take place in the chronology of events so that the performance of "Bela Lugosi's Dead" frames everything that happens, although the killing takes place quite some time after the song has ended.

The Hunger's opening scenes thus offer the spectacle of Murphy singing a song about an actor (Bela Lugosi) who played vampires in the same frame as a real vampire, who is played by Bowie, the consummate "cracked actor" of performance.⁹ In doing so, the film puts glam-rock icon Bowie face to face with goth icon Murphy by way of offering two distinct but equally androgynous gender styles that confront each other in a dizzying clash of fakeness—or realness.¹⁰ The Bowie–Murphy encounter gains an additional allusive twist from the viewer's potential awareness of Murphy's earlier cover version of Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust," a paean to glam self-fashioning. In the video for that cover Murphy performs Bowie's rock star alter-ego, Ziggy, as an undead subterranean creature who stage-dives into a funeral procession of adoring followers who then wrap him in a shroud—a classic instance of how gothic tropes such as the undead can be deployed to facilitate goth's performative play (here Murphy's performance of Bowie's performance of his own imaginary alter ego).

In a comparable fashion, the Bauhaus song turns Lugosi—the actor who famously performed the role of Dracula in Todd Browning’s classic 1931 movie (based on Bram Stoker’s classic late-Victorian novel)—into a real vampire. As a vampire, Bauhaus’s Lugosi is dead and undead at the same time: “The count Bela Lugosi’s dead / undead undead undead,” run the lyrics. It imagines and stages an elaborate funeral and requiem for the undead performer: “The virginal brides file past his tomb strewn with time’s dead flowers / bereft in deathly gloom.” Since this work of mourning takes place for the undead, it can have no end and thus turns into melancholic fixation, the affective content of which is expressed through musical and lyrical repetitions with which the song (inconclusively) ends. “Bela Lugosi’s Dead,” in fact, does not so much end as fragment and fade away with its plaintive reiterations of the word *undead* (in live performances, Bauhaus enhance this effect by playing lavishly extended versions of that closing iteration). Brat’s hyperbolic desire to live forever in a single scene that is “fully Gothic” (as Danielle Willis might drily observe) is thus—like Bauhaus’s song, and like the undead condition as expressed in many vampire narratives—a species of melancholic fixation. Moreover, goth subculture, in a way that recalls the first twenty minutes of *The Hunger*, can be likened to a vampiric bricoleur, preying on various melancholic intertexts to sustain its own fixated undead status.¹¹

Central to such stylized melancholy theatrics, goth subculture ravages mournfully what were once dominant forms of Western culture. Here, as in many other ways, goth differs markedly from its punk precursor, for whereas goth plunders the canon, punk always mines the lowbrow and everyday.¹² As a goth, explains one participant in the subculture, “you get caught up in the old literature—Edgar Allen [*sic*] Poe, Shelley, Bram Stoker—the mystical Gothic music, Victoriana and the classic horror films. . . . I immerse myself into the art, music, literature and architecture of long past times and at times you feel that you are almost passing into that world” (qtd. in Mercer 38). Similarly, a journalist comments on the early-1990s San Francisco goth scene: “Listening to the House of Usher denizens talk about their interests is like taking a course in classic dark literature—heavy on the Brontës [*sic*], Byron, Shelley, Yeats—only the male professor wears a dress and lipstick, and the woman professor a pair of custom fangs” (Pescovitz 1994, 28). Goth thrives in direct proportion to the loss of currency (in all senses of the word) of “the art, literature and architecture of long past times.” Through goth’s stylization of melancholy affect, Western culture shows up in the underground as its own revenant.

Yet, as I have been suggesting, it is not only the Western canon that goth ravages but also the rather more intact Western systems of sex/gender and

sexuality. Whereas lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and gay male identities are still fiercely contested in the present, goth looks forward to a future perfect when those identities will have been effaced. In this way goth offers a double refusal, turning its back both on compulsory heterosexuality and on normative models of lesbianism and gay masculinity. Even goth's provisional alliances with bisexuality and transgenderism seem tenuous and ephemeral. As Michel Foucault has suggested in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), sexuality has been crucial to the last two hundred years of Western understandings of the self. To envision a world in which the self has been disjoined once and for all from categories of sexuality and gender—as in the personal ads in the “Networking” section of *Industrial Nation*—is to entertain the *posthuman*.¹³ As band names such as Alien Sex Fiend, Incubus Succubus, or the Virgin Prunes further suggest, goth lays claim to posthuman sexuality and gender in the here and now, however ironically or absurdly.

Goth's experimental forays into the posthuman are, perhaps, most elaborately developed in the literary texts of goth-identified authors. Storm Constantine's *Wraeththu* (1993), an epic cycle of novels, represents a time when humans are gradually supplanted by a new breed of beings, a properly posthuman race, the Wraeththu, who are, significantly, “hermaphrodite” (794). In her novel *Hermetech* (1991), which fuses goth with cyberpunk, Constantine presents an “intersex” (Constantine's term) called Zambia Crevecoeur who has undergone not so much sex reassignment surgery as sex multiplication technology: Zambia has a variety of sexual organs produced on her/his body, including six sphincters on her/his torso. The novel ends in “neuro-fuck ecstasy” as a variety of characters conjoin in a technologically new form of sexual activity so powerful that it has planetary repercussions (359). Constantine's vampire novel, *Burying the Shadow* (1992), tells of the end of humans and the beginning of a universe of vampires; this novel is even more extreme than Brite's *Lost Souls*, for it casts this story as an apocalypse that parodies Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The vampires discover their ultimate triumph through a transcendental form of erotic intercourse that is radically different from what mere mortals can conceive of as sex: “For someone who had experienced this, the conjunction of the flesh alone could never be enough” (273).

At the conclusion of *Lost Souls*, Brite also leaps over the human to follow Nothing, her surviving vampire, fifty years into the future. Nothing is then discovered to be leading the twenty-first-century equivalent of a goth-industrial band playing “snuff-rock” (Brite 1992, 353).¹⁴ All of Brite's vampires are bisexual, for as Brite depicts the future, bisexuality has become prevalent if not actually normal (351–53). Of course, feminist and lesbian-

feminist science fiction and fantasy has always focused on utopian visions or allegories of changed gender relations. What distinguishes Constantine's and Brite's goth texts from such nongoth precursors is their insistence on the advent of radically different posthuman identities predicated on the refusal to abide by the erotic limitations of the human or the anthropomorphic as they are presently understood.

Transgender activists and theorists have also begun to speak in urgent and even apocalyptic tones of the fall of a regime of sexual and gender dualism.¹⁵ "To encounter the transsexual body, to apprehend a transgendered consciousness articulating itself, is to risk a revelation of the constructedness of the natural order," writes Susan Stryker (1994, 254). "As the bearers of this disquieting news, we transsexuals often suffer from the pain of others, but we do not willingly abide the rage of others directed against us." Stryker appropriates for herself as a transsexual woman—a kind of alien sex fiend—the full powers of monstrosity. "Though we forego the privilege of naturalness, we are not deterred, for we ally ourselves instead with the chaos and blackness from which Nature itself spills forth." She ends her reclamation of images of transsexuals and transgenders as "creatures," urging her readers to "discover the enlivening power of darkness within [themselves]" (254). Significantly, Stryker's transsexual manifesto borrows tropes from classic Gothic texts such as *Frankenstein*. In closing my discussion of goth damage with Stryker I do not mean to ignore the transsexual specificity of her work. I do, however, argue that goth subculture articulates modes of empowering monstrosity like that described by Stryker. Like Stryker's "creatures," goths see no need to mourn the passing of the categories of gender and sexuality as they crumble into decay: instead, goth subculture invites us to "dance [their] ghost" with the persistent—yet also persistently inventive—play of melancholic signifiers.¹⁶

Notes

I'd like to acknowledge Lauren Goodlad and Michael Bibby for their remarkable patience, tireless persistence, and wonderful insights.

1. See, for example, McRobbie 1991 and 1994; various essays in McRobbie 1988; and Frith and Goodwin 1990. In the latter volume, Frith concludes with an insight that may help clarify goth's ambiguous position: "As children now of Barthes and Bowie rather than Marx and Coca-Cola, we may understand the discourses of sexuality better than we did in the 1960s, but the coordination of theory and practice seems as difficult as ever" (424).
2. I take this wonderfully suggestive term from "Goth Damage," a short text by Willis (1993).
3. In *Cottonmouth Kisses* (2000), Clint Catalyst offers a very different narrative from

Willis's, in which, despite Catalyst's textual fragmentation and flirtation with bisexuality and transgenderism, goth, like drug and alcohol use, must finally be overcome, outgrown even, in a metanarrative that stresses the "truth" of selfhood as gay, male, and sober. See in particular the final piece, "The Dreaming Real," 143–58. The first piece presents "bad" bisexuality and androgyny, which it contrasts with "innocent" gay male selfhood in the context of bathroom sex in a goth club; see "Some New Kind of Kick," 8–21. The bookended quality of the text between these two pieces further buttresses a model of progress away from goth.

4. While this lunch box trend began as a mode of goth and punk DIY, for some time now "goth" lunch boxes—cum—handbags have been mass-produced, as a trip to any Hot Topic store reveals.
5. I take the phrase "system of distinction" from Sarah Thornton (1994, 177). Thornton, in her turn, develops the notion of "distinction" from Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1994).
6. See Irigaray 1985, 66; Silverman 1988, 155–59 and 162–80; and Schiesari 1992.
7. Note that through the name of her band, Brat seems consciously to echo Freud's "Psychoanalytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)." In that text, Freud analyzes the famous Schreber case, in which the eminent Judge Schreber became convinced that he was the woman chosen by God, God's girlfriend, in short. See Freud 1989.
8. In *Lost Souls* Brite also imagines a goth collectivity forming around "Bela Lugosi's Dead."
9. I refer to the well-known lyrics of Bowie's own 1973 song: "Crack, baby, crack, show me you're real."
10. The rapprochement between goth and glam musical styles is often remarked upon; for example, the band Daisy Chainsaw characterizes its music as a hybrid form, "gloth" (see Daisy Chainsaw 1994, 33).
11. Fans sometimes draw on this analogy to the point of monomania: for example, one self-styled goth vampire insists that goth, unlike other subcultures, "does not fade away," while another states, "I'm 24. How old!! I actually feel age is so insignificant if you're a Goth, because Goth is ageless. Yes, maybe like a vampire" (qtd. in Mercer 1988, 38, 21).
12. Dick Hebdige observes, speaking at once for himself and for punk: "Like Genet, we are intrigued by the most mundane of objects—a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motor cycle" (1979, 2). Goth, by contrast, has eyes only for the otherworldly and the extraordinary.
13. I am drawing here on the use of the term *posthuman* by Judith Halberstam (1991, 37–52; cf. Halberstam 1993, 1994, and 1995; and Straayer 1996 and 1990).
14. Brite's invention of this musical category provides yet another manifestation of the goth relish for the boundaries between death and undeath.
15. See Nataf 1996, Stone 1991, and Bornstein 1994. For assessments of what "transsexuality" does when invoked as sign of changing regimes of meaning, see Prosser 1998: "Such chrono-trope of transgender renders transgender equivalent to

this moment that surely—as a moment (post-postmodernism? after the “fin” of the millennium?)—must pass. Will we not then be left to discard transgender in looking for the next transgressive thing?” (203).

16. See the lyrics to “Lucretia My Reflection”: “We got the kingdom, we got the key, / We got the empire, now as then, / We don’t doubt, we don’t take direction, / Lucretia, my reflection, dance the ghost with me” (The Sisters of Mercy, 1987).

Part III



LOCALITIES





“TO COMMIT SUICIDE IN BUFFALO IS REDUNDANT”

Music and Death in Zero City, 1982–1984



Gothic-industrial music, according to Csaba Toth (1990), “remark[s] on the postindustrial disappearance of the laboring body against the backdrop of vacant factory yards, deserted farms, bleak downtowns, a polluted environment, and ever-present television screens” (89). To readers who lived through deindustrialization in western New York (and related Rust Belt metropolises) during the Reagan presidency, Toth’s description reads almost like a Triple-A tourbook of their dystopic hometown.¹ Toth further asserts that the gothic-industrial music scene, “typically growing up and forming their groups in manufacturing ghost towns, . . . located itself as a cultural form that, at least in part, articulated community reactions to specific social and political developments in the face of deindustrialization and the arrival of the postmodern moment in the West” (88). He goes on to astutely read what he terms “second-wave” gothic-industrial music of the late 1980s and early 1990s—particularly the videos of Nine Inch Nails—as “testimon[ies] to the shifts in the history of late capital” (88).

Rather than critiquing, as Toth does, second-wave gothic-industrial music’s “objects of consumption”—recordings, videos, clothing styles—this essay will closely examine one particular first-wave (early 1980s) gothic-industrial “sphere of participation”²—the music scene at a particular club (the Continental in Buffalo, New York) as it evolved within one narrow historical period of rampant reorganization in global capital (1982–84). I will also examine how this participatory sphere’s “reactions to specific social and political developments in the face of deindustrialization” were articulated in the formation, initial performances, local reception, and musical com-

positions of one Buffalo-based gothic-industrial band from that period, Nullstadt.

Western New York's Legendary Gothic-Industrial Nightclub

The Continental originally opened as a wedding reception hall and dinner theater in downtown Buffalo in 1975.³ Several years later it was transformed by owner Bud Burke into a nightclub that would become the destination for a crowd more appropriately dressed for a funeral. Clubgoers from the early 1980s remember the neighborhood immediately surrounding the Continental in these early years as laced with porn shops, liquor stores, strip joints, and abandoned and boarded-up buildings. Since its inception as a club, it has been a haven for assorted regional punk and goth musicians and audiences, occult practitioners, junkies, the G/L/B/T (gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender) community, radical artists, anarchists, and even the occasional frat brother and sorority sister who have wandered—knowingly or unknowingly—through the glass doors at 212 Franklin Street.

Inside, the spatial organization of the club divided these diverse clubgoers into three separate, though interlocking, spheres of participation. The cultural organization of space at clubs (such as the Continental), Wendy Fonarow theorizes, is to be viewed as “a communication of alignments”: “At the indie gig, where one places oneself is a physical enactment of a *statement* of assessment and allegiance” (1997, 368). I’d like to briefly discuss the three distinct spaces or spheres within the Continental as they were remembered by early-1980s participants at the club: the downstairs bar and live performance area, the downstairs outdoor “patio,” and the upstairs bar and dance floor.

The downstairs bar and live performance area was certainly a key sphere of participation in the club. Bands emerging from diverse subgenres of 1970s punk shared the weekend stage; this typically involved three new and relatively unknown bands on Thursday evenings and an emerging opener plus an established local group on Friday or Saturday nights. Stylistically, the bands could range from the postpunk dissonance of local celebs the Fems and thrash/hard-core groups like Tension, Painkillers, and a then speed-metal inflected Goo-Goo Dolls to more innovative electronic-rock acts (Electroman), ska-inspired groups (David Watts), rockabilly-influenced bands (Splatcats), and regional favorites like 10,000 Maniacs. National and international touring acts such as the Gun Club, Nina Hagen, the Lords of the New Church, and Howard Devoto all booked dates at the club in 1982 and 1983. Yet such live performances, even those by international touring acts, were rarely mere “objects of consumption.” Instead, the downstairs bar and live performance area provided a unique sphere of participation

for clubgoers' musical subcultural experiences. Participants would regularly chant along lyrics to songs from Continental regulars (lines from a Fems' working-class anthem, "I was born / eating potatoes and corn," come immediately to mind). When German punk chanteuse Nina Hagen appeared at the club on November 23, 1982, for example, one clubgoer remembered: "Nina was talking about sauerkraut or something when I shouted, 'I love you, Nina Hagen!' She looked at me, grinned, and continued: 'And speaking of love . . . ,' and introduced the next song. JP and I looked at each other, and I was cool for the moment."⁴ The possibility of participating in such "cool" moments was certainly one factor that drew clubgoers back to the Continental.

Several other clubgoers articulated their sphere of participation in the club with the back patio. According to one informant: "The Continental was truly a watering hole in the vast wasteland known as Chippewa. . . .⁵ [It's] the only bar I ever went to in the city where getting high was nothing to worry about, just step out the back door [and onto the patio]." Another clubgoer fills in the details: "I also remember hanging out in the lovely veranda—which resembled a small and claustrophobic Dickensian prisonyard, and taking some kind of surgical anesthetic that my friend stole from his father, a pharmaceutical salesman." The alignment of back patio patrons is clearly a participation in the drug subculture of the club.

The upstairs dance floor and bar, complete with its lighted floor, wall-to-wall mirrors, and central (enclosed) DJ platform, was the central hang-out for both dancers and the gothic-industrial crowd. The music being spun was crammed with the newest releases of the day: New Order's "Blue Monday," Cabaret Voltaire singles, and other standard goth platters such as Bauhaus's "Bela Lugosi's Dead." One patron remembered the mirrored walls providing "endless fascination." Others characterized the upstairs dance-floor area by its darkness ("a place for misfits to hide in the shadows," one nongoth called it) and self-fetishization ("people, the dancers, seemed like they couldn't stop staring at themselves in the mirrors").

Some participants made critical assessments and formed alignments about which of the three areas they felt most in tune with. These individuals were typically not part of the gothic-industrial crowd. One clubgoer observed: "Always enjoyed the downstairs better personally. Clearly many of the people upstairs weren't real interested in the bands, just wanted to dance or find a dark corner to do whatever. . . . downstairs is what the Continental was all about: the bands, the [outdoor] 'smoking lounge,' Marty [the bartender, famous for his strong screwdrivers], video requests, air!!!"

Similar comments about the upstairs were made by a few gothic-industrial participants who came to hear their music and share the solidarity they felt

with their peer group. Overall, however, I got the impression talking to these clubgoers—as well as from personal experiences at the Continental during these years—that these spheres of participation (areas particularized for listening/drinking, drugging, dancing) maintained a more fluid, dynamic relationship to each other. Except for isolated moments (a strong set from a particular favorite band downstairs, or a popular set of songs from the DJ upstairs), clubgoers tended to mediate experiences of each of the three spaces—grabbing a drink and listening to a few live songs downstairs, having a smoke outside, then heading back upstairs to dance or hang out in a dark corner. Thus, in contrast to Wendy Fonarow's more static and rigid spaces/categories, the spatial alignments at the Continental were more transitory, negotiable, and inclusive.

One reason for this less rigid, more inclusive cultural organization of space at western New York's legendary gothic-industrial nightclub, I'd argue, was a deeper affinity between clubgoers based on the larger, overarching socioeconomic conditions of the area's deindustrialization. A number of people I interviewed mentioned this in our talks. One clubgoer, when describing the black garments favored by a majority of Continental patrons (upstairs and down), claimed that the people "looked like they all worked in the same factory." He went on to address the more significant underlying economic issues of the time: "You know, a lot of people at the club didn't have a lot of money in those days, Buffalo, early '80s, steel mills and factories closing down. Some were downright poor. And, you know, you put on all black, you might only have one pair of black pants, one or two black shirts, a black trenchcoat you got from Amvets or Goodwill. But with that one outfit, anywhere in the club, you were *in*." As another clubgoer put it: "Buffalo . . . is an industrial city with a large blue-collar work force. The Continental's scene was most certainly influenced by the area's lack of job opportunities. . . . Most clubgoers used the Continental as an escape from the lack of opportunities and the ultraconservative ideology of the [western New York] area."

In what follows, this chapter will present a closer examination of the specific economic conditions of the city during the 1980s, the presentation of these conditions in the national and local media, and the impact of these conditions on people who were spending their late-night and early-morning hours at 212 Franklin Street.

The Necro-Ideology of Zero City: Buffalo, New York

Death came to Buffalo from its inception. As the state of New York was granting the city its charter in April 1832—Buffalo was no longer a trad-

ing outpost perched at the crux of Lake Erie and the Niagara River just above the plunge of Niagara Falls, but now an official metropolis—a cholera plague was ravaging the city and decimating its inhabitants. Later that same year, a fire consumed over sixty buildings in the heart of the city's downtown. It was, it seems, a less than fortuitous year to conceive a city.⁶ But the years immediately following its tenuous, death-inflected birth also saw the rapid growth and maturation of the city. By the end of the nineteenth century, Buffalo had become a major industrial hub, the greatest grain port in the world and the world's second-leading livestock exchange and slaughterhouse, the nation's second-leading railroad terminus, one of the country's leading brewers and grain hubs, and the nation's eighth-largest city. As one reward for this rapid maturation, and symbolic of its national and international stature at this time, Buffalo was awarded the Pan-American Exposition of 1901.

If 1832 was a less than opportune year for the granting of the city charter, the opening of the exposition in Buffalo at the onset of the twentieth century turned out to be a more encompassing historical and psychological death blow. In his chapter on the exposition, Mark Goldman (1983) describes the promise the city held for the gathering, an event that would catapult the reputation of Buffalo into world-class status, not only industrially and commercially but culturally as well. Unfortunately, as with the events of 1832, death arrived in Buffalo on September 6, 1901:

On September 6, President McKinley [went] to the exposition, where he was scheduled to meet the thousands of people who, in spite of the oppressive heat, were waiting at the Temple of Music, a large, vaguely Byzantine structure on the north side of the fairgrounds. . . . It was extremely hot in the room—over ninety degrees—and everybody was carrying handkerchiefs, either wiping their brows or waving them at the president. Leon Czolgosz, however, used his handkerchief to conceal a tiny handgun, and as the fast-moving line brought him directly in front of the president, Czolgosz shot him two times in the stomach. (Goldman 1983, 9)

Eight days later, the president was dead. The national and international press stories cemented the association of McKinley's assassination with the city of Buffalo, and a process that developed into what I'll call here the "necro-ideology" of the city was set in motion. Goldman's description is interesting in relation to later discussions on Nullstadt: how McKinley visited "the Marvel of the Electronic Age," how he was assassinated inside "the Temple of Music," and so on. The symbolism of the McKinley

assassination remains significant to area artists. An album featuring local musicians from the Continental scene, released in 1988, was titled *We Shot McKinley*; the album includes songs from both Nullstadt and one of Nullstadt keyboardist David Kane's side projects, Decay of Western Civilization.⁷

Architect, radical public artist, and urban theorist Kryzstof Wodiczko, in his 1986 essay "Memorial Projection" (in Wodiczko 1999) employs the term *necro-ideology* to critique the memorial icons of metropolitan centers. In the essay, Wodiczko explores how memorials (such as the McKinley Monument, installed in Niagara square at the foot of Buffalo's City Hall in 1907 to "commemorate" the assassination of the American president) serve as "ideological creation[s] of the post-eventful state." These memorials, he argues, "exhibit outright . . . [the] joyless, deadly, and heavy duty" of a confused public who "must now learn how to live closer to the obscene necro-ideology of memorial icons, the naked, cold bodies of the monumentally frozen goddesses, gods, and heroes of our glorious massacres of humanity" (49). Part of the education of this "confused public," I'd argue, falls squarely on the shoulders of local artists who need to constantly critique the city and its politics, teaching the public how to live amid assassinations, deindustrialization, disintegrating urban cores, and "joyless, deadly" icons of the region's history—even if this amounts to admitting, as the artists of Buffalo did, "we killed McKinley."

In 1975, about a block and a half from the necro-ideology of the McKinley Monument, a wedding hall and dinner theater named the Continental came to life. The original incarnation of the Continental opened in a year that saw less than glowing national publicity for the city of Buffalo, culminating in a grim *New York Times Magazine* article jointly authored by members of the SUNY-Buffalo American Studies Program.⁸ Titled "Down and Out in America," the article reads like a Studs Terkel-penned oral history of the social, economic, and psychological effects of deindustrialization in a city with official unemployment figures (at the time) at 10.3 percent, more than three points above the national average. During the years under consideration here (1982–84), however—after the Continental had metamorphosed, Gregor Samsa-like, from a wedding and dinner theater business into a postpunk gothic-industrial nightclub—the situation for Buffalo's workers, and the presentation of that situation in the national and local media, became even more grim.

The language of the media coverage at this time enacts, and engages, language and key metaphors of the gothic-industrial subculture. In a *New York Times* article from November 29, 1982, "New Buildings in Buffalo Can't Overshadow Blight," author Richard Lyons's description oddly parallels

Continental clubgoers' descriptions of the area around 212 Franklin Street: "hundreds of decrepit buildings, many vacant and others occupied by pawn shops, fortune tellers, second-hand stores and shot-and-a-beer joints." At the time of the article, Lyons notes the unemployment rate of the city had reached 12.5 percent, "higher than the rest of the country." One month later, the same newspaper carried an article by William Serrin about Bethlehem Steel's permanent layoff of 7,300 steelworkers. Serrin's article epitomizes the necro-ideology typical of descriptions of western New York: "The death in Lackawanna was a long time coming. But to a person who has known the death of an elderly parent or friend who had lain unconscious a long time, the death in Lackawanna, while almost sure to come, was no less shocking, meant no less pain." One laid-off worker quoted in the article characterizes the city with a language central to the discussion here: "It's going to be zero."

On February 13, 1983, the *Washington Post* ran a piece titled "Draining Their Lifeblood: Steelmaker Pulls the Plug on 7,300 in Lackawanna" (Kurtz 1983), on the shutdown of Bethlehem Steel, expressing a similar necro-ideology: "They pulled the plug on this close-knit company town two days after Christmas, and most everyone can feel the lifeblood slipping away." Later that spring, the *New York Times* ran a piece called "The Twilight of Smokestack America: A Tale of Two Cities" (Kilborn 1983), comparing Buffalo and Louisville, Kentucky. The language of death again permeates the section of the article on Buffalo: "For two decades now, more awesome, glacier-like forces have been at work in the American economy, rolling across the nation's industrial landscape, burying neighborhoods, factories, and the once-secure skills of millions of American workers." This article describes "the cadavers of [Buffalo's] urban factories," "the graveyards of heavy industry," an area "doomed," and other elements with gothic overtones.

Stories in the local press took on the same gothic pallor. On the day the steel mill announced its closing, one front-page article described conditions in the city "approaching, and in some respects exceeding, those of the Great Depression." Articles the following day tell of battered spirits and shrouds of gloom. The *Buffalo News*, in 1983, was filled with such articles. A Tom Toles cartoon published in the paper two days after the plant closing shows the casket of the Bethlehem Steel plant laid inside a grave. A tree looming in the background appears modeled on a sycamore from an illustrated Edgar Allan Poe. Mourning the death of steel in the city are three main characters: one, a worker in hard hat and overalls, wears a UNIONS badge and holds a bloody ax; one, wearing a MANAGEMENT badge and

dressed in a sharp business suit, holds a bloody spear (the puddle of blood beneath the management ax is noticeably larger than the blood dripping from the union's ax); the final character wears the word GOVERNMENT blazoned across the back of his sport coat (he is holding a bloody mace). As these three white male "entities" mourn the loss of Bethlehem Steel, a tiny dialogue box in the corner announces, "The Police are out looking for somebody Japanese." While the Bethlehem casket and cadaver waits to be covered with earth, the city itself, Toles seems to be saying, must turn to the complex causes and repercussions of this economic death blow rather than the all-too-prevalent racist scapegoating of the Japanese.

The social and psychological consequences of the city's political economy decisively affected people who were spending their time at 212 Franklin Street in the early 1980s. Participants in the scene, most of whom had family members or close friends among the unemployed, typically characterized the city as a "ghost town" and vividly remembered its abandoned storefronts, its underemployed, its unemployed, and its homeless. In these political and economic conditions the gothic-industrial music scene at "the next whisky bar" on 212 Franklin Street—and the band that would best represent it—was born.

Nullstadt

The characterization by laid-off steelworker David Yetman that the city was "going to be zero" encapsulates a much deeper socioeconomic and psychological experience of Buffalonians in the early 1980s, an experience of deep alienation, pessimism, and despair. In the remainder of this essay I want to examine how the music of one particular Buffalo band, who took their name (Nullstadt) from the combination of German words for "zero" (null) and "city" (stadt), engaged and critiqued the historically conditioned necro-ideology of the city.

The history of the original Nullstadt lineup—singer/keyboardist Stephen Giles Collins, singer/percussionist Donald Kinsman, and keyboardist David Kane—begins amid "the postindustrial disappearance of the laboring body against the backdrop of vacant factory yards, deserted farms, bleak downtowns, a polluted environment, and ever-present television screens" (Toth 1997, 89). Collins, who had moved to Buffalo from Boston in the summer of 1981 to take a job as a cameraman at the Sherwin-Greenberg video company on Chippewa Street (making "low-budget commercials and corporate movies"), remembered the early 1980s in Buffalo as "a time of Reagan-defying youth" wandering amid "the windswept dusty streets lost between economies, its ad agencies scavenging party bones for misplaced

bits of pride to put on TV, the beautiful decrepit steel mills.”⁹ Kinsman, an emerging visual artist, had recently returned to Buffalo after a stint as a student at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn; Kane was resettling in the city after a period living in Philadelphia. By 1982, Kane was playing in well-known Buffalo bands such as the Celibates and Electroman and selling keyboards at the city’s premier electronic instrument store at the time, Unistage. The first encounter between Collins and Kane was at the Continental. As Collins recalls:

I was intimidated by the place, it was divey, dark, and loud and thumping and flashing, pretty girls with weird hair, and the smell of incense and cloves and CO₂ fog made me horny. The owner, Bud Burke, used incense to mask the smell of dog shit from his guard dogs that had the run of the club when it was closed. There was a dance floor upstairs. Downstairs on the stage, a band called Electroman was playing. It was the first time I saw David Kane. Doing keys.

I was wicked envious of David, because he was making sounds like I wanted to make. . . . That feeling shows up in a song I wrote later called “I Came to Hear the Machines.”

Collins’s first memories of the Continental, and his first encounter with his future bandmate, parallel the standard descriptions of the club: the darkness, the eccentricity of the other clubgoers (often making first-timers feel intimidated), the division into spheres of participation (the upstairs dance floor, the downstairs stage), and so on. What’s also interesting about Collins’s first encounter with Kane is that it is recalled simultaneously as a moment of participation. Collins’s jealousy for Kane’s “sound,” and the psychological/economic metaphor articulated as “maybe . . . [a] want of better things,” encouraged his participation—his writing a song about the draw of “this [Continental] scene,” whose focus, to Collins, was “to hear the machines.” In the downstairs space of the Continental, regularly described as “industrial” by clubgoers from the time, the sound of David Kane’s *machines* proved to be the irresistible draw in an era where the sound of assembly lines at many Western New York factories was grinding to a halt.

Collins next met Kane when he went to Unistage to pick out a new keyboard. Kane always had firsthand knowledge of the newest electronic instruments being marketed and sold at that time by companies like Yamaha and Roland, and many local musicians—myself included—would regularly visit Unistage for Kane’s advice.¹⁰ Whenever Collins could “save up some coin” from his cameraman job, he’d “buy another toy from Kane.” He soon assembled a Casio keyboard, a Yamaha analog synth, a Roland TB-303

bassline sequencer, and a TR-606 drum unit. Collins was writing songs privately and occasionally renting a four-track recorder to get his compositions down and circulate cassette dubs of them among friends. These tapes—the subculture of exchanged cassettes, tapes self-produced and outside capital’s purview—proved seminal in Collins, Kinsman, and Kane forming Nullstadt. According to Collins:

My grip friend, Sutherland, liked the tunes and the lyrics a lot. . . . Because of Sutherland, somebody at WBNY [the local (Buffalo State) college radio station] heard one of my tapes, and suddenly I got invited to open for the Fleshtones at an outdoor show at Buff State. . . . I immediately called Don [Kinsman] for advice. He said he would go on stage with me, but back then all he could do is sing and bang on stuff. He also told me if I went up there with a little Casio and a bassline, I’d get laughed off the stage. We needed to find a third person who was a real musician. Donald suggested we go over to Unistage and ask David [Kane] what to do. I was really nervous when we went in to talk to him about it. David said, “Well, why don’t you just invite me?” . . . I called Sutherland and told him I had a band.

After just a few rehearsals, and amid much nervous tension, especially on Collins’s part (Kinsman had performed with other groups by then, and Kane was already a seasoned musician), Nullstadt took the outdoor stage at the Buffalo State campus on the night of July 19, 1983, for their first performance. Their set began, appropriately, with the electronic “noise” that opens the first song they performed, “A Certain Hostility.” After fifteen seconds or so of this buzzing (“the song of the machines”), the TB-303 bassline sequencer and a TR-606 drum unit kick in and run through an industrial four-bar minor-key sequence. After this first “machine-solo” sequence (it repeats throughout the entire song), Kane cuts in to lay over this his “powerful big mysterious [synth] sounds.” Kinsman’s ethereal voice incants a wordless phrase over this electronic-mechanical sound for two more runs through the sequence; then the “machines” themselves march a few times through the sequence on their own. Collins steps up to the mic, not to sing over the machines, but to speak:

the egress from the garden was at a place called Charlie.
American tourists would stand there, chilled, and look across.
they thought about their homes in places like Gary, Indiana
and felt a certain hostility in the very wind that blew.

The opening minute of their first performance is an amalgamation of everything Nullstadt. A *Buffalo News* review of the show described their

music as “dense, keyboard-laden soundscapes” with titles like “Machu Picchu,” “Time/Noise,” and “Bismarck Is Dead.” “Rhythm machines keep the time,” the reviewer continued; “Kinsman adds occasional synth-drums and Collins manipulates tapes of shortwave radio broadcasts.” Machines, death, politics, noise, information, electronics, shortwave radio broadcasts—from the very first show, Nullstadt’s performances had engaged in the aesthetics of then-emerging first-wave industrial goth bands deftly fused with a beat aesthetic lifted from the German electronic music pioneer Kraftwerk’s influential 1978 record, *The Man-Machine*.¹¹ Equally, as one sees in Collins’s lyrics to “A Certain Hostility,” there is the dialectical tension of the natural world (“the egress from the garden”) and the cold war political world (“at a place called [Checkpoint] Charlie”) in the rust-belt metropolis (“their homes in places like Gary, Indiana”), all producing an alienation/anger at the individual’s feeling of being torn between or lost within these competing worlds. Ostensibly about a covert operation about which a friend whose father was in the CIA had written to Collins, the song additionally addresses another common Nullstadt theme: the media, (mis-)information, and the failures of communication. At the conclusion of their Buffalo State show (at which the first-time band received, according to the show’s producer, “the first standing ovation they’d had for an opening act in four years”), Collins, Kinsman, and Kane stepped from the stage, “leaving their machines going after the song ended.”

A few weeks later, Kane called Collins and said he could get a Thursday-night gig for the band at the Continental. Collins recalled his initial reaction: “I guess I must have been thinking, OK, now this is getting serious. The Continental was a big deal for me. Here I am standing on the same stage where I came to watch Nina Hagen.” That August, Nullstadt took the stage for their initial Continental gig. As became typical for Nullstadt performances, other performers joined the band for an invited or impromptu participatory moment onstage. During this initial Continental performance, the interlocutor was local poet Oleg Harencar as “Russian tour guide” during the song “Holiday in Peenemünde.” The song is about an excursion from the airport—where Collins tells listeners that “they call me ‘mister’ on the public address / i meet my maker at the information desk”—to a testing center. In the third verse, Collins declares:

the guide will tell us all the facts and figures
we didn’t come here for an education—
we came to mingle with the ghosts of the engineers.

Again, we have several of Nullstadt’s principal obsessions: communication, alienation, participatory engagement (the transitory/fluid space of the

stage). The participation vibe, Collins recalls, was a constant aspect of Nullstadt shows: "Eric Fiedler got up on stage and chanted at the end of 'Beirut Waltz' until Elmore the bouncer came to pull him off, and Eric dove into Elmore's arms like a child to his dad. Eventually it began to resemble a real band, but we still did quirky things like breaking into a version of 'La Gazza Ladra' which prompted [Mark] Freeland to bolt onto the stage and spontaneously recite a passage from *A Clockwork Orange*."

One reviewer from a local college student newspaper summarized Nullstadt in 1983 as "radical because they still retain beauty in ugly times. Even tho they speak of 'haunting' it is still a beautiful haunting. Beautiful in its ugliness. It is truth in timbre" (Reynolds 1990).

Around this time, the band began rehearsing at the heart of "the beautiful ugliness" of zero city—an upstairs space above the video studio where Collins was working, around the corner from the Continental. When I asked how the space they were rehearsing in affected their music, Collins replied, "We did have the feeling of being in a rust belt, depressed, you know. . . . The fact of the stagnation, the dissolution of things was part of life as we expected it. They're trying their hardest to do that, probably for very sound economic reasons." Such comments convey the sense of Toth's observation with which I opened this essay, that the "first-wave" gothic-industrial bands of the early 1980s articulated the economic conditions and cultural environment of "manufacturing ghost towns" that were engulfing former industrial epicenters in America, the United Kingdom, and other parts of the industrialized world.

"When a City Becomes a Zero City"

In this section of the essay, I'd like to examine how two Nullstadt songs from 1984, their final period as a three-person band and the end (according to Toth and others)¹² of the first wave of gothic-industrial music, articulate the necro-ideology of rust belt deindustrialization. Then I will conclude this essay by offering a few explanations why the musical subculture of the Continental—its ethos of (de-)industrial participation in the early 1980s—continues to flourish in a city like Buffalo more than two decades later.

The Orwellian year of Reagan's reelection, 1984, opened strong for the boys from Zero City. Local music journalist Tim Switala featured the band in a half-page article, "Nullstadt Blends Fantasy, History," in his clubland column of the *Buffalo News*. Employing phrases such as "apocalyptic doom," "haunting," and "frightening" to characterize the band for local readers, he goes on to comment on how Nullstadt's songs and aesthetic "teeter between historical fact and chilling fiction" and how their amalga-

mation of "acerbic wit, political frustration, social concern, and beautiful music" makes them "one of the more socially relevant bands circulating the city." One clubgoer from this time vividly encapsulated Nullstadt in similarly precise economic-aesthetic terms: "Nullstadt was a poor man's American Kraftwerk."

In addition to its unavoidable Orwellian connotation, however, 1984 should also be remembered as a year of signature miscalculations and frustrations in the national politics of a disorganized Left. As Mike Davis astutely argues in *Prisoners of the American Dream* (1986), Reagan's defeat of Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro was consonant with Mondale's defeat of Jesse Jackson's presidential primary run.¹³ The pull to the center by the Democratic Party that characterized the presidential primaries of 1984, coupled with the crippling defeat of Mondale by Reagan at the end of the year, only heightened the sense of alienation, defeat, and despair among people who were coming to 212 Franklin Street to hear the newest songs of "Zero City." "The politics underlying the industrial Goth scene were complex," Csaba Toth summarizes. "A crumbling welfare state in Western Europe, the rise of Reaganism in the United States, and the mass embrace of the Right both at the polls and on the level of everyday life engendered the apocalyptic scenarios of industrial performers" (Toth 1997, 87–86).

The music Nullstadt composed and first performed in 1984 addresses and articulates this complex politics and political economy. Nullstadt's song "The Secret Judge" is decidedly Orwellian, with a central interrogation scene:

reality, quote-unquote, is a function of information
and our information says, and our information says
. . . that you did subscribe to certain magazines
and that you did use your typewriter late at night
. . . and that you made certain phone calls
to number known only to the group.

"The Last Man" is an assemblage of words, according to Collins, "ripped off almost verbatim from an essay by Nietzsche of the same name as the song"; "Animals in the Forest" recounts (in German) a journey to a city where the "animals" (rats, cockroaches, Tarzan, Jane, and "many, many bureaucrats") have replaced those of the earlier deserts and forests; and "Was Bleibt Inzwischen? (What's Left In-Between?)," sung by Collins in German, tells of a city with "no more houses, no more shops / our life hangs by a thin thread." Two other songs from 1984, however, give the sharpest picture of Nullstadt's articulation of "zero city" and the necro-ideology of its deindustrialization: "Swans Allegro" and "Nullstadt."

"Swans Allegro" opens with a single note pounding sixteen times from Collins's Roland SH-101 analog synth; added to this after four bars is a pared-down electronic percussion track that sounds as if it had been recorded on the assembly line at one of the recently closed Buffalo factories. Kane's synth parts, particularly the Mini-Moog solo at the center of the song, are crisp and forceful; the rhythm programming is among the band's most relentless and feels like a precursor to the sound beginning to emerge from the second-wave gothic-industrial music at Chicago's Wax Trax records; and Collins's vocals are easily among his most impassioned. "Swans Allegro" tells the story of a character referred to in the opening verse as "postmodern man" who appears incapable of transitioning from the collapse of modernist industrial society to the gap left by the postmodern moment which, in places like Buffalo in the early 1980s, had failed to arrive. Left at this juncture, postmodern man questions a possible return to a time before the frigid, dehumanizing machines:

profiles to sky, myths of the first whatever
cold pastorage, a blooming timelapse flower
go back from film, back from video
make charcoal men
on cave walls.

The song builds to a crescendo a minute or so later (following Kane's solo), when Collins delivers the closing verse and chorus:

look at my hand: i'm looking at a black and white hand
the dead blast furnace towers above a silver swampland
concentric entropies will ripple through the silver trees
come back to earth
and let's go home

The scenario is profound: looking at his "black and white hand" (perhaps a hand dirty from a day's labor, the residue of reading about factory closings in the morning's newspaper, or a symbol of the deep racial divisions that resulted in the failure of the progressive Jackson Rainbow Coalition to replace what Collins called the "doddering anti-communist" Reagan), the singer is reminded of the towering "dead blast furnace" and "concentric entropies" rippling "through the silver trees." Since I first heard the song, the "silver trees" have always struck me as a metaphor for the historic concrete grain elevators that are located directly next to "the dead blast furnace" of Bethlehem Steel on the shore of Lake Erie and along the Buffalo River on the city's south side. Around the time of this composition, a large debate

festered in city hall about what was to be the future of these “architectural ruins.” A *New York Times* article on the debate opens with a description of “the huge, cylindrical grain elevators” that “stand as a testament to a time, only a half century ago, when this city was a premier grain shipment center.”¹⁴ The article quotes Susan A. McCartney, president of the Preservation Coalition of Erie County, who describes a “cult of grain elevator buffs” who want to preserve them as “architectural ruins” or redevelop them as an industrial museum. These elevators, “silver trees” adjacent to the closed steel mill, “still serve a useful function,” the article concludes, “even if only as artistic inspiration.” If, as Toth observes, the “art practitioners of industrial Gothic perceived the deindustrialized space that late capital produced as the site of utmost abjection, “the end result of social entropy” (1997, 86), the “concentric entropies” rippling through the “architectural ruins” of Buffalo’s “silver trees”—its empty though artist-inspiring grain elevators—serve as a vital metaphor for the psychological state of the band, and the city itself, during the Orwellian year.

Yet if any Nullstadt song most clearly articulates the landscape and necro-ideology of the abandoned factories and the economic ghost town pallor of the metropolis during the crux of the Reagan years, it’s the song whose title is the band’s name, “Nullstadt.” The lyrics (composed in “really bad German,” Collins admits today) depict the fusion of the city with its people, the architectural ruins with the alienated individual, the cold war military state with the “un-proud” workplace.¹⁵

a city becomes a zero-city when one no longer can be there.
his voice gets lost and his friends become like abandoned property,
just like the buildings that stand all around here looking at their own
shadows.
.
. . . this city has a soldier, and he lives in the old slaughterhouse.
this house has white walls, and the staff are building beautiful white
trenches.
at night he makes his rounds, he comes to rape you and steal your pro-
visions.
the soldier from zero-city: he carries out his act of grace in four-
quarter time.

Listening to the song, one hears what seems to be the haunting fusion of some long-forgotten German beer-drinking number with a lost outtake from Andrei Tarkovsky’s film *Solaris*. Collins TR-606 drum unit, Kane’s Drumulator, and Kinsman’s synth drums are all silent during the song.

The other electronic machines produce an eerie melody line and a futuristic, computerized background soundscape over which Collins intones the lyrics. The political economy of the region is here characterized by lost voices, friends reified into abandoned property, and a metropolis transformed into a military state. The city's once flourishing slaughterhouses become the barracks for armed militia who "build" (rather than dig) white trenches before nighttime advances that result in nothing short of the rape of the city's terrorized citizens—"act[s] of grace" carried out "in four-quarter time." The apocalyptic vision of "Nullstadt" reaches its necro-ideological apex at the brink of what seems, for zero city, a certain and permanent death.

Zero City: "A Great Place to Love, and to Leave"?

Nullstadt's lineup changed drastically at the end of 1984, when bassist Kent Webber (who played with Kane in the Celibates) and guitarist Bart Mitchell joined the group, closely followed in 1985 by the addition of drummer Greg Gizzi. Nullstadt's songs took on a decidedly more electro-funk aura. Kane's synth sounds became more percussive, with sharper attack and less decay. It was during this period (1985–88) that Nullstadt came closest to nationally emerging from "zero city" as they began playing clubs like Manhattan's Irving Plaza and the video for their pop-inflected love song "May Day" tied for third place on MTV's *Basement Tapes*. As with the vast majority of aspiring bands across the country, however, a national recording contract never came. While other bands from the early and mid-1980s of the Buffalo music scene eventually broke nationally (first 10,000 Maniacs, then the Goo-Goo Dolls), Nullstadt solidified its place as an icon of western New York's legendary gothic-industrial nightclub. "They fit the mood of the Continental and the city, I suppose," one person who attended most of Nullstadt's shows told me. Throughout the remainder of the 1980s, the band played the club frequently, packing the Continental with "regulars" from both upstairs and downstairs like no other band.

Two key factors invoked by Nullstadt made them unique among a dozen or more innovative, compelling bands who took the stage at the Continental during the early 1980s. First, in their name, sound, lyrics, and overall demeanor, they encapsulated the necro-ideology of a city amid industrial collapse and architectural ruin during Reagan-era America. Second, they fused this ideology with an ability to link the separate "spheres of participation" at 212 Franklin Street (downstairs live performances, upstairs gothic-industrial dancers), allowing invited and impromptu participation in the creation of any live "Zero City" performance.

By the end of the 1980s, the crowd at the Continental was changing drastically. Many of the people who were part of the first wave of Continental patrons left Buffalo for expanded opportunities in California, Washington, D.C., New York City, Minneapolis, and elsewhere. There was often a feeling of extreme relief at getting out of the economically deadened city, as best expressed by one clubgoer: "When I drove to California in 1988, I was so happy to get out of Buffalo. I never felt a greater sense of freedom in my life. It was like I just chewed my leg out of a steel trap." As new gothic-industrial bands like Ministry and Nine Inch Nails formed, performed, and gained local, national, and international reputations, the bar at 212 Franklin Avenue spun these groups' new releases for the crowd on the upstairs dance floor, and the club continued to stay alive.

The necro-ideology of the Continental remains legendary in western New York. When news of the Columbine High School shooting and its link to the goth subculture hit the headlines in 1999, the *Buffalo News* sent a reporter directly to the Continental for an investigation (Galarneau 1999).¹⁶ And in the early years of the new millennium, the city of Buffalo, New York, continues to struggle with the death of its old industrial base. Local newspapers still characterize the region's urban core as "continu[ing] to bleed" and report that "the wound remains open and our long experience with population decline is beginning to breed infection" (Stefko 2001). An article in the *New York Times*, "A Fine Place to Live, and Leave: A Shrinking Population Shapes Buffalo's Psyche" (Eaton 2000), argues that "the reality of Buffalo is not simply economic. It is historic, geographic, demographic, and psychological. . . . the shrinking of Buffalo seems to have seeped into the city's soul and become part of its identity, as much as eating spicy chicken wings and rooting for the Bills." And while the article points to an Erie County jobless rate (6 percent) less than half of its astronomical highs of the early 1980s, this rate remains "the highest of any major metropolitan area in the United States (the national average is 4.4 percent)."¹⁷

The Continental survived the multiple death blows dealt to Buffalo these recent decades because it functioned as a space for a participatory youth subculture to "articulat[e] community reactions to specific social and political developments" in the face of a deindustrialization that has yet to be transcended in the region, "the arrival of the postmodern moment in the West" (Toth 1997, 88) that somehow missed the once-great grain ports, slaughterhouses, railroad terminus, and steel mills of Zero City. Until whatever moment is meant to follow this postmodern one disembarks on the western edge of Lake Erie just above Niagara Falls, it appears that the necro-

ideology of the club at 212 Franklin Street has served a vital function in the still-struggling Zero City.¹⁸

Notes

1. The title of this chapter is a line from the hit Broadway musical *A Chorus Line*. The statement is reprinted in a collection of aphorisms, *Buffalo: A Bull's Eye View* (Meyer, Meyer, and Choinski 1987).
2. I take the terms "objects of consumption" and "spheres of participation" from Aronowitz (1989, 201). For a more extensive explication of the participatory as response to alienation in the context of music, see Keil 1987.
3. This subtitle was the heading on a Web site developed by Continental patrons in recent years (www.thecont.com). This early Continental history is taken from Ruberto 2001.
4. Comments from clubgoers from the 1980s are from e-mail, phone, or personal interviews I conducted with approximately twenty individuals between May 2001 and August 2002.
5. The area known as Chippewa Street, where Chippewa meets Franklin just a block from the Continental, was gentrified in the 1990s. The area is now a major bar/drinking destination, especially for college students. Continental patrons are very critical of the area, especially the lack of live music in the new clubs. In the late 1990s, I witnessed clubgoers and bar backs wearing FUCK CHIPPEWA T-shirts at the Continental.
6. Material in this paragraph is summarized from Goldman 1983.
7. See www.musicians-united.com/GBGH.html for more information. More recently, the Hallwalls Art Gallery, in conjunction with a series of citywide centennial events commemorating the 1901 Pan-American Exhibition, included an installation by local artists Craig Reynolds and Betsy Frazer titled "William McKinley Shooting Gallery." Gallery patrons were invited to take a pistol loaded with blanks and reenact Czolgosz's assassination of the president. Each target was electronically rigged to set off bits of sound and video, including footage from the execution of Czolgosz. Projections of the city's abandoned grain elevators were projected on the surrounding walls.
8. It's interesting that the article is authored by SUNY faculty and students, as the university's decision to build their new campus in the distant suburb of Amherst in the early 1970s is often seen as the signature miscalculation in the postindustrial development of the urban core. According to *Buffalo Architecture: A Guide* (Banham, Beveridge, and Hitchcock 1981), "Virtually every major local planning decision of the postwar period also undermined Buffalo's future, from the construction of the new stadium in Orchard Park to the location of the new State University campus in suburban Amherst. Downtown and the central city neighborhoods began to decline precipitously under the impact of massive private and public disinvestment" (49).
9. All information on Nullstadt is from personal and e-mail interviews I conducted with each of the three original members in 2001 and 2002.

10. Kane also benefited from the proximity of the Moog synthesizer corporation, which was located in Buffalo at the time: "I had one of the first hundred Mini-Moogs that came off the [assembly] line in Buffalo."
11. It's interesting to compare the situation of Nullstadt in Buffalo with other gothic-industrial music scenes of the first wave. Take, for example, these excerpts from Howard Slater's (n.d.) essay on the scene at the Factory club (and Factory records) describing similar conditions of a painfully deindustrializing Manchester, England, in the early 1980s: "We were familiar with crumbling industrial architecture, with rain, gloom(!) and the recession of the early 80s and we were also searching for something intellectually stimulating: poetry, politics, drugs. . . . It was about sliding in through unevenly chained-up gates and exploring the spaces of disused factories, playing with the reverberation as if it was a massive echo-chamber, and becoming queasy with vertigo whilst standing over the cold air of silent loading bays and lift shafts."
12. Toth defines gothic as "a long sub-moment in the history of *industrial music*" (1997, 89). His "first wave" of the early 1980s includes bands like SPK, Einstürzende Neubauten, Throbbing Gristle, and Test Department. Toth's subsuming of goth under industrial music remains problematic to many critics of this music. In a similar vein, David Thompson and Jo-Ann Greene 1994 claim that "arguably, Goth had two good years, mid-1982—when the press first started courting the emergent bands, and Southern Death Cult were being heralded as the next Second Coming—through mid-1984, by which time UK Decay and Bauhaus had splintered, the ex-Southern, former-Death Cult were preparing to unleash *Dreamtime* and even Sex Gang were crumbling."
13. See Davis 1986, chapter 7, "The Lesser Evil? The Left, the Democrats and 1984."
14. "Buffalo's Grain Elevators: Inspiration or Blight?" 1984. *The New York Times*, August 19, 40.
15. One city publicity campaign of this era promoted the city with the slogan, "Buffalo: We're Talkin' Proud." Among people at the Continental, it was considered an absurd joke.
16. The front-page article begins: "Anywhere else in Buffalo, a black Cadillac hearse parked out front would mean bad news. At midnight on Franklin Street, in front of the Continental rock club, with a winged chrome skull as a hood ornament, it meant party time."
17. The continuing population contraction of the area is also well covered in a *Buffalo News Sunday Magazine* article, "The Incredible Shrinking City (and What to Do about It)" (Vogel and Rey 2002).
18. In 2005, the following epitaph appeared in the *Buffalo News*. "[T]he legendary club at 212 Franklin St. has most definitely gone dark. . . . Two years ago, it looked like the Continental was on the mend. But the Continental never quite returned to its heyday, when bands would be blaring to appreciative crowds on the first floor, while the world's greatest alternative dance party raged on the second. Just memories now" (Miers 2005: G28).



JASON K. FRIEDMAN

“AH AM WITNESS TO ITS AUTHENTICITY”

Goth Style in Postmodern Southern Writing



When I was a boy growing up in Savannah, my uncle brought home a wife from Chicago. One day, sitting under the pecan tree in their yard, my new aunt told me that before she moved south, she thought “snakes hung from the trees down here.” When I was a junior in high school, my American literature teacher, Beulah Harper, told us that on her summer vacation she capitalized on this widespread Yankee ignorance. Wherever Mrs. Harper went on that trip up north, she said, she carried in her pocketbook a carefully cropped picture of Savannah’s Sipple’s Mortuary, with its white columns and portico and sweeping front lawn, and whenever she was asked what the South was really like, she would pull out that picture and say, “Why, here it is. The South. This is my house, the kind of house we all live in down there.”

Snakes in the trees, plantations on every block—these images, though at odds with each other, are familiar components of the southern mystique. Writers working in the southern gothic tradition, notably William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor, have simultaneously contributed to and undone this fantastical construction of the South. It makes perfect sense to us that Faulkner and O’Connor set their fiction down south; where else would they, and why would we want them to set it anywhere else? What seems more surprising is that so much contemporary fiction associated with goth subculture is set in the South. Southern gothic writers appeared to have no choice but to write about the South, to voice some truth about their region; what, then, is the South’s appeal for goth writers, and what does it look like in their work?

In the 1990s, goth, a style-conscious postpunk youth subculture, was

dragged into the national spotlight as a result of popular vampire films and novels. Ten years later, goth is not as visible as it once was, yet if you go out after dark in any large American city or college town you can still find teens and twentysomethings sporting the goth look: whiteface, blue-black hair, black clothes, Renaissance and Victorian garb. Goth, in contrast to punk, is also remarkable for its adherents' enthusiasm for the written word; with flourishing Internet newsgroups and literary touchstones that include English and American gothic novels, Romantic poetry, vampire tales, and contemporary horror fiction, goth can even be said to be a text-based subculture.

Consider the contemporary novels most widely read and discussed in goth subculture: Poppy Z. Brite's novels (especially *Lost Souls* and *Drawing Blood*) and Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles* (especially their first installment, the novel and its film version *Interview with the Vampire*). Add to these *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1992), by postpunk musician Nick Cave, who is widely revered as a goth granddaddy and whose first band, the Birthday Party, "have now been given the honorary title of forefathers to the 'New-Super-death Tribe'" (Cave 1988, 101). In style and literary aspiration these books are a heterogeneous lot, yet they all are set in the American South. Brite's plots unfold in contemporary New Orleans and the fictional Missing Mile, North Carolina. The chief action of *Interview with the Vampire* is set initially in late-eighteenth-century New Orleans and plantations in the surrounding countryside. And Cave's novel maps the mythical Appalachian-like Uku-lore Valley, with a hamlet whose layout, stock characters, and surrounding terrain mark it as small-town southern.

We can begin to explain these novels' engagement with the South by noting that in contemporary American writing, the most available form of the gothic is the southern gothic. In the course of this essay I will approach a definition of the term *southern gothic*, but first I want to justify my assumption that these novels are, foremost, gothic novels set in the South rather than southern gothic novels or simply southern novels. On the goth newsgroups, in reviews, in the scant critical material on Anne Rice, the novelists I am considering are never discussed as southern writers, their books rarely treated in the context of southern writing. Understandable enough: None of these writers obscures his or her inability to claim the kind of authentic southern birthright that southern literary forebears vaunted in an effort to stake out their turf. None of these books seeks to engage the region's history or social conditions in any sustained manner. And all of these novels express a commitment to the generic advancement of the gothic lacking in most other postwar fiction set in the South.¹

We might claim, then, that postwar southern gothic writing uses the

gothic to investigate the southern, whereas goth writing—contemporary fiction associated with goth subculture—uses the southern to approach the gothic. This is a claim worth making, if we keep three qualifications in mind. First, the claim willfully ignores the marketing decisions involved in packaging a book as a literary southern novel—thus conferring upon it, in the wake of Faulkner, a certain respectability—or as a horror novel—thus positioning it in the mass market. With or without their authors' collusion, *Drawing Blood*, *Lost Souls*, and *Interview with the Vampire* are sold as rack-size horror novels; *And the Ass Saw the Angel* also has a mass-market trim size, as well as a front-cover quote from *Elle* magazine; but my copy of Faulkner's gothic masterpiece, *Absalom, Absalom!*, won't fit into those displays at the checkout line. Since it is beyond the scope of this essay to evaluate the implications of these marketing decisions, I want simply to suggest that while we shouldn't judge books by their covers, a writer's decision about what to put between those covers is not necessarily blind to such marketing concerns. Anne Rice's well-publicized yen for literary respectability, constantly thwarted by the gothic's low prestige, therefore is relevant to our reading of *Interview with the Vampire*, her modernist-inspired "plantation gothic" first novel.²

But there seems to me a more salient objection to our claim that goth writers differ from nongoth southern writers in their overriding investment in the gothic. I'm referring to the way we've been considering the words *southern* and *gothic* independently, as if the southern gothic were no more than a mode in which southern literary conventions were overlaid on gothic ones. In fact, the gothic has had great continuity as a southern literary tradition. In the eighteenth Query of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (289), Thomas Jefferson, that conflicted slaveholder, conjured a vision of masters in psychic bondage to their slaves, thus inaugurating the plantation gothic and laying the groundwork for what Leslie Fiedler would call the "essential sociological theme of the American tale of terror": "slavery and black revenge" (1966, 414). Edgar Allan Poe defended and reinvigorated the mode in the first half of the nineteenth century, while during this same period, the old Southwest (the semifrontier world of Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia) produced a comic backwoods grotesque that relied on elements of pastoralism. In novels such as *Absalom, Absalom!* and stories such as "A Rose for Emily," Faulkner developed a gothic modernism, combining the plantation gothic with the comic gothic. And in the second half of the twentieth century, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Harry Crews, Shirley Ann Grau, Doris Betts, Padgett Powell, and Mark Steadman, among others, have worked in the southern gothic tradition, with varying degrees of postmodern reflexivity.

Aside from this historical justification for keeping the term *southern gothic* intact, there are certain ideological reasons. The term is widely used, though rarely interrogated or even defined; it does not exist as a Library of Congress subject heading. But to borrow Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous definition of obscenity, we all know it when we see it. And what we know is that anything can happen down there; or as Margie Burns, one of the southern gothic's only theorists, put it, the South is "an ideological Other for the nation as a whole" (1991, 106).³

The popular and critical imaginations conceive, as products of the deep, dark South, all manner of horror and brutishness; writers need adduce no further motivations or origins to justify, for example, their characters' violent behavior or even, for goth writers' purposes, the supernatural. Thus the investment southern literary magazines and publishing houses have in maintaining the southern gothic as a commercially viable category is enabled by the strong ideological pressure American culture as a whole exerts on the term. Southern writing, then, whether or not it relies on gothic conventions, is always already construed as gothic, and while not all southern writing is coextensive with or treated as southern gothic writing, we can understand why the category "southern gothic" has come to seem superfluous or redundant.

Recall one of the stories that introduced this essay. Combating one set of stereotypes—snakes in the trees—with its complement—plantations on every block—Mrs. Harper clearly was as complicit in the production of the southern mystique as her Yankee interlocutors were. Indeed, the southern gothic itself is largely responsible for the promotion of this Janus-headed mythology. While it seems paradoxical to credit self-representations for the construction of the South as geographic "other"—and downright perverse for southern writers such as O'Connor then to blast northerners for being prejudiced against the South (1991, 40)—Burns posits three historical uses for the southern gothic: to conjure "an atmosphere of bemused languor" that rationalizes the region's exploitation by real-estate developers, to discourage "poaching on home preserves by non-Southern authors," and to treat southern history in a "nonpolitical and therefore safe" way (Burns 1991, 117). Burns, interested chiefly in the third point, claims that the genre's dark humor depends on a "distancing of social actuality" (122n)—that is, an inattention to the origins of class oppression.

A consideration of goth fiction's use of the South complicates and enriches Burns's account of the southern gothic's mystification of class relations and social problems specific to the region. Goth writing abandons standards of realist representation more thoroughly than southern gothic

writing does; paradoxically, this abandonment enables goth writing to address precisely the problems Burns claims the southern gothic ignores. All the goth novels I'm discussing rely on the supernatural, with no attempt to rationalize these effects the way so many of their gothic forebears did in an effort to make their work acceptable in Enlightenment America. While gothic conventions in southern gothic writing manifest largely as tropes and figures, southern goth writing turns these conventions into facts—that is, goth literalizes what in southern gothic writing remains figurative. So keeping in mind my three qualifications—commercial, historical, and ideological—for considering the term *southern* independently of the term *gothic*, I want to examine the implications of this literalization of the gothic in goth novels set in the South. If the South's status as ideological other consolidates its appeal to goth writers—that is, if we'd expect *anything* down there, why not vampires and ghosts?—these writers expose and ultimately detonate this detrimental construction.

To this end goth writing employs various literary methods, especially parody and pastiche, thereby calling attention to the complicated rhetorical act that all southern writers are obliged to perform in the postmodern world. David Harvey's attribution to postmodernist thought of an "intense distrust of all universal or 'totalizing' discourses" (1989, 9) suggests the difficulty of even speaking about postmodern "southern writing"; but Michael Kreyling indicates why southern writers are obliged to take recourse in the postmodern's characteristic mode of parody. Kreyling claims that stylistically, southern writers must contend with Faulkner, "the great master-code recognized now for so long as synonymous with 'literary' and with 'southern'" (1993, 6). As for the subject of southern writing, Kreyling finds in the South the specific historical conditions that make it ripe for the postmodern: "The southern culture which serves as the mimetic backup for southern literature has for some time been self-fascinated, addicted to images of itself and pseudo-events" (6). Kreyling cites as examples the Faux Faulkner Contest and Elvis look-alike contests—both of which, as we shall see, goth writers have de facto entered. Indeed, Kreyling calls parody "perhaps the only type of power available (or desirable) to a writer or critic living in the self-conscious sequel to a successful age of inimitable originals" (4). Thus, the development of a distinct goth subculture has accelerated the postmodern play and irony in which southern writers have been engaged for decades.

Moonlight and Magnolias as Metaphors

Although Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), which first established the gothic as a genre, was unabashed in its supernaturalism, British gothic

novels had, by the 1790s, come to posit material causes for their supernatural effects. From the outset, gothic writers in the New World couched their supernatural devices in rationalist trappings, explaining them away via such medieval sciences as alchemy or, later, bourgeois pseudosciences such as mesmerism. (Poe loudly objected to his contemporaries' practice of explaining away their works' supernatural effects.) Yet regardless of how these conventions are rationalized, gothic fiction treats the supernatural literally, while southern gothic fiction employs the supernatural metaphorically, at once to further and conceal its construction of the South as ideological other.

I don't want to imply some easy opposition between figure and fact here. But I do want to distinguish between a literary work's literal content—its primary denotative meaning—and what I call its metaphorical design, or figurative-language series. In talking about what Paul Ricoeur calls "the world of the work," we assume, of course, that the work offers up a world of its own.⁴ Literary works summon such a world through their arrangement and adherence to formal rules; through their use of tradition and genre; through their intent and use of language. We might say that it is through style that literary works become more than the sum of their sentences. Literary works create new worlds by replacing the world itself and it is the metaphorical statement that reveals this operation. "Metaphor's power of reorganizing our perception of things," Ricoeur writes, "develops from transposition of an entire 'realm'" (1984, 236). Ricoeur calls this realm a "new referential design" (230), which I specify as the work's *metaphorical design*.

Surely *design* is one of the most recurring words in *Absalom, Absalom!*, which I want to consider briefly in acknowledgment of Faulkner's status as literary southern gothic master code. Patriarch Thomas Sutpen's rags-to-riches-to-ruin story—and consequently the novel itself—is motivated by his tragic pursuit of an abstract design without regard to ethical concerns. Critics have debated how accurately the tale figures the South's rise and fall, but clearly the novel encourages this kind of allegorical reading. I want to suggest that the book is supported by a gothic metaphorical design—a framework of ghosts and demons and shades—that accounts for its characters' generally inhuman treatment of one another and alienates our response to them. Sutpen's design is realized most concretely in Sutpen's One Hundred, the plantation he carves out of swamp and virgin forest; but using the raw materials of the gothic, *Absalom, Absalom!* constructs an underlying ghostly edifice of its own.

Although *Absalom, Absalom!* has often been called a detective story, we might

be more tempted to call it a ghost story. The gothic trope of the haunted house—translated, in southern literary terms, as the haunted plantation—is ever present, and at some point in the text every character gets labeled “ghost,” “shade,” “shadow,” “demon,” “vampire,” or notably, “shadows in turn of what were . . . shades too” (Faulkner 1987, 379).⁵ But none of these labels is meant to be taken literally. *Absalom, Absalom!*, then, is a ghost story without the ghosts, and without the dead bodies that are the prerequisite for ghosts. Although his hands are “crossed on the breast as if he were already a corpse” (464), Henry is not yet a corpse. And his body’s incineration is only implied, never shown. *Absalom, Absalom!* is a ghost story, but only in its metaphorical design.

Flannery O’Connor similarly develops a new metaphorical design out of the old conventions of the gothic. In all her fiction, O’Connor conjures gothic visions that foremost are symptoms of physiological, psychic, and spiritual stress. In her 1953 story “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” this vision is in the service of portraying a New South in collision with the old. Bogus Confederate general “Tennessee” Flintrock Sash, who was probably a foot soldier in the Civil War, now finds greater glory in his ornamental role at events such as the *Gone with the Wind* premiere in Atlanta. In this story he is wheeled out and parked onstage to lend an apposite sense of gravity to his sixty-two-year-old granddaughter’s teacher’s-college graduation ceremony. But during the ceremony, no one notices that General Sash is suffering the results of something resembling heatstroke, in which the past—his own, the South’s—comes rushing at him over the “black procession” of “black figure[s],” scored with “black music.” “Black robe” becomes metonymic for “college graduate,” and “black pool” describes the graduates’ congregation at the end of the procession (O’Connor 1984, 142–43). Through metaphor, O’Connor turns the General’s experience of the graduation ceremony into a kind of black mass or funeral procession.

Yet there are no black people in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.” The darkening of the General’s vision ironically coincides with his last-minute enlightenment, his understanding of history as something deeper than spectacle. The graduation speaker’s hollow words—“Chicakamauga, Shiloh, Johnston, Lee”—literally assault the General but then give way to their referents as “a succession of places” that “rushed at him as if the past were the only future now and he had to endure it” (143). But the word laid on most thickly here, *black*, never finds its literal, human counterpart, in the narration or in the General’s head. If the Civil War has become marked as a conflict fought over slavery, then the General’s defiant restriction of blackness to the realm of metaphor suggests his limited capacity for redemption.

Metaphor, I suggest, is the means by which the southern gothic, in

Burns’s words, “conceals the dehumanization of response *to* the South, by representing it as a dehumanization of response *in* the South” (1991, 107). Burns is describing the kind of dodge that figurative language might also be said to perform. Metaphors are privileged arenas for lying; by granting authors these limited flights of fancy, readers kid themselves into believing that what is not figurative in a text is somehow “truer.” We might suggest that Faulkner and O’Connor capitalize on this contract by cordoning their texts’ dehumanizing impulses off into the safe space of metaphor. Thus the ideology-sustaining elisions that Burns finds in southern gothic writing are reinforced metaphorically, the gothic operating at a remove from the southern gothic’s principal referential context of southernness. I wouldn’t want to claim that southern gothic writers are being surreptitious here, practicing what Ricoeur, following Colin Turbayne, calls a “bad faith” use of metaphor, in which the reader is led to confuse metaphorical with literal attribution. As in O’Connor’s story, the figurative language in Faulkner’s novel calls attention to itself. Nevertheless, as Burns suggests, the gothic in southern gothic writing “mystifies the matter presented, removing it into an *atmosphere* detached from social actuality and engineering a response alienated and unsympathetic” (108, my emphasis).

Southern *goth* writing, on the other hand, takes the supernatural as its very subject. Goth writers use southernness to build their metaphorical designs, thus inverting the relationship between *southern* and *gothic* that we have seen in southern gothic writing. We might schematize the relation between literal content and metaphorical design in both southern gothic fiction and goth fiction set in the South this way:

	Southern Gothic	Goth
Literal content	Southern	Gothic
Metaphorical design	Gothic	Southern

This essay investigates goth’s reversal of these terms, especially its implications for the construction of the South that the southern gothic has helped generate. My focus is on the way goth writing hauls up into the light the submerged worlds created by the southern gothic’s metaphorical designs. The goth writing I will be discussing operates, in part, via a metaphorical design centering on southernness that coalesces into the kind of scaffolding provided by the gothic in southern gothic writing.

However, even at the level of primary, literal reference, goth novels’ southern settings are never as realistically drawn as those in southern gothic writing. Indeed, goth writers take for granted the sense of southernness that

the southern gothic has labored to generate. In Brite and Rice, the southern landscape emerges as stage backdrop, an aggregate of familiar southern geographic motifs—swamps, plantations, moonlight and magnolias. Rice's New Orleans plantation country and Brite's fictional Missing Mile, North Carolina, seem purposely less authentic and credible than the vampires traipsing across these landscapes. And in Cave's overtly parodic novel, Ukulore Valley's surreal southern terrain is peopled with stock southern characters as well.

As I have suggested, the southern gothic has been so successful at projecting an otherness onto the South that goth writers need do little work in this regard. The stage is set for their supernatural gothic dramas. But while goth novels treat the supernatural realistically, it is hard to resist interpreting these effects metaphorically. That is, while Brite's vampires in *Lost Souls* become overtly symbolic of the human condition only in the closing moments of that novel's principal action—"I don't think anyone knows what evil is," says a human character named Ghost, "so maybe they were just like us" (1992, 349)—we strive to find in them some metaphorical dimension from the start. Expressing this humanistic craving, Rice once told an interviewer, "I just find [the supernatural] the most powerful means that I have for writing about real life" (Ferraro 1990, 67).

I want to acknowledge, then, that in goth writing there are many levels of metaphorical reference, that metaphor might intrude into these novels' literal meaning system more deeply than in naturalistic southern gothic writing. Nevertheless, I want to resist interpreting everything in goth writing metaphorically or allegorically. I want instead to distinguish between what goth novels treat realistically and what they treat metaphorically, or with scant attention to realism. Furthermore, we should note that some of these books are more committed to realism than others. For example, Brite's novels—in their slow, careful plotting and characterization and their up-to-the-minute familiarity with brand names—recall the "shopping-mall realism" of such nongoth southern writers as Bobbie Ann Mason. Cave's novel, on the other hand, is an outright satire of southern-gothic writing, lampooning gothic conventions as well as hackneyed representations of southern social conditions. *Interview with the Vampire* is neither parodic nor naturalistic, instead approaching the vampire novel with a straight-faced quasi-modernist method.

Anne Rice's Fashion Victims

Interview with the Vampire was Anne Rice's first novel. While Rice has a more tenuous connection to goth subculture than does Brite or Cave, goths have

taken a keen interest in her work. And as the earliest of the contemporary novels we're discussing, predating the rise of goth subculture by several years, *Interview with the Vampire* serves as a bridge between earlier generations of postwar southern gothic writers and contemporary goth writers.

In its deployment of the plantation gothic, *Interview with the Vampire* is Rice's most consciously southern novel. The novel's suspenseful action presents itself as primarily a drama of narration; omnipresent quotation marks, often doubled and even trebled, remind readers that they are always *reading*. Except for an absence of italics, the material text of *Interview with the Vampire* thus looks a lot like that of *Absalom, Absalom!* Both books open in a dim, claustrophobic room, with an elder authority recounting his life to a somewhat reluctant initiate. Indeed, both books employ a lopsided interlocutory structure; the "dialogues" in *Absalom, Absalom!* are either alternating monologues or else simply one-sided, while Rice uses interview more as frame than as format, the boy's questions soon dropping out and his voice re-emerging only in the novel's final moments.

In the novel's central action, Louis searches for answers to his existential questions by first pleading with his father creator, Lestat. Scornful of Louis's humanist sentimentality, Lestat tells him that "vampires are killers" and that "if you find one or more of them together . . . one will be the slave of the other, the way you are of me." Louis replies, "I'm not your slave," then "realized I'd been his slave all along." Lestat continues: "That's how vampires increase . . . through slavery. How else?" (Rice 1977, 84).

Neither his property nor his forced laborer, Louis is Lestat's slave in the S-M sense, in thrall to Lestat's power as his creator and apparently the sole possessor of vampire knowledge. This model is complicated by the fact that Louis is literally a slaveholder. But the plantation becomes little more than a cover for the vampires, "the work of the plantation itself producing little" (49), and when Louis learns the slaves are planning to destroy them, he tells Lestat "our game of playing planter was over" (51). Both Lestat and Louis are performing, but whereas Lestat happily brandishes his slave-whip prop, Louis feels as miscast in the role of slaveholder as he does in that of vampire. Louis is tragic not because he feels he is always playing a part but because he cannot accept performing as the truth of being. It is his yearning for a sense of *being himself* that enslaves him. Thus it is precisely *as a slaveholder and as a vampire* that Louis is enslaved.

As the novel progresses, servitude emerges as its central metaphor for the vampire condition. Slavery draws upon the referential context of southernness the way O'Connor's "black robes" signal the referential context of the gothic. While Rice, ever questing literary respectability, may consciously

have chosen the southern gothic tradition for its literariness, O'Connor surely would have been scandalized by the comparison. For *Interview with the Vampire*'s great innovation is not in the southern gothic but in the gothic genre. Rice fully subjectifies a creature that in vampire literature had been cast as monstrous, inhuman. Thus while the southern gothic uses a gothic metaphorical design to dehumanize the South, Rice uses a southern metaphorical design to humanize what the gothic traditionally has construed as inhuman.

Southernness, expressed specifically through slavery as a metaphor, does much of this work of humanization.⁶ Slavery might seem an odd choice of metaphor for this purpose. But while Rice does not idealize the master/slave relationship as a model for vampire relationships, she seems to find greatest intensity in an imbalance of power; in her work, power relations are bound up with the human condition. But what are the implications of Rice's use of slavery as a metaphor? Doesn't such aestheticizing occlude slavery's brutalities? And wouldn't such a rhetorical strategy be as monstrous as any vampire that ever stalked the pre-Ricean literature?

Eric J. Sundquist has noted that *Absalom, Absalom!* "has virtually nothing to say about the horrors of slavery as a labor system" (1983, 130). Yet the novel's larger critique of racial construction (you can never be sure who is black and who is white) serves implicitly to invalidate slavery, which assumes two races and absolute distinctions between them. I want to suggest that *Interview with the Vampire* takes a more direct stab at the issue. In the novel's first part, Louis says of his plantation's slaves:

But in seventeen ninety-five these slaves did not have the character which you've seen in films and novels of the South. They were not soft-spoken, brown-skinned people in drab rags who spoke an English dialect. They were Africans. And they were islanders; that is, some of them had come from Santo Domingo. They were very black and totally foreign; they spoke in their African tongues, and they spoke the French patois; and when they sang, they sang African songs which made the fields exotic and strange, always frightening to me in my mortal life. They were superstitious and had their own secrets and traditions. In short, they had not yet been destroyed as Africans completely. Slavery was the curse of their existence; but they had not been robbed yet of that which was characteristically theirs. They tolerated the baptism and modest garments imposed on them by the French Catholic laws; but in the evenings, they made their cheap fabrics into alluring costumes, made jewelry of animal bones and bits of discarded metal which they polished to look like gold; and the slave cabins of Pointe du Lac were a foreign country, an African coast

after dark, in which not even the coldest overseer would want to wander. No fear for the vampire. (49–50)

This passage sets out to revise popular representations of slavery, though Louis does not specify which ones. Of course, the fictional account—both novelistic and filmic—that most likely informs Louis’s young interlocutor’s preconceptions about slavery is *Gone with the Wind*. Published in 1936, like *Absalom, Absalom!*, Mitchell’s novel was that year’s most popular example of the plantation gothic. If *Absalom, Absalom!* avoids critiquing slavery as a labor system, *Gone with the Wind* romanticizes it as practically a lifestyle choice. The above passage only appears to be correcting this representation; Louis’s rendition of slavery might happily coexist alongside Margaret Mitchell’s. Seventy years before the Civil War, his slaves’ bloodlines are as yet undiluted by white blood; by the time Scarlett gets ahold of them their skin has lightened and so have their temperaments, their African spirit. What is truly revisionist about the quoted passage is not its ostensible history lesson but rather its reversal of the terms by which we commonly understand the relation between slave history and its representation in fictional accounts. The sanitized darkies in certain popular representations of the Civil War are accurate, just uninteresting, according to Louis. His account is meant to be true yet acquires the supposed authority of popular fiction by adopting its dramatic style or by writing history as if its described events were in fact fictional. Or, we might say, Louis’s narrative achieves its heuristic force by describing slave life as an episode in a gothic novel.

This use of the gothic as a metaphorical context reinforcing a damaging ideological construction is familiar to us from the southern gothic. And Rice’s novel is interested in slaves only to the extent that they can illuminate Louis’s soul. Earlier in the novel, Louis refers to the “black slaves” of French Revolution-era New Orleans as “yet unhomogenized and fantastical in their different tribal garb and manners” (39). The slaves are so real that they are unreal; here as in the passage quoted above, their realness is indicated by their style. While this paradox might suggest Rice’s own strategic investment in fictional representation as historical truth, it might also suggest Louis’s sense, however misguided, of his slaves’ masquerade as transformational, as an *expression* of their preslavery identity rather than an *assertion* of it.

Slaves assert what is “characteristically theirs” through costume and masquerade, while vampires wear black to produce—and as a result claim as essential—their “funereal gleam.” The vampires Louis meets in Paris are world-weary aesthetes who turn to gothic style—black clothes, dyed black hair—as a retreat from a culture in which they are otherwise fully ensnared,

especially compared to the bestial Transylvanian revenants Louis has just encountered. Rice certainly is not equating the brutalities of slavery with her vampires' anomie; Louis's slaves, being mortal, appropriately meet their end at the fangs of their masters, the vampires. However, the novel posits the development of a kind of alternative subjectivity—an interiority almost wholly reliant on style—as both groups' means of confronting wholesale alienation. Louis's slaves are still free Africans; he is a vampire but can't lose his human heart. *Interview with the Vampire* uses southernness only to further the aims of the gothic, and yet in establishing this connection between vampires and slaves—this in-between state in which they both live—the book leaves us with humanized vampires as well as humanized slaves, at least relative to their portrayal in some southern gothic novels.⁷ Thus if the cited passage from *Interview with the Vampire* is less revisionist than Louis intends, it seeks to undermine a dehumanizing construction of slavery that the southern gothic has helped propagate.

Poppy Z. Brite's Bloodsucking Kudzu

The figure connecting Anne Rice and Poppy Z. Brite is the New Orleans vampire. Comparing Rice's cosmopolitan vampire aesthetes with Brite's less cerebral American vampires would make a compelling study in itself. But I want to continue my investigation of the southern gothic by examining the way Brite's work maps the South—New Orleans and especially her fictional hamlet Missing Mile, North Carolina. I want to focus on *Drawing Blood* (1993), her second novel, because I think it's her best book and because of its evocative southern milieu and its ironic take on southernness.

Drawing Blood tells the story of Trevor McGee, who as a kid witnesses the bloody effects of his father's butchery. In an old Missing Mile farmhouse, Bobby McGee, an underground cartoonist who has lost his muse, murders his wife and younger son and then hangs himself. Twenty years later, Trevor, himself a troubled cartoonist, returns to the house to understand his father's rampage and discover why he was spared. The house, a welter of poltergeists, seems intent on witnessing the son repeat his father's crimes. In a strategy reminiscent of Quentin and Shreve's midnight ramblings in *Absalom, Absalom!*—but literalizing that book's repressed homoeroticism—Trevor accesses his father's "essence" by tripping with his boyfriend, Zach. The two young men meet up—via a kind of virtual reality—in Birdland, a Charlie Parker—esque realm, flavored with New Orleans "like a spice," that is the source of creativity in Trevor's family mythology. In Birdland Trevor's father passes along the gift, but it is Zach, back in the real world of that southern farmhouse, who stops him from repeating his father's crimes.

Drawing Blood thus foregrounds the supernatural, but southernness provides the novel's metaphorical design. Fond of setting words adrift from their usual referents, Brite takes southernness as the object of her post-modern play. *Drawing Blood* is awash in Dixie beer. Zach drinks a lot of it when he gets a part-time gig fronting a band called Gumbo. And kudzu is ubiquitous in the novel. But whereas kudzu's potency as an emblem of southernness traditionally lies in its conjuring of a static South in the process of being swallowed up, Brite uses the vine to reveal the hollowness of the familiar southern values that O'Connor more blatantly eviscerates in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy." Kinsey Hummingbird, the proprietor of Missing Mile's sometime goth club, the Sacred Yew, "imagined it twining through the rooms [of the farmhouse], sucking nourishment from blood long dry. He did not doubt this was possible. As a child, he had seen a kudzu root unearthed from the Civil War graveyard where his own great-great-great-uncle Miles was buried. The root, fully six feet long, had eaten its way through a grave and taken on the shape of the man buried there" (148-49).

In her first novel, *Lost Souls*, Brite writes about vampires, but in *Drawing Blood* the bloodsucker is metaphorical. Obviously, kudzu "sucks blood" by strangling, or at least engulfing, whatever it touches. But the grotesque image of sucking dry blood—specifically that of the Civil War dead—also conjures a vision of the southern writer preying parasitically on the dead. Brite's voracious vine eats not a man but what remains of a hundred-year-old corpse, the vanished body of the South itself. The South, according to myth, is governed by the chivalric code, or what O'Connor's ersatz Civil War general's hypocritical granddaughter calls the "old traditions." Brite deepens this parody of southernness by extending it to her work's metaphorical design. In *Lost Souls*, the "old traditions" emerge as a "Southern Pride car wash" (1992, 40).

In an early chapter of *Lost Souls*, Brite more overtly satirizes writers whose bread and butter is southernness itself. The lovelorn Ann considers her lover Eliot's penis ("thinner and pointier than she was used to" [106]) and then his half-finished novel:

So it didn't matter when she read the half a novel and couldn't think of anything to say about it. It was a study of a rural family in Virginia. It was Tough and Gritty, but Sensitive. The hero turned out to be the youngest son, Edward, who went to the University and became a teacher of English. Edward was also the only character who didn't talk in dialect—Eliot had written his doctoral thesis on William Faulkner, and had never really gotten over it. It didn't matter that Eliot talked sneeringly of her "red-

neck boyfriend”—whom he had never met and never would—and derived a perverse glee from hearing that Steve was a college dropout. (106–7)

Ann turns to junior-college English professor Eliot—and eventually the heartless green-eyed vampire Zilla—out of frustration with her brutal musician boyfriend, Steve. Even without the additional details of his orange pro-vasectomy button (“*I Got Mine!*”) and his lame pickup line (“*You disturb me . . . but you intrigue me*” [106]), Eliot’s novel alone brands him as ridiculous, pretentious, a poser, a fake. The “half a novel sitting on his desk” (106) evokes the stereotype of the egghead professor of literature who is always trying—and failing—to write it. (Those who can’t, teach.) Hopelessly abstracted from real-world—that is, class—concerns, Eliot knows only what he has read, in this case Faulkner, whose noxiousness, at least as projected onto late-twentieth-century America, presumably lies in the kind of fakery that attracts Eliot to him in the first place.

Here Brite seems to be indicting the naive representation of regional dialect as a key to identity. What is spurious—or at least no longer appropriate—about this connection is that it depends on a vanished or vanishing regionalism in this postagrarian era of mass communications and interstate highways. Additionally, it renders the educated southern speaker as accent-free, while the uneducated dirt-eaters choke on their misspelled pronunciations. For her part, Brite avoids this kind of condescension by rarely having her characters speak in hammy dialect; she conveys southern accents not through misspelling, a convention of southern gothic writing, but rather through syntax and idiom. For example, the novel’s most southern-sounding character, the old North Carolina medicine woman, is known as Miz Caitlin, but her own dialogue is characterized more by colorful diction than by misspelling: “Well, I wouldn’t pay it too much mind. That old thing usually stays broke, but once in a while it gets temperamental. You can predict a passel of woe in anyone’s life if you’ve the inclination” (148).

Ann’s attitude toward Eliot—his pencil penis, his work—suggests Brite’s relation to Faulkner, especially as Ann is the only significant female character in this thick book. Or at least this attitude—in a novel controlled by attitude, as embodied in its hip third-person omniscient narrator—is what Brite wants us to believe.⁸ Except for moments of excess that seem more gothic than Faulknerian, the novel’s prose is straightforward and colloquial; its narrative unfolds in the traditional manner. If the very term *southern gothic* seems redundant in its double registering of the pastness of the past, Brite indeed seems to have “gotten over it.” *Lost Souls*, a Book-of-the-Month-Club Alternate Selection, updates mainstream horror fiction with its twentysomething goth attitude and subcultural content rather than

with stylistic innovation or other Faulknerian literary devices. Ann obviously thinks of a lot to say about Eliot's novel, she just can't think of any nice way to respond; instead of engaging the book, she ignores it.

More generally, then, Ann's reaction to Eliot's book spells out Brite's desired relationship with southernness—a relationship, I have suggested, played out in her novels' metaphorical design. So while Brite's direct engagement with Faulkner seems rather naive—especially compared to Rice's adaptation of Faulkner's modernist style—her novel's treatment of southernness suggests that unlike her character Ann, she ultimately is not ignoring Faulkner at all. But if on the level of metaphor Brite deconstructs that outmoded set of representations we recognize as southern—a set we receive largely from Faulkner's southern gothic—what world does she give us in return? The action in both novels takes place principally in New Orleans and Missing Mile. As in *Absalom, Absalom!*, New Orleans in Brite's work functions as an "other" to the Protestant True South. In its Catholic excess and more-decadent examples of "foreign"-inspired aestheticism, New Orleans offers both writers an origin for the gothic dramas they stage in southern towns of their own invention.

But Brite's Missing Mile, North Carolina, is no Jefferson, Mississippi—the seat of Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha County. While Faulkner's Jefferson is meant to be, as Cleanth Brooks points out, "an authentic community," "a full cultural context" (1978, 164–65), the best we can say about Missing Mile as a community is that it has a few regulars. As readers we are more interested in the strangers who get stranded there. In *Lost Souls*, Christian, a New Orleans vampire whose jadedness has slid into existential apathy, runs out of gas in the town: "He looked at the trailers and broken-backed shacks, the weed-choked family graveyards, the heaps of rusted scrap metal" (1992, 124). Wondering where he is, he asks a little girl standing by the road; retarded and mute, she replies by swinging her dried-rat plaything. This little girl is familiar as the kind of grotesque character we expect to encounter in southern fiction. But in a novel whose method, in contrast to its subject matter, is often ploddingly naturalistic, Brite's small-town setting seems willfully sketchy, even stagy. In the sentence quoted above, for example, it seems unlikely that *all* these features of the landscape would be so close together that Christian could take them in at a glance. Furthermore, for a town so down-on-its-luck, Missing Mile strangely boasts a good music store and a club, the Sacred Yew, which Christian "came to realize . . . was no redneck bar. He saw children in black, which he had not expected in a small southern town" (128).

I don't want to overpraise Brite for her postmodern use of collage here,

her unmooring of fixed representations. *Lost Souls*, her first novel, also describes New Orleans as a place with adulterous sex “under cover of Spanish moss and anonymity, hot silk and desperate searching tongues and the wet ground and the ghostly white scent of magnolias opening in the night” (1992, 3). This breathless description suggests an unreflexive use of the southernness she seems, in her description of Missing Mile, to be parodying. But whereas this portrayal of New Orleans gives way, in *Drawing Blood*, to a smarter, more sober insider’s version, so Brite’s description of Missing Mile in that book reflects a new complexity. The town retains elements of its staginess, but in *Drawing Blood* the strategy seems more certain.

Drawing Blood, which eschews evil vampires in favor of a haunted house and more sophisticated psychological terrain, opens by introducing its locale: “Missing Mile, North Carolina, in the summer of 1972 was scarcely more than a wide spot in the road. The main street was shaded by a few great spreading pecans and oaks, flanked by a few even larger, more sprawling Southern homes too far off any beaten path to have fallen to the scourge of the Civil War. The ravages and triumphs of the past decade seemed to have touched the town not at all, not at first glance” (1993, 2). If Missing Mile has missed the New South, it seems to have missed the Old South as well. In *Drawing Blood*, Brite introduces an Old South physical presence but ignores it for the rest of the novel. In her description of Missing Mile, Brite indeed comes to reject entrenched representations of southernness. After Trevor has visited his family’s graves, he

realized that he had barely glanced at the headstone as he left, had not touched it at all past the first initial contact. It was numb, dead, like the fragments of memory and bone that lay beneath it. Maybe they had been there once, but as their flesh decayed and crumbled in the sodden Southern ground, their essences had leached away too. Maybe he could find his family in Missing Mile, or something of them. But not where their bodies lay. (114)

For Faulkner, sin is most often attributable to the group and made manifest upon the land itself; by contrast, Brite, concerned primarily with the individual conscience, finds sin’s traces only in the body’s “essence,” or soul. In the graveyard scenes in *Absalom, Absalom!*, headstones pass along information—including some underlying emotional truth about the familial relationships they formalize—to the related and the unrelated, thus reflecting Faulkner’s understanding that tombstones are public memorials whose chief function is community making. Brite, on the other hand, is concerned more with the individual’s subjective path to his dead loved ones’

souls. Hence in her work, southern ground is just wormy dirt and tombstones aren't texts; they do not speak. Trevor reduces memory to bodily chemistry; when you're gone, it's gone. Or memory remains, but shattered and as a result undetectable.

In Brite's work there certainly is no trace of the kind of group memory or myth on which southern communality traditionally rests. Traces of the South's defining myth, the Civil War, are absent (as they rarely are in southern novels, even contemporary ones), although *Missing Mile* proves to have a radical element that suggests the town saw some of the social upheaval that the rest of the country did in the 1960s. Brite, however, is not interested in mapping *Missing Mile* as a community of former hippies, such as the ones running the music store and the club. Nor does she envision a community of the goths who frequent these places in the 1990s. That *Missing Mile* is no community at all suggests Brite's undoing of southernness as community. *Missing Mile* is the kind of loose pastiche that goth subculture itself might represent, a town full of strangers who know they can never connect but still find the effort worthwhile.

Nick Cave's Southern Gothic Karaoke

If Poppy Z. Brite's *Missing Mile* resembles a movie-studio lot more than it does the small towns in southern gothic writing, Nick Cave's *Ukulele Valley* is off the map. *And the Ass Saw the Angel* opens with a crow's-eye view of the valley, and what the crow sees is kudzu: "Down the bitten inner-flank we go, where trees laden with thick vines grow upon the trembling slopes. Some hang out into the valley at dangerous angles, their worried roots rising from the hillside soil as they suffer the creeping burden that trusses and binds and weighs like the world across their limbs. This knitted creeper, these trees, all strung one to one and chained to the ground by vine" (1992, 5). While Brite's kudzu is malign, Cave's is indistinguishable from the South it is swallowing. Brite's vine suggests movement—it's *alive*—while Cave's seems static relative to the anthropomorphized trees whose movement it restricts. This emblem of southernness acquires a goth spin as a Romantic symbol of the oppressiveness of worldly cares, which Cave's novel heaps and heaps upon its protagonist, Euchrid Eucrow. More specifically, the kudzu reference initiates a series of images of creatures, including poor Euchrid himself, whose bodies have been deformed by literal bindings and cagings.

We should not overlook the humor in all this. Cave's prose alone—a stew of faux Faulkner and Poe peppered with medieval diction and contemporary Commonwealth slang—indicates its parodic status. The novel projects gothic character types—Euchrid, for example, falls in a tradition of gothic

villain-heroes—and southern stock characters—hypocritical preacher man, kindhearted prostitute pariah, assorted inbred types, and a heartless sectarian Baptist community—onto an impossible landscape juxtaposing a mountain valley, sugarcane fields, and a swamp, showered by Biblical rains.

Of course, what is most audacious here is not Cave's bravura performance but the very fact that he undertook it. Hailing from Australia, Cave lacks any claim to being a southerner; a musician, he even lacks title to being a fiction writer. The biographical note on Poppy Z. Brite's first novel, stating that she "has lived all over the American South," makes no claim that she possesses an authentic southern birthright. Judging from the note on Cave's novel, however, we could conclude that he has never even been to the South. Like *King Ink*, which collects Cave's song lyrics and related prose, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* cobbles together its southern setting out of the lives and music of Cave's southern musical heroes—Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Elvis—while the novel's southern voice reflects the influence of southern gothic writers Poe and Faulkner.

To a greater extent than Brite's work, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* foregrounds southernness as nothing more than commodified representations. Thus while we could go through the novel tracing metaphors of southernness, the book's parodic status licenses us to broaden our discussion of metaphor to include the novel's literal southern setting. Having observed the disparate features of the valley's landscape, we should note that the town itself is unnamed and furnished with such generic landmarks as Memorial Square and Courthouse. Thus while never explicitly identified in the text as southern, Ukulore Valley is obviously marked as such. Or as the paperback's back cover, doing the marketing work the text eschews, proclaims in big red print: "In a world of Southern moonshine and madness, he followed his vision of vengeance." Here the South itself, being so generic, forms the metaphorical context for the gothic drama the novel enacts.

Let me give a brief synopsis of Cave's novel. Abused by a monstrous, rotgut-drunk mother, caged and crippled by a father who also tortures animals, hunchback mute Euchrid Eucrow spends most of his time staying out of their—and the cruel townspeople's—way. Peering into her window one evening as part of a divine "mission," Euchrid soon sees prostitute Cosey Mo as a saintly sex goddess, so when preacher Abie Poe sends her pink trailer tumbling, Euchrid links his fate with hers—and with that of her baby daughter, Beth, whom the clueless townspeople hail as a sacred virgin ensuring the region's fertility. Euchrid has other ideas; having been informed, by his father's ghost, that Beth is Satan's spawn, Euchrid decides to act accordingly. His parents dead, Euchrid eventually literalizes his estrangement

from the community by constructing and holing up, with various caged beasts as his subjects, in a porno gothic castle that looks like a *Waterworld* set. Euchrid calls it Doghead and he's the king.

Thus even if we consider the gothic little more than a genre of conventions, rather than an adaptive expressionistic style, we can see that Cave is parodying that genre as fully as he is parodying southernness itself. We have noted the way southern gothic writing develops a metaphorical design out of the materials of the gothic, while Brite and Rice create such a design out of the set of representations that we recognize as southern. Cave, meanwhile, sets up a southern metaphorical context for a gothic drama that seems no more real. In so doing, Cave accomplishes what I have suggested Rice and Brite attempt on smaller scales: he subverts the ideology that sustains the link between *southern* and *gothic* and that has allowed the category to go unexamined for so long.

In undoing this link, Cave deploys southern tropes to hilarious gothic effect. Euchrid, descendant of inbred hill stock, is as physically degenerate as we would expect, but his symptoms—notably an uncontrollable nosebleed and moonshine DTs—manifest the raw emotional and psychological states responsible for traditional gothic heroes' supernatural visions. And Euchrid, understandably, is a pessimist, so when he spies the now-wretched Cozey Mo, wrapped in a dirty blanket, in the square one rainy night, he assumes the figure is "Death—yes, Death—why, Death" (149). More enigmatic is the guardian angel who pays Euchrid visits in his swamp bower. As the narrative progresses, Euchrid seems more sinning than sinned against, emerging ultimately as gothic hero and villain pounded into one—a gothic antihero or, to be site-specific, an outlaw hero.

In keeping with the ascendancy of style that we have seen in Rice and that we see in goth subculture itself, the style of *And the Ass Saw the Angel* reinforces the subversion of both gothic and southern conventions that it dramatizes. Its present action narrated in first person by Euchrid as he sinks in quicksand, the novel chronicles Euchrid's life and the valley's history chiefly in omniscient third person—interspersed with chapters in which Euchrid recounts these memories himself, along with charts, the text of a poster, a historical section typeset like a page out of the Bible, a page from a "book—part inventory, part diary," and a crow's-eye view on Euchrid's slow demise. This proliferation of points of view and discourses echoes *Absalom, Absalom!* and produces in the reader a similarly disorienting effect: the ground of Cave's novel is quicksand rather than any stable ideological field.

But what is most memorable about Cave's novel is Euchrid's voice, which sounds mighty funny. "Sounds," of course, because he doesn't talk. That

he *can't* speak seems a decisive strike against the myth of the southern voice as the central sign of southern identity. Euchrid, a sometime Peeping Tom, calls himself a "looker." Listen to him describe preacher Poe leading the town in a mass baptism:

Through the milling crowd that teetered upon the moat's uncertain edge, ah glimpsed Poe wading fearlessly through the atramental waters, clad in white unnerwear, his sinister black jacket and shirt and his ridiculous black hat—ah hate hats—doffed and left with his horse back on terra firma somewhere. By the way he took to the water, it is mah belief that as the raving wompster waded deeper and deeper into the drowning-pool of his swollen religious mania, he saw himself not as one in a long line of disciples reenacting the sacred ritual of Baptism, but rather this cachexic and beardless huckster, who was now bellowing at his followers to join him, believed he was the great hairy hydrophiliac himself, and that his sodden and shapeless longjohns were no less than camel skins. (115)

There's a healthy dose of faux Faulkner here. Note the length of the second sentence, its convoluted syntax, its blend of high and low style. That sentence's first clause is attached awkwardly to a second clause that opens with a southern-populist political exordium: "it is mah belief." From that point the sentence drains of subjectivity, its down-home, confessional tone giving way to an omniscient, godlike sense that renders its object with utmost moral seriousness. Cave recalls the Faulknerian voice also in the structure of negation, as in the construction "he saw himself not as one" and the preponderance of adjectives formed by affixes that negate. In this way Cave's text, like Faulkner's, takes as much interest in what is not there as in the fact of its absence. The stringing together of modifiers via the conjunction *and*—"cachexic and beardless," "sodden and shapeless"—also echoes Faulkner, as does the witty mock-heroic description of John the Baptist as "the great hairy hydrophiliac himself."

The passage diverges from Faulkner—and recalls Cormac McCarthy's early southern gothic novels—in its antique diction, which, together with its evocation of the gothic setting of poisoned black swamp water, hearkens back to Poe and earlier, to the gothic novel's British roots. Note also the Australian put-down "raving wompster."⁹ Euchrid's "southern" accent is odd, engaging, and utterly unaccountable. (One might also ask how he has learned to read, much less found the books that could account for his medieval diction, so well suited to his bleak worldview.)

The most egregious characteristic of Euchrid's voice is his use of "ah" for the long vowel *\i*. Thus "I" emerges as "ah" and "my" becomes "mah"—

a strategy toward authenticating southern speech even more facile than the familiar one of dropping the *g* from the end of gerunds (as in "Ain't you comin' home for supper, Junior?"). As a substitute for "I," "ah" belies the pronoun's illusion of coherent identity; Cave reinforces Euchrid's wretched state by evoking what Emile Benveniste (1973) has taught about the fundamental provisionality of this "shifter." Euchrid cannot represent himself without an inchoate cry of pain, a wordless plea for mercy. The novel makes explicit—via its typical parodic mode—this gothic equation of identity. Exploring his father's old sea-captain's chest after his death, Euchrid finds the photograph of a ship named *Natasha I*. Catching the picture's reflection in the mirror, he finds, to his horror, that the name encrypts "IAH SATAN," which leads him to "I AM SATAN" (282). Ah = Am—goth's answer to Descartes's formula for the Age of Reason. (Or, as rendered more campily toward the end of the novel, Euchrid sinking ever deeper into the muck: "Ah sink therefore ah am!" [365].)

Cave's perverse homage to Edgar Allan Poe, in the figure of the preacher Abie Poe, acknowledges Poe as gothic "father"—the word formed by the Hebrew letters corresponding to *A* and *B*, which is also the root of the name Abraham, the Hebrew father. But Cave appears even more interested in the writer's cultural standing as *poète maudit*. Poe seems important here less because of his stylistic influence than because of his faith in the primacy of the imagination, his frustration with his contemporaries' strategies of explaining away, in rationalist terms, their work's supernatural effects. While the Ukulites blame Euchrid's muteness on the leaching of reason from his family tree—"His daddy's got hill in him! He's schoopid dumb"—Abie Poe attributes the boy's silence to "a dumb spirit" (121). *And the Ass Saw the Angel* implicitly attacks the kind of mimetic operations, dependent upon a rationalist belief in a coherent southern identity, characterizing not only post-Faulkner southern gothic writing but also *Absalom, Absalom!* itself. Like Euchrid Eucrow's, the voices in *Absalom, Absalom!* exceed any individual subjectivity, yet ultimately that novel endorses an essential southern identity of the sort *And the Ass Saw the Angel* deconstructs.¹⁰

Abie Poe exorcises the "dumb spirit" in the form of a "great glob of sputum," and if Euchrid still cannot speak, he finds that "suddenly all the words ah had ever wanted to speak were there for mah choosing, all crammed up to be first spoken" (122). But if Poe is the more overt antagonist in Cave's macho, Bloomian struggle with Faulkner as well, then we must acknowledge the other member of that triumvirate of southern white male fathers haunting this novel. I'm referring to Elvis, perhaps Cave's greatest musical influence. After both his parents have died, Euchrid transforms his ances-

tral cabin and then himself: "In the mirror, mah hair now long, ah looked like a fucken prince. A King: King Euchrid the First. Monarch of Dog-head. Don't fuck with the King, brother. Don't fuck with the King. And then ah looked again to Heaven and again ah gave Him thanks" (281). The novel's faux Faulkner voice here gives way to the equally parodic voice of the Elvis impersonator. And what are those Elvis look-alike contests anyway but pop culture's version of the Faux Faulkner Contest—a point vividly illustrated when the first Elvis scholarly conference took place in summer 1994 in Faulkner's hometown of Oxford, Mississippi. Just as Faulkner beat his humbler parodists—those without literary aspirations—to the punch by lampooning his own style in a piece that appears in *The Best of Bad Faulkner: Choice Entries from the Faux Faulkner Contest* (see Wells 1991), so Elvis became his own best impersonator, though the voice he channeled was one to which anyone could have access.¹¹

Cave's stylistic bricolage is analogous to goth's own status as what Lauren Goodlad has called "a neo-romantic pastiche for empty postmoderns" (n.d.). But what might Cave's hodgepodge of various literary styles, of stray voices, of high and low culture accomplish? Does this strategy represent any achievement beyond an exercise in what Fredric Jameson, referring to postmodern pastiche, disparagingly calls "blank parody," or mimicry "devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists" (1991, 17)? What initially struck me as remarkable about *And the Ass Saw the Angel* was not its self-conscious and comic use of parody, for as we have seen, southern writers today must approach their method and subject with some degree of postmodern reflexiveness, irony, and suspicion. As a songwriter, however, Nick Cave famously values originality above all else, and this almost naive faith is what distinguishes him from the postmodern artists at whom Jameson aims his critique. In "Thistles in the Soul," a mini-review collected in *King Ink*, Cave gushes that what makes a band or a musician "great" is that "they have attained a sound which is first *authentic*, and which is *utterly their own* . . . [their] own special language" hard won from "the pain of *true self-expression*, through a *genuine* love of their medium" and "for one reason—to give voice to their souls" (129, my emphasis). Watch me do my Elvis shtick, Cave seems to be saying in *And the Ass Saw the Angel*, and feel the genuine pathos at the heart of it.

We can reconcile Cave's valorization of authenticity with the crowing inauthenticity of his work by noting Goodlad's observation that goth posits itself not only as "neo-romantic pastiche" but also as "an alternative subjectivity—the interiorization of a stylistic exterior." This neo-

expressionism—*And the Ass Saw the Angel*'s will to substance—marks the ultimate divergence between the aims of southern gothic writing and those of southern goth writing. If, as Goodlad (n.d.) claims, goth "invents itself as style, but celebrates itself as content," then that content has more to do with self-realization than with the kind of "cultural self-interpretation" that Lewis P. Simpson finds characteristic of the southern gothic (1985, xiv). Southernness, as gleaned from the art and lives of his musical heroes, clearly has seized Cave's imagination. But his novel seems to assume, more broadly, that the best way to achieve an authenticating self is to project it against the most inauthentic backdrop possible. Of course, "A Late Encounter with the Enemy" gives us such a backdrop: the General snoozing in his seat as *Gone with the Wind*'s mythic South flickers onscreen. But whereas O'Connor's hall of mirrors—a pseudogeneral dressed up to validate a series of moving images in which actors reenact a past that never happened—bears an implicit hope for communal and individual spiritual transcendence, Cave's method is a gothic expressionism, the voicing of a secularized and individual "soul."

What are the costs of such a gothic expressionism, the literary engagement with the conflicted self rather than with the *socius*? The southern gothic at least feigns interest in a social actuality that southern goth writing has little enthusiasm for excavating. We might reasonably expect the self-interpretation Simpson finds in the southern gothic to include some engagement with the South's history of racial oppression; and indeed, as we have seen, southern gothic writing concerns itself with this history, albeit by developing, through gothic supernatural tropes, an implicitly dehumanized world in which we could expect nothing better. On the other hand, the most parodic of the southern goth novels we have been considering, Cave's southern gothic fantasy, is also the only one without black characters or any interest in the South's history of racial oppression. And Rice's and Brite's brands of gothic expressionism marginalize such entrenched social problems.

But if contemporary goth writing does not give us much of a South to replace the southern gothic's snakes hanging from plantation trees, we should not underestimate the power of goth parody to undermine such a stereotypical construction. Goth writing's unabashed supernaturalism capitalizes on this set of meanings—with its implicit message that anything can happen down there—in order ultimately to explode them. The goth novels we have examined use obvious smoke and mirrors to conjure a southern landscape. Through an aestheticizing metaphorical design, the southern gothic distances its characters from one another and from readers, thereby mystifying an oppressive social actuality; in contrast, by using the gothic to provide its

primary, literal content, southern goth writing hauls its bugaboos into the light. By humanizing the inhuman—animating houses, making flesh-and-blood heroes of vampires, turning a hunchback mute punching bag into the star of a big book—goth writers reverse the southern gothic’s concealed dehumanization of the South. If, as Margie Burns has argued, the southern gothic encourages our “alienated and unsympathetic” response to the South “by representing it as a dehumanization of response in the South” (1991, 107), then surely goth writing’s soliciting of unbounded sympathy for its traditionally unsympathetic, inhuman (or barely human) subjects is a radical attempt to rouse us from our rote approach to reading the South. In stylistic invention alone—the acceleration of the postmodern play and irony in which southern writers have been engaged for decades—goth writing has given southern literature a needed shot in the arm. But beyond that, southern goth writing, in its up-front reliance on the gothic’s supernatural aspects, might paradoxically have something more “real” to teach us about the South than what we have learned from southern gothic writers. Goth just might explode the myth of the South once and for all.

Notes

I want to acknowledge Simon Dumenco, Mary Esteve, Lauren Fitzgerald, Lauren Goodlad, Shannon McRae, Mark Shaw, and Priscilla Wald for their contributions to this project’s development. I especially thank Tim Dean for his hand in shaping the final product.

1. Indeed, in his introduction to *3 by 3: Masterworks of the Southern Gothic*, Lewis P. Simpson characterizes the southern gothic by its very indifference to the concerns of the Gothic as a literary genre: “No more than Faulkner’s or O’Connor’s writings do the works collected in *3 by 3* indicate a dedication to the Gothic mode as such” (1985, xiv).
2. “What matters to me is that people know that my books are serious and that they are meant to make a difference and that they are meant to be literature” is one of Rice’s familiar interview refrains (Ferraro 1990, 28). In another interview she claims that “only in our time . . . is Gothic fiction associated with low-level writers” (Gates 1990, 76). Or, to historicize the gothic more accurately, we might say that only in our time are so few “high-level” writers associated with the gothic.
3. Burns’s contemporary observation suggests how entrenched this construction has become in the half century since W. J. Cash opened his influential *The Mind of the South* by claiming, “There exists among us by ordinary—both North and South—a profound conviction that the South is another land” (1969 [1941], vii). Cash agreed that it was, though his book famously shattered the gentleman-planter myth—and the view of southern history organized around it—that largely gave rise to this “profound conviction.” Two decades later in *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward suggested that southern collective experience, “at

variance with national myth[s]" (1960, 25) of progress and plenty, provides a sounder basis for a proud regionalism than does southern myth. Still, contemporary fictional representations of the South—from the film *Deliverance* to the television miniseries *North and South* to the *Gone with the Wind* sequel novel *Scarlett*—simply confirm the South's enduring role in America's colonial romance.

4. Literal content corresponds to what Gottlob Frege (1952) calls sense, or, in Paul Ricoeur's gloss, "what the proposition states"; metaphorical design, on the other hand, is analogous to reference, or "that about which the sense is stated" (Ricoeur 1984, 217), the statement's larger context of meaning. Ricoeur makes yet another analogy out of this relation between sense and reference. The "structure of the work" corresponds to sense, while the "world of the work" corresponds to reference; hermeneutics, according to Ricoeur, is "the theory that regulates the transition" from the former to the latter (220).
5. All references to *Absalom, Absalom!* are from the paperback edition of Noel Polk's corrected text. All idiosyncratic punctuation in these references is Faulkner's.
6. In his classic study of southernness, *The Burden of Southern History* (1960), C. Vann Woodward notes that in the Civil War, the South identified "its whole cause" with slavery.
7. In *Absalom, Absalom!* Sutpen's slaves are first described, by the novel's omniscient narrator, as "his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men" (4–5). They have no say in the narration of Faulkner's polyphonic novel. When we first meet Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, her creator compares her to a bloodhound and an elephant.
8. Although of questionable efficacy, Brite's dismissive attitude toward Faulkner is understandable. *Absalom, Absalom!* takes a sympathetic or neutral attitude toward its many androgynous male characters but displays a persistent misogyny, associating women with such supposedly naive or sentimental forms of discourse as fairy tales, county-newspaper-friendly war poems, and gothic novels. Then there was Faulkner's backhanded compliment, "I think women are marvelous, they're wonderful, and I know very little about them" (Gwynn and Blotner 1995, 45).
9. Euchrid's diction is peppered with late-twentieth-century Commonwealth vernacular: "cotton wool" for "cotton balls," "caravan" for "trailer," "surgery" for "doctor's office," "petrol" for "gas."
10. Poststructuralist accounts of *Absalom, Absalom!* disagree about whether the novel's competing voices ultimately sustain or destabilize a "southern voice." I agree with Weinstein that it is in *Absalom, Absalom!* that Faulkner first "urges the authority of his 'own' voice" and so "enters the oratorical discourse of his Southern culture . . . he signs on" (1992, 141). Correspondingly, it is the southerner Quentin's "own" voice that ultimately prevails in the novel, as it is the absence of a southern heritage that prevents the Canadian narrator Shreve—despite his near-total authority as historian of the South and southern-dynastic chronicler—from completing the transport of sympathy that the novel posits as the very mechanism of the past's simultaneous transmission and capacity for being transcended. Thus Shreve perceives Quentin's conflicted relationship to his home—

land, but he cannot truly understand it. At the very end of *Absalom, Absalom!*—in Quentin’s famous defensive cry, “*I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!*”—we are left with Quentin’s plight as a southerner manqué. He is inescapably doomed, not by his people’s defeat or by the land they have cursed and exhausted through slavery, but because of his own inaction, his inability even to “fail so grandly” (Faulkner 1978) as the southern myth’s heroes.

- II. It is beyond this project’s scope to consider fully Cave’s interest in Elvis, but I suspect that in his work, Cave’s affectionate parody of the King is what Linda Hutcheon (1988, 11) calls a “wishful call to continuity” rather than a merely ironic and fragmented reworking, though this latter discontinuity is certainly present in his novel. In many ways Euchrid resembles Elvis, whose status as *the* postmodern hero obviously appeals to Cave. Like Umberto Eco’s rose, like the South itself, Elvis means so much to so many people that by now he hardly means anything at all. *And the Ass Saw the Angel* strives to exploit all these “meanings”: Elvis as surviving twin (and as a result psychically divided; Euchrid’s twin dies soon after birth); Elvis as southern culture hero; Elvis as poor white trash who comes to rule a domain of his own design; Elvis as the probably false prophet represented by the antihero Euchrid (Marcus 1991, 121–22; Rosenbaum 1995). Yet at the same time, Elvis, more overtly than Faulkner or Poe, voices the South in Cave’s work less as ideological “other” than as America’s gothic truth—the shackling guilt belying the freedom from the past, the bitter experience belying the dream of innocence, the spectacle of dissolution belying the narrative of progress, the specter of defeat haunting the victory parade.



THE (UN)AUSTRALIAN GOTH

Notes toward a Dislocated National Subject



The massacre of students at Columbine High School in Denver, Colorado, in April 1999 was among other things the catalyst for a positive retrieval of goth identity. Young goths would come to be distinguished from the more nihilistic, proviolent "Trench Coat Mafia," even though both groups no doubt shared some musical and other tastes as well as a "structural" position at secondary school. In Melbourne, Australia, the *Age* newspaper's editorial for April 23, 1999, also attributed the massacre to the influence of "global culture" and its countereffect of producing newer and smaller "tribalisms" (Horror 1999). The editorial noted that globalization brought the Columbine massacre "closer to home," that is, closer to Australia.¹ A few days after the *Age* editorial in April 1999, however, journalist Sharon Gray published a short piece in the same newspaper that attempted to recover goth identity from this post-Columbine accusation that it had now become both too global and too tribal. Her punning title, "Vamping It Up's Goth to Be Fun," certainly signaled her intention to divorce goth teenagers pretty much altogether from the high anxieties emanating from the Columbine school events. She looked in particular at her son's infatuation with the American fantasy role-playing game *Camarilla* and found that the game "has more rules than you can think of" (it is not anarchic or out of control; it is disciplinary); that it is played, as she says, "from the waist up" (it is nonsexual and nonviolent); that it is about "problem-solving" (it has a positive pedagogical function; it is therapeutic); and most importantly, that the game is creative, relying on the participants' invention of characters and their ability to tell a story to a small group of coplayers. This last feature takes the game out of the otherwise alienating context of global culture and returns it to the localized realm of the storyteller as outlined by Walter

Benjamin (1936): the role-playing game in this sense transmitting narrative directly to each of the participants, with everything that is said prescribed by shared and accepted regulatory codes of behavior: where everything is conventional. Together, these points all seem to suggest a very particular mode of goth cultural practice—as therapeutic, localizing, creative, non-violent—which then enables it to be distinguished from the Trench Coat Mafia’s more destructive and self-alienating fantasy/role-playing activities. The Melbourne *Camarilla* domain, called *Flavus Periculum*, is the second largest in the world, with its own magazine and Web site, and now a clearly defined “chapter.”² “Chapters,” Gray notes, “tend to stay together and become close friends, and blood runs thick.” When she goes to Perth with her son, he e-mails ahead, and chapter members “picked him up within an hour of our arrival, took him to games and clubs all over town, and dropped him back the night before our departure. Better than Rotary,” she concludes.³

The Melbourne chapter of *Camarilla* is one of many expressions of a contemporary goth teen identity located in Australia. In the post-Columbine framework of a mother’s spirited defense of her son, it bridges for Gray the generational divide in a way that may in fact be untypical of relations between parent cultures and other youth subcultures.⁴ More particularly, the return to storytelling, to generic rules or conventions and regulated behavior (rather than violence, anarchy, and destruction), is broadly symptomatic of what seems to be a creative, highly literate, and *literary* subculture. I speak here of goth in terms of its mediated or textualized forms of self-expression; this essay is not an ethnographic project. In fact, goth sub-cultural literariness is routinely referential, returning over and over to a set of generically prescribed (that is, canonical) literary quotations—such as Oscar Wilde; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and other Victorians, as well as various Romantic poets. Goth self-expression can seem anachronistic as a consequence: out of time, as well as out of place. This feature can seem all the more striking in a country like Australia, where the relation between national culture and a subculture such as this can be tangential at best: a predicament played out some time ago in the Australian soap opera *Home and Away* through its own resident goth, Edward Dunglass, a character utterly out of place at the otherwise normative Australian beaches of Summer Bay. Australian goths—involved in role-playing games like *Camarilla* or, like Dunglass, reading French existential literature on the beach—might well be thought to have disengaged from the nation altogether. Their attraction to a set of *other* places (imaginary as well as real) thus amounts to something like an act of mute resistance: neither passive nor active (and certainly never violent), and perhaps not even critical, but simply an occupa-

tion of some other place or “structure of feeling” (in Raymond Williams’s 1977 phrase) elsewhere that offers pleasures that Australia’s national culture cannot satisfy.

On its own, however, this view also runs the risk of relaxing into the prevailing goth subcultural stereotype of alienation—a stereotype used as the primary trope in accounting for the troubled condition of the Trench Coat Mafia. Even so, Richard Davenport-Hines (2000), a major commentator on goth and gothic identity, has invoked this stereotype in a way that is at least partially useful in the Australian context when he suggests that goth (he takes it as a transnational generic category) stands for “no homeliness, no reconciliation” (10). Australia, of course, has an official cultural policy of reconciliation with its indigenous people, and it is currently obsessed with the issue of homeliness, intensified in 2001 through the centenary of federation (revisiting the unification of its constituent states and the foundational moment of the nation) as well as in a range of cultural/political/spiritual tracts currently in circulation that address and often yearn for contemporary Australian forms of belonging.⁵ Following Davenport-Hines, we could imagine Australian goths to be indifferent to these features of a national culture, in particular, national self-identity as “Australian.” However, I want to argue in this chapter that although goths may well be indifferent or even downright dismissive of the dominant preoccupations of national culture in Australia—of “being Australian”—they may nevertheless engage these preoccupations in a dialectical way. Working against the stereotype of alienation, there are indeed forms of goth belonging in Australia—the need to be *here*—that sit alongside forms of goth longing to be elsewhere.⁶

It has in fact been commonplace for some time to speak of an “Australian gothic,” a sensibility or an aesthetic that is traceable in Australian literature right back to convict and transportation writings at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The late-colonial Melbourne novelist and journalist Marcus Clarke’s comment on the “Weird Melancholy” of “Australian scenery”—which for him struck the same “note” as the poetry of Edgar Allan Poe (Clarke 1876, 645)—is paradigmatic of this particular structure of feeling: the sense that in Australia belonging (of being fully and sympathetically immersed in the Australian landscape, for example) is simply not possible. Gerry Turcotte has an extended essay on Australian gothic in *The Handbook to Gothic Literature* (1998). In Turcotte’s view, the gothic is a central aesthetic in Australia, emerging at the origins of settlement and consolidating itself in the 1890s in gothic romance based both in the bush and the

city, and then underwriting the subsequent canonical works of Christina Stead and Patrick White as well as more recent literature from Louis Nowra, Peter Carey, and Elizabeth Jolley, among many others. Turcotte's sense that an Australian gothic literary aesthetic is central to the Australian literary tradition, however, is contestable. It may equally be claimed as marginal to it, especially given the ongoing valorization of realism in Australian literary production and the preoccupation in much landscape poetry and contemporary Australian fiction with "proper" and fulfilling relations to place (to the local, the regional). In other cultural fields, the gothic can indeed be cast as marginal, anachronistic, *out of place* in Australia: thus Brian Andrews (2000), in a book about the gothic revival in architecture in Australia, can say that after the 1950s, "Gothic fills a small and perhaps increasingly irrelevant corner in our national consciousness" (142). The very act of invoking a "national consciousness" itself helps to produce marginality or irrelevance in others, of course. What I would prefer to do here, however, is to draw simultaneously on both these accounts of the Australian gothic—as a central, symptomatic sensibility and as something marginal or even irrelevant to Australia. In this way, I will give an account of the subculture that Australian gothic forgot (since goths themselves are never mentioned in any of the literature) but with which it has such an affective alliance.

Daniel Nettheim's film *Angst* (2000) is the first Australian film to feature a goth as one of its protagonists. The film builds itself around Dean, who lives with some friends in Kings Cross in Sydney's inner city. Dean works in a video store and is passionate about lowbrow horror films, modeling himself on Quentin Tarantino, perhaps, as he spends his idle time at the store writing schlock horror film scripts. One day, a goth girl called May, played by Abi Tucker, walks in and immediately captures his attention. Dean has an ex-girlfriend who lives in prosperous, suburban Sydney and who is now engaged to a clean-cut young man with entrepreneurial ambition. In contrast to the suburbs, Kings Cross is cast as a desolate place, with homeless, unemployed men wandering the streets, something that horrifies Dean, giving him a sense of his own possible future. He confides in May as they become romantically linked, and they decide to go to his former girlfriend's suburban home—she still lives with her parents—to exorcize his demons. The trip by taxi to the suburbs begins an act of desecration directed at the prosperous suburban home and all that it stands for: an Australianness that is both conformist and infantilized (signified by pink fluffy pigs that fill the former girlfriend's bedroom). May and Dean break into the bedroom; the pink toys are arranged and then discarded as the couple have sex, completing the desecration. Two features are worth noting in this sequence. First,

Dean's fear of homelessness is cured paradoxically by the desecration of what is in effect a sacred space in a suburban home; and second, it is the goth girl, May, who supplies this cure. May retains her goth image as someone without respect for *homeliness* (suburban homeliness, at least) but in the process, she cures Dean's fear of *homelessness*. In the coupling that follows after she undoes her brassiere, her sexual identity is rendered almost maternal as the camera focuses on her breasts from underneath and then on her reassuring gaze down at Dean as she sits on top of him. The goth girl thus has both a desecrating and a therapeutic function: no homeliness, certainly, but no homelessness either. Hers is the body through which Dean's future is settled. Insofar as he is cast as a national subject (since he wants to "fit in," that is, to belong), the goth girl functions as a nation builder as much as she figures an indifference to the nation through her gothness.

This dialectic of engagement and disengagement—being both of the nation and indifferent to or dismissive of it—seems to be a way of productively conceiving of relations between a subculture and a national culture. In Australia, there have been two nationally configured goth Web sites. The first, closed in July 2003, was www.gothic.net.au, titled "gothicnetau," a state-by-state, city-by-city network of goth activity and goth e-mail addresses, each with their goth nickname ("Abyss," "Dark Maiden," "Solitaire," "Miasma," and so on) and sound-bite profiles of self-identification. The second is www.goth.org.au, titled *The Aether Sanctum: Dark Culture*, a much denser, beautifully designed e-zine Web site with reviews and articles as well as goth news, articles about club life, and so on. Again, there are city-by-city listings of relevant events; Australian cities might even be claimed as "goth" in accounts that map goth geographies by identifying goth clubs to go to, shops to visit, and so on. In Melbourne, for example, there are the goth nightclubs Heresy and Revelations (both in Flinders Lane), Abyss (in Bourke Street), and Belfry (Smith Street in Collingwood). There are boutique goth clothing shops such as Gown of Thorns on Brunswick Street in Fitzroy and Victorian Gothic on Sydney Road, Brunswick. Each of these venues has its own Web site. There is at least one specialist goth record shop here, too: Heartland, in North Melbourne. These venues collectively produce a set of goth nodal points across the city announcing a certain kind of inhabitation of urban territory. Other Australian cities can be equally transformed: an entry on *Aether Sanctum* from April 18, 2001, announces "Sydney Gothic is now open!" linking to a "Sydney Gothic" Web site that both territorializes and commodifies (with news about goth fetish shops and gothic features on the Mercedes Australian Fashion Week Festival, for example).

On the other hand, commodified goth identities imprinted upon cities can also be rejected, to deterritorialize, perhaps, that is, to reassert (often defiantly) goth identity as marginal. In November 2000, there were many media reports about Michael Rymer's filming of Anne Rice's novel *Queen of the Damned* in Melbourne, one of them announcing that "Melbourne is officially the goth capital of Australia." The article is posted on *Aether Sanctum* and given short shrift with these remarks: "Melbourne tabloid rag *The Herald Sun* recently printed some piece which is based on a chat one of their people had with one of the guys working on that I'm-so-fucking-sick-of-hearing-about-it *Queen of the Damned* movie. I find the attitude to be pretty shonky show-biz fare. Makes me wonder if goths are too recognisable. I think we are really." The recognizability of goths is both central to their subcultural aesthetic and constantly disavowed. On the one hand, many goth Web sites work hard to make goth identity more recognizable than ever by providing often quite elaborate genealogies of goth cultural activity or working carefully through definitions of goth. On the other hand, these Web sites also relish the various kinds of eccentricities or idiosyncrasies that characterize this subculture. The homepage of Miasma—available from gothicnet.au and through the Internet Relay Chat channel aus.culture.gothic—says, "And so we come to the place where one usually finds a description of the being that has made this page. Well, why should I be any different?" Alongside this resigned acceptance of sameness, the name Miasma is given its own peculiar goth identity as a word invoking an "unwholesome or unpleasant atmosphere." It is thus rendered utterly eccentric, underwritten by a range of fantasy literature claimed as goth (from Terry Pratchett to Anne McCaffrey and Isobelle Carmody: the Web site quotes passages that use the word "miasma" from each of these novelist's works).

The goth snubbing of the filming of *Queen of the Damned* and its temporary cinematic occupation of Melbourne stems also from distinctions between the subcultural e-zine (with its restricted, discriminating goth audience) and the tabloid newspaper (with its far less restricted and—by implication—less discriminating Australian readership). These are taste differences, of course, which align the goth Web site with higher cultural concerns, reflected in particular through their commitment to literary cultural production. Goth, as I have noted, is both a literate and literary subculture: it can be both canonical (drawing from Tennyson, Wilde, and so on) and marginal (turning to fantasy literature outside of the canon). Both gothicnet.au and *Aether Sanctum* contain much goth fiction and poetry and clearly encourage literary self-expression. For *Aether Sanctum*, poetry is especially central to Australian goth self-identification, and it devotes a considerable amount of

virtual space to it. This is a space that also knows about the Australian literary canon, about writing that lies well outside of the usual field of goth literary references. Some more recent issues of the e-zine (see issue 6), interestingly enough, have presented a subsection in the literary pages titled "Goth Bush Poetry": lovingly crafted goth rewritings of Australian bush poetry classics. Here is a sample from "The Goth from Snowy Riva," a version of Banjo Paterson's famous late-colonial poem "The Man from Snowy River," so central to national self-expression. It is crafted (or "translated," as the Web site suggests) by Barbara Welton:

There was movement at the nightclub, for the word had passed around
That a Homie's younger sister had gone astray,
And had joined the wild goth gang—she'd been known to hang around,
So all the Homies gathered for the fray.
All the old and jaded gothics from the nightclubs far and near
Had mustered at the Hell Club on that night,
For the gothics love hard chiding where there's Homies on which to
sneer,
And the gossip snuffs the battle with delight.

There was Azriel, who dressed up as the Tarot's Page of Cup,
The young man with his hair as black as jet;
But few could sneer beside him when his blood-alcohol was up—
No one had ever shown him up as yet.
And Romancy of the Overblown came down to lend a hand,
No better one-up-man had they yet seen;
No other intellect could throw him while he was sober 'nough to
stand,
And he looked damn fine in those shiny jeans.

And he was there, a gothling—a small and weedy beast,
He was something like an Eldritch, undersized,
With a touch of Peter Murphy—three pints thoroughbred at least—
And as such by goth women muchly prized.
He was hard and tough and wiry—just the sort that won't say die—
There was courage in his quick impatient tread;
And he bore the badge of gameness in his black-rimmed, mascaraed
eye,
And the spiked and lofty plumage of his head.

There are parodic tributes to other Australian bush anthems, turning them into spaces through which to write mock goth epics. As I see it, this

process involves both a canny engagement with a bush Australian literary canon—the latter now clichéd and overwrought, as well as redundant (especially in relation to goth inner-city self-identification)—and, through the goth “translation” or, we might say, desecration of these poems, a celebration of subcultural marginality. These are not poems that arise out of indifference, in other words; they are not disengaged with national culture and its models of identity. Indeed, goths rewrite these bush poems precisely to give their own place (their geographical place) in that culture some clarity. In another example, the pseudonymous poet “ephemerae” reworks the famous Australian bush song “Nine Miles from Gundagai,” each verse ending with the refrain, “And the goths sat on the Town Hall steps / ’Neath cloudy Sydney skies.”

These goth makeovers of Australian bush poetry—relocating them to an identifiably goth inner city of nightclubs and goth-inhabited public spaces—present a relationship to the national literary canon that is still unfolding on *Aether Sanctum*. But, as noted already, the citationality of Australian goth writing is also and inevitably transnational. An Australian goth literary genealogy would, of course, begin with the iconic goth singer/composer Nick Cave whose first novel, *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989), is a Faulkneresque work set in the American deep South, laboring under the heavy influence of the book of Revelation in its presentation of a story about aberrance and persecution. With his bands the Birthday Party and the Bad Seeds, Cave himself helped to identify Melbourne as the “goth capital of Australia” and goth Web sites elsewhere routinely locate Cave and his music as foundational to the subculture. Cave’s many commentaries often bear out the disjuncture between recognizability as a goth (“I’d hate to go down in history as the number one Goth, the man who spawned a thousand goth bands with stacked hairstyles, no personality, pale sick people”) and a goth-underwritten sense of the eccentric or idiosyncratic or marginal (“I seem so totally at odds with the modern world . . . some oddity of novelty that has ceased to be important” qtd. Pelek 1999). An earlier collection of writing, *King Ink* (1988), includes five very short dramatic variations on the Oscar Wilde play *Salomé*. Its literary citations turn away from contemporary Australia, drawing attention instead to the book’s otherworldliness: its inhabitation of somewhere else (Old Testament narrative mediated through Wilde’s decadent aesthetic, the American deep South, and so on), its longing to be elsewhere.

There are signs of a newer second generation of goth novelists in Australia. My focus here is strictly on novels with identifiably goth characters written by identifiably goth authors: there is, indeed, so often a strong “fit” between the two, a direct projection of authorial goth sensibilities onto the protagonists. This is one feature that places a novel like Milissa Deitz’s *Blood-*

lust (1999)—an Australian vampire novel based, much like the film *Angst*, in inner-city Sydney—outside the goth subgenre.⁷ *Bloodlust* is certainly a self-consciously referential piece of work, naming its vampire heroine Carmilla after the Irish writer J. Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 vampire story. It also offers a range of transnational references to other vampire and related writing (the last line invoking a novel by Poppy Z. Brite) as well as to romantic poets such as William Blake, all of which are certainly out of place in the national culture and consistent with goth self-identification. But although it is generically related, this novel is not goth in the way I have outlined it above: for one thing, its unhinged female heroine is too destructive (when she unclasps her brassiere, it signals death, not, as for May in *Angst*, therapy and redemption). Indeed, she is a perpetually homeless character who relishes her alienation, becoming, eventually, a suicide. It makes this novel closer in kind to the darker world of the Trench Coat Mafia from whom, as I've noted, goths have subsequently been carefully distinguished. By contrast, the second generation of goth novels are quieter, more inclined to yearn than to destroy, producing the peculiar combination of alienation and the longing-to-belong already described: not (self-)destructive, but transformative.

Cameron Rogers's *The Music of Razors* (2001) is a horror fantasy also heavily under the influence of *Revelation*, with its fallen angels and its characters who yearn for transformation, to be something else in some other place. In its opening section, "The Art of Longing," a goth girl, Hope, "pink haired and pierced," is cast as an old soul grown tired of the world: a soul about to become otherworldly. The novel turns away from the Australian ideal of the family suburban home, rejecting "the bland eternal scenarios that existed just beyond the happy lie of high school's end, the horrible, mediocre things that *happened to everyone else*" (260–61). In place of suburban mediocrity, the novel offers an otherworldly fantasy that finds its earthly resonance in an inner-city alleyway: a goth place that is both marginal and appropriately full of significance, as Hope realizes when she passes by:

She had looked into it . . . and fancied she could see huddled ghosts curled in the refuse, memories of memories looking back at her out of the corners of old eyes.

Thick grime layered the brickwork. The stuff was like a dried, crumbly paste of talcum and mucus, with the occasional cancerous fleck of faded red here and there, the markings of some forgotten vandal. The stuff on the walls had made her think of growth rings in trees, or layers of earth. . . . To Hope, that little alleyway was a cathedral to what happened when life tossed you into what lies outside. (91)⁸

Here is a goth place that is welcoming in its alienation, homely in its invocation of homelessness: a place that is both empty and inhabited, rendered in a way that confuses what Australian historian Tom Griffiths (2000) has called “deep belonging” with utter estrangement. Nostalgia here—expressed through a central character whose own life at home has become traumatic and unsustainable (but who, like May in the film *Angst*, goes on to perform an essentially therapeutic role)—provides the impetus for a goth future where place itself is perpetually cast as otherworldly: where every place (even the suburban home) is always already a gateway to some other place.

Kim Wilkins is another goth horror novelist who has published six novels to date, as well as a series of novels for teenage readers. She also has a Web site (welcome.to/KimWilkins), which once opened with a quotation from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses”:

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough
Gleams that untravelled world whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.

The goth yearning for otherworldliness (a gateway into “that untravelled world”) stands in contrast to the various diary entries on Wilkins’s Web site beginning in 1997 and working through to the present day, which self-consciously map a very worldly career in popular fiction built around new publications, awards won (especially the Aurealis Award for horror fiction, which Wilkins has won several times over), deals with publishers, book launches, reviews received, and so on. A novelistic identity is developed online that seamlessly integrates commercial imperatives (promoting her work, outlining her career) with a goth voice that seems somehow unmediated, intimate, and confessional, absorbed in the craft of literature for its own sake. Indeed, literature is presented on the site as its *own* otherworld, both therapeutic and deranging for the goth writer: “I love writing more than I can adequately express. It is the balm for my soul—I love to lose myself in a story, and I get so attached to the characters that it’s not unusual for me to go to pieces emotionally while finishing a book. Everything I write is written with the utmost care and attention; I can honestly say that my heart is in my work.”

Kim Wilkins comes from Queensland, already reconstructed here as a place intrinsically suited to the budding goth author (“I grew up near the seaside in a creepy old Queenslander. Underneath it I had a cubby hole where I used to go to write”). Brisbane, where she now lives, is itself presented as a goth city, with its vibrant goth club and music scenes and fanzines and boutiques. But it is also sometimes cast as parochial, and so often far

too hot, as Wilkins notes, for a goth "to think." For her book launches, Wilkins comes down to Slow Glass Books in Melbourne, a science fiction, fantasy, and horror book shop near the center of the city that also hosted the launch (well attended by local goths) of Cameron Rogers's *The Music of Razors*, another nodal point in urban Australian goth cultural geography. Her novels are published in Britain and Europe, too, and in one case translated into German; Wilkins comments on "an overseas junket" that takes her to London and Berlin, "the coolest place in the universe," and so maps out an Australian/transnational network of goth-inflected cities comparable to Nick Cave's post-*King Ink* infatuation with Berlin, although she does not share his more developed literary and musical fascination with the American deep South. A link to Wilkins's Web page from British goth horror fantasy writer Freda Warrington—the favor is returned by Wilkins—confirms the Euro-Australian transnationalism that underpins her particular goth horror fictional interests. This is far too specific and restricted in its range to be considered under the diffuse heading of "global culture." Indeed, it works at creating a highly localized, resonating cultural geography, networked into locales that—in relation to an available goth sensibility (as well as in relation to so much settler Australian experience, still attached to British and Western European locations)—are already highly familiar, enabling those first trips to London and Berlin to be cast nostalgically.

The goth attachment to places that "being goth" has already rendered familiar works against the grain of the usual romanticizing of goth found in so much cultural criticism these days. A typical example is Csaba Toth's 1997 article on industrial goth music, which links its practitioners to Judith Halberstam's claim that gothic "marks a peculiarly modern preoccupation with boundaries and their collapse," thus enabling "multiple interpretations and a plurality of locations of cultural resistance" (Halberstam 1995, 23). These kinds of claims about gothic high art are simply not realized in the case of goth horror fiction, which, like popular fiction broadly speaking, by no means enables "multiple interpretations." It relies instead on a shared, recognizable—or even (recalling *Aether Sanctum*) "too recognisable"—set of conventions. Nor are there a "plurality of locations of cultural resistance" here; as I have noted, the cultural geography of goth is restricted and familiar, a means of conserving identity rather than orchestrating its collapse. It produces not the unhomeliness of Davenport-Hines but a renewal of homeliness-away-from-home, the kind of homeliness that can be traced through in a fairly clear way in Wilkins's second novel, *Grimoire* (1999).

This novel is certainly citational in a conventionally goth sense: its characters read Poe, Byron, Coleridge, Keats, Goethe, and the English decadent

poet Ernest Dowson. One of its two epigraphs comes from Tennyson, and the demons one of its characters conjures up have their names taken from Edmund Spenser. This is a strikingly literary novel, in fact, concerning a graduate student, Holly, who comes down to cold, wintry Melbourne from northern Queensland to begin her research into British Victorian poetry at a place called Humberstone College. We can note the structural homology between this character and Wilkins herself, a graduate student at the University of Queensland researching British romantic poetry. The novel is "close" to the author in this sense ("I can honestly say that my heart is in my work"), going on to chart the lives of literary studies graduate students who live somewhere between the young adult demographic Wilkins has also explored in her fiction and the more "mature" end of the literary marketplace. The novel's comment that Holly was awarded a scholarship "to start her Masters in Victorian literature at one of the most elite institutions in the southern hemisphere" (7) might suggest that Humberstone College is a fictional cipher for the heavily self-promoting University of Melbourne. But Wilkins instead gives the college its own idiosyncratic goth genealogy, as an Australian outpost of a fictional university in York, England, built in Melbourne in 1857 by a scandalous Victorian named Howard Humberstone in the gothic architectural style, of exactly the kind that Brian Andrews had cast as "increasingly irrelevant" to "our national consciousness" (2000, 142). The old college has two key features for the novel: a library, where the characters do their research, and a set of subterranean tunnels where the current owner of the college and some of the academics there try to call up demons in order to gain eternal life. It becomes central to the "old" Melbourne created in the novel that Holly increasingly makes into her home: a place that, in spite or perhaps because of the discomfort it brings with it (cold, rain, wind, run-down accommodation), nevertheless calls forth "infinite promise" (22).

Holly is joined by two other students: Prudence, an outgoing goth girl whose wealthy parents are living in Hong Kong and who has a huge collection of occult books in her own library at home; and Justin, an orphaned boy who comes to live with the Humberstones themselves and who is studying the works of Gabriel Dante Rossetti. Holly, too, is distanced from her family, leaving a failed marriage in Queensland and so gaining the disapproval of her mother and father. The novel would seem, then, to be emphasizing (in Davenport-Hines's terms) the "unhomeliness" of its symptomatic characters: Justin's comment "I don't know how to behave in a family" (225) becomes representative of the graduate students' condition and returns to the more typical subcultural rendering of parent culture/youth

subculture divisions. Holly's predicament is more traumatic, pulled back to the Queensland town of Daybrook by her domineering parents, especially her mother, as if Daybrook is her rightful place, her home: the real place, a place of responsibility and duty, in relation to which the old imported gothic architecture of Humberstone College is just a nostalgic and (from the mother's point of view) irresponsible goth fantasy. But the novel reverses this structure, turning Daybrook and Queensland—and Holly's mother—into the unreal part of the goth equation, as Holly realizes when she wakes up there one morning: "Holly was completely disoriented when she woke. The smells and sounds were familiar but didn't seem right somehow. It took her a moment or two before she remembered she was back at her mother's place. . . . Time seemed to be slipping away from her too swiftly, as though Daybrook were fairyland and for every hour she spent here, a week or two was going by in the real world. The world where she really belonged" (174–75). The return to Melbourne is thus intoxicating to Holly, increasingly securing it as her rightful place: homeliness away from home. Her two graduate student friends help this security in the midst of demonic events, bonding together as they race to prevent the piecing together of a book of demonology, the *grimoire* of the novel's title, pitching themselves against the diabolical Humberstone and the rather clumsy, bumbling academics in his charmed circle.

This kind of homeliness without a home sees a structure of belonging invoked not in Australia but in a uniquely goth and highly nostalgic cultural and literary geography that moves from an oppressively hot and conservative Queensland down to a wintry but nevertheless exhilarating Melbourne, and into a Victorian netherworld connected romantically—and quite literally, through Holly's ghostly lover—to the dark streets and quaint, strange houses of London. Such homeliness without a home is also given expression through the character Prudence, a promiscuous girl who is having an affair with one of the professors, Dr. Aswell. In a sequence that serendipitously recalls Dean and May in the film *Angst* as they go by taxi out to the suburbs to desecrate an old girlfriend's bedroom, Prudence, feeling jilted by her teacher, goes to Aswell's house to confront her own particular demons. The house is a "picture of suburban happiness" (255), with Aswell and his wife Mandy away. Prudence breaks in and goes up to the bedroom and finds Mandy's dresses in the wardrobe, all colored beige: "Did people who wore beige *want* to fade into the background?" (285), she wonders. Aswell suddenly returns home and Prudence is caught; she leaves quietly, determined next time to break into his office instead. The novel spends some time getting Aswell out of Prudence's system; it does this in order

to bind the three graduate students ever closer together (sexually, among other things). Finally, with the demonic Humberstone defeated and the grimoire and the demons laid to rest, the three characters express a set of fantasies that see themselves “chained” together as a “family” that replaces conventional family structures (they are all effectively without parents). It does so, however, not by invoking “homelessness” or playing witness to the collapse of “boundaries” but by superimposing a set of generic conventions appropriate to being goth in Australia over the rejected conventions of suburbanness, worldliness, mainstream national culture, parochialism, bad fashion sense, and the suffocating pressures of the parent culture.

The effect is to make Australian goth identity—in its textualized, mediated form, at least—both less Australian and more homely-in-Australia: more otherworldly and yet *here*. Through the self-conscious establishment of an all “too recognisable” set of cultural and literary markers (literary citations, inner city cultural geographies, highly particularized transnational associations), this alternative but conventional subculture thus achieves self-definition, coherence, and a certain amount of comfort in the knowledge that living in Australia and being goth can indeed be reconciled.

Notes

1. There was, indeed, serious concern about just such a high school massacre happening in Australia, leading to the investigation exactly two years after Columbine of a student at a high school in western Sydney who had allegedly kept a “massacre” diary. On this investigation, see Zimmer 2001.
2. See www.users.bigpond.com/harlquin/flavusp/whatsnew.htm.
3. For another article distinguishing goths from the Trench Coat Mafia and violence, see Gibson 1999. “Goths are generally more into melancholy than murder,” Gibson suggests.
4. See the classic Birmingham School account of subcultures on this topic of generational differences between youth subcultures and the “parent” culture, Hall and Jefferson 1990 [1975].
5. See, for example, Read 2000; Moloney 2000; and Tacey 2000.
6. I take this juxtaposition of belonging and longing, rather loosely, from Stewart 1993.
7. I am grateful to McKenzie Wark for drawing my attention to this novel, published by Vintage.
8. Thanks to Lucy Sussex for drawing my attention to this novel.

Part IV



ARTIFACTS





ATROCITY EXHIBITIONS

Joy Division, Factory Records, and Goth



While traveling through England in 1993, my coeditor came across an article in a northern tabloid headlined "Mystery Couple Search Cemetery," reporting that an eighty-two-year-old Macclesfield psychic had witnessed a "tall elegant couple, a man and a woman, both six feet tall with long black robes" searching for the grave of Ian Curtis. Curtis was the lead singer for the Manchester-based band Joy Division who hanged himself in 1980 on the eve of the band's first U.S. concert tour. According to the psychic, "The woman had a face like an angel from heaven and she spoke softly to me asking if I knew Ian Curtis who was buried there. She was so lovely. She looked at me with black eyes. She was so beautiful. I felt I was talking to someone from out of space. I felt as if they were from somewhere else. They had a strange presence about them. A holy presence." Later, the article points out that "devoted fans have made a pilgrimage to [Curtis's] grave in the past," but that the mystery couple witnessed by the psychic was "a haunting experience."

I open with this bit of lurid tabloid ephemera for a number of reasons. First, Anderson's article associates Curtis and Joy Division with "the macabre Gothic music cult," demonstrating how widely Joy Division has become associated with goth. Anderson's article in an obscure, provincial newspaper eerily confirms the enduring significance of Joy Division for goths some thirteen years after the band's demise. Despite its relatively small following during its short existence, after Curtis's death the band became enormously influential and continues to retain a significant place in the "alternative" rock market.¹ Further, the article's emphasis is less on Joy Division's music than its association with a subculture prone to haunting

cemeteries. The interest in this story for the tabloid is inextricably linked to the same kind of fascination with Curtis's suicide that has made him and his band so significant for goth subculture. In a sense, this article is itself, then, a "goth" tabloid story.

Even further, though, this article interests me for what it illustrates about goth subculture. The mystery couple's black robes and angelic look were subcultural constructions, likely made possible by the boutiques and apparel venues marketed to participants of goth subculture.² Having first emerged in the early 1980s as an offshoot of postpunk and various related rock subcultures, goth constitutes a surprisingly enduring and far-flung spectacular subculture with a predilection for fashions and cosmetics that affect the cadaverous, morbid, and melancholic. Goths' deathly pale faces (often achieved with white foundation), black makeup, elaborately teased dyed-black hair, black clothes, and penchant for bondage gear and religious fetishes make apparent to the straight world their passion for the arcane and funereal. Anderson's tabloid article attests to an invasion of the quotidian by gothic obsessions, casting an eerie glow on provincial Macclesfield in ways that might resonate with goth subcultural styles and their haunting of mainstream cultures. The psychic's story epitomizes the uneasiness aroused in the straight world by the presence of goths with their undead appearance. At the same time, the story dramatizes the fraught relations of real and simulacrum, presence and absence. The mystery couple's "holy presence" was fashioned out of the fetish objects of goth subculture, an affect achieved by simulating what was not there, the spectral. At the same time, though, the story calls our attention to at least one indisputable presence. The grave of Ian Curtis was indeed this story's transcendental signified, its ghostly irreducible real, and insofar as it may be said to be the object of the mystery couple's search, the grave is also a foundational goth obsession, the sign of something both incontestably "real" and of the one who is absent.

In the same sense that the mystery couple staged their longing for something both there (the grave) and not there (Ian Curtis), Joy Division staged an exhibition of melancholia that became a key element of goth style. Joy Division's music, its production, and the design of its promotional materials by its record company, Factory Records, seem to emphasize absences in ways that call to mind the Freudian concept of melancholia. According to Freud, melancholia, unlike mourning, is an endless longing for an object that can't be named. Mourning involves a process of grieving for the identifiable and real loss of a distinct object of affection. Melancholia, on the contrary, is a grief that knows no object. Freud suggests that, while mourning eventually overcomes grief over a loss by substituting some other object

in the position of the lost, in melancholia grief is never overcome because the ego has incorporated loss into itself (1917, 245–46). As Freud describes it, the melancholic, in a sense, stages loss itself as the focus of its affection, making absence its object of longing. The melancholic ego turns on itself, and, as Freud noted, this condition can in some cases lead to suicide. Joy Division presents absences as a central motif of its style. It is through absences that a sense of dread, nihilism, and funereal mystery is conveyed, a sensibility that many later goth bands emulated.

Taking its name from a term the Nazis gave for the section in concentration camps reserved for prostitutes, Joy Division's self-abnegating nihilism became its signature. Unlike the fast-paced power-chord pogo beats and carnivalesque excesses of punk, Joy Division's music was mordant, heavy, and plodding, its style imposing, stark, and classically elegant. Joy Division's first LP, *Unknown Pleasures* (1979), was hailed by the British music press as a major achievement. Released by Factory Records, an independent label based in Manchester, its black cover, devoid of information about the band, cast a sense of dread. With titles like "Disorder," "New Dawn Fades," "She's Lost Control," and "I Remember Nothing," it promised a vision of life as not only pointless but failed, cruel, and macabre. The first track, "Disorder," sets the tone, its driving minor-key guitar riff supporting Ian Curtis's urgent baritone singing, "Who is right, who can tell, and who gives a damn right now? / I've got the spirit, lose the feeling, let it out somehow." Throughout the record Curtis sings about hopes and opportunities lost ("guess whose dreams always end? / We don't rise up, just descend"), the emptiness of existence ("directionless so plain to see / a loaded gun won't set you free / so you say"), and its commonplace violences ("I've seen the nights filled with bloodsport and pain / And the bodies obtained, the bodies obtained / Where will it end?").³

Like most independent records of the period, *Unknown Pleasure's* sales were comparatively small, yet Joy Division managed to attract a devoted following, playing to ever-increasing audiences around England, Belgium, and Holland. After months of gigging and the release of several well-received singles, the band planned a small U.S. tour for the spring of 1980. On May 17, 1980, on the eve of that tour, however, Ian Curtis was found by his wife, Deborah, hanging by the neck in his parents' home in Macclesfield—Iggy Pop's *The Idiot* was still spinning on the stereo, the needle stuck in the run-off groove. In his suicide letter, Curtis wrote that it was dawn and he could hear birds singing as he finished writing. Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart" was released almost immediately after Curtis's suicide—it entered the Top 20 in the British charts and became one of the longest-

lasting entries on the charts in British pop history. In the song, Curtis crooned of failed romance and a hopelessness more profound than many listeners could realize.

Is the bedroom so cold?
Turned away on your side
Is my timing that flawed?
Our respect run so dry
Yet there's still this appeal
That we've kept through our lives
And love, love will tear us apart—again.

The melancholia of Curtis's lyrics and Joy Division's music seems in hindsight to have been uncannily prescient of the singer's suicide.

Joy Division's unique melancholic style became the "signature" for other releases on Factory Records in the label's early years. From about 1979 to 1984, most of the bands recording on the Factory label, such as Section 25, Crispy Ambulance, A Certain Ratio, the Wake, and the Names, in various ways reiterated not only the musical style established by Joy Division but also its production and record packaging. Along with Joy Division, these early Factory bands constituted a bleak, nihilistic corner of postpunk music, prefiguring goth. In this chapter I will examine how Joy Division's music, sound production, and promotional packaging articulated a melancholia that became central to goth style. Ironically Joy Division never presented itself as "goth"—in fact the band seemed opposed to the whole notion of a gothic rock style and scoffed at its pretensions.⁴ From its beginnings Joy Division modeled itself on the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, and other early postpunk bands (e.g., Wire and the Buzzcocks). Unlike the "mystery couple" Stevenson encountered, Joy Division dressed in a fairly nondescript manner—Mick Middles, writing in *The Face*, referred to their appearance as "distinctly Forties in style" (qtd. in Johnson 17). Their permanent-press slacks, short, utilitarian haircuts, skinny ties, and work shirts made them seem more like working-class stiffies than the otherworldly neo-romantic wraiths the Macclesfield psychic witnessed (fig. 1). Yet Joy Division is regularly cited by goths and in the popular media as foundational to goth subcultures.⁵

What may be perhaps most obvious about Joy Division's iconic status among goths is the fact of Curtis's suicide. Although the surviving band members became New Order and gained fame in the mid-1980s as major forerunners of electronica with the hit "Blue Monday," the legacy of Joy Division has always haunted the later band. At their concerts New Order



Fig. 1: Ian Curtis

was often heckled by fans who would scream out “Joy Division!” and “Ian!” Almost every major article about New Order refers to Joy Division and Curtis’s suicide, much to the chagrin of the surviving members.⁶ While such fandom often forms around rock star suicides, it is not, I would argue, Curtis’s suicide alone that can explain the significance of Joy Division for goth subculture. The band’s music, sound, and style—the band as a *production*—have been received as if they were profoundly related to the suicide, and thus it is the combination of the morbid fact of Curtis’s death and the affect of his band’s style that has made Joy Division so foundational to goth. Further I will suggest that, in part, Joy Division’s rendering of melancholia through allusions to the horrors of history is a unique element of its reception as gothic. Curtis’s lyrics present a world devoid of hope and filled with horror that is metaphoric of the singer’s sense of personal failure and loss. In one of Joy Division’s most powerful songs, “Atrocity Exhibitions” (1980), Curtis’s lyrics allude to the coliseums of the Roman Empire and the death camps of the Nazi regime to portray a world in which torture and murder are spectacles for entertainment, a world in which only death and the nothingness that lay beyond brought hope of release from torment.⁷

Asylums with doors open wide
Where people could pay to see inside

For entertainment they watch his body twist
Behind his eyes he says: I still exist
This is the way, step inside.

Sadly, Curtis's lyrics in "Atrocity Exhibitions" probably had particular resonance for his own experiences—he suffered from epilepsy, which was exacerbated by onstage performances under glaring lights. According to his wife, Deborah: "I don't remember ever seeing Ian have a fit while on stage. It was only after his death that I found out how frequently this happened or that it even happened at all. . . . It was allowed to become an expected part of Joy Division's act and the more sick he became, the more the band's popularity grew" (114).

What many fans and critics saw as Curtis's *act*, his jerky, tortured movements on stage seeming to correspond to the tortured subjects of his songs, was in fact the real and painful experience of his condition. But as Deborah notes, Curtis's seizures were, in a sense, enabled by the band's live performances, made into an act, a spectacle that helped make the band popular. Reviewers of the time often referred to Curtis's contorted stage dance as evidence of his authentic vision of pain and horror—yet none of them ever seemed to know that these contortions were beyond his control. In many ways this fraught relationship between the "staged" and the "real" reveals a fascinating dimension of goth's early moments. Curtis's lyrics often staged history as metaphoric of his own lived pain—his personal condition, in a sense, made possible Joy Division's "atrocity exhibitions" and gave them a morbid authenticity. As British rock journalist Paul Morley once wrote in the *New Musical Express* (*NME*), Joy Division's music was "filled with the horror of our times" (qtd. in Cowley 2002).

To extend Morley's thought further, an important dimension of Joy Division's goth style is its introjection of "the horror of our times," specifically the historical atrocities of Nazism, as metonymic of melancholic identity. Perhaps one of the most recognizable differences between punk and goth is the former's satirical edge, its angry glee in displaying repulsive signs, such as the swastika, for iconoclastic shock value; punk use of such symbols seeks to empty them of historical content, ironize them, turning them as a rebuke back upon the straights whose world produced Nazism. In goth the value of such signs is precisely rooted in their content, in the horror, dread, and macabre associated with what they denote, in a sense acknowledging their baleful historical significance. For Curtis, the horrors of history confirmed his own personal horrors—the brutalities of the Roman coliseum or the concentration camp were metaphorized as his own personal torments writ large. The choice of Nazi iconography as style begs

many questions, many of which haunted Joy Division and Factory Records throughout its history. While it stems in part from the punk iconoclasm of late-1970s U.K. subcultures, I will conclude by suggesting how we might understand it as revealing elements of a goth “whiteness.”

The Factory Style

Although gothic rock is widely said to have become an identifiable style in the early 1980s, its roots reach back to some of the darker versions of 1960s psychedelia, such as the Doors and the Velvet Underground. According to guitarist Steve Severin of Siouxsie and the Banshees, “We didn’t tell John [the Banshees’ original guitarist McKay] ‘Oh, you have to play an A-sharp minor there, and it’ll be really spooky.’ We’d say, ‘Make it a cross between the Velvet Underground and the scene from *Psycho*’ ” (qtd. in Thompson and Greene 1994, 42). While these earlier rock styles share a number of characteristics with gothic rock—for example, lyrical emphasis on madness, despair, and the supernatural, the use of studio effects to achieve “spooky” sounds—gothic rock music as a cultural phenomenon sprang directly from the punk cultural phenomenon. Almost every first-generation goth rocker’s account of personal awakening begins with some encounter with punk, usually with the Sex Pistols.⁸ Yet punk rock differs from gothic rock in a number of important ways. Punk songs were typically structured around three power chords played loud and fast on an electric guitar turned to full volume. Late-seventies punk tended to emphasize the treble range and to sound as if it had been recorded live—in contrast to the mainstream rock it rebelled against, punk prided itself on the absence of effects and studio technology. Of course, this lo-fi approach was simulated through studio effects. Chris Thomas’s production of *Never Mind the Bollocks Here’s the Sex Pistols* (1977), for example, involved many overdubs, splices, and edits (Zak 2001, 178).

Most participant historians of goth agree that gothic rock became a recognizable subculture only after 1979, but it has been widely asserted by both music journalists and goths that Joy Division was the first band to be called “gothic” (Wake 1994; Porter n.d.). According to the oft-cited story, Joy Division’s promoter and eventually the key figure in Factory Records, Anthony Wilson, called Joy Division’s music “gothic” in a 1978 BBC interview. At roughly the same time the U.K. music magazines *New Musical Express* and *Sounds* described the new direction Siouxsie Sioux and the Banshees was taking after punk as “gothic.” This new direction involved more overt use of special effects, more emphasis on melody, and an introspective, moody approach. Primarily the British music press focused on what it

heard as “atmosphere” in the new music by the Banshees, Joy Division, and Bauhaus. “Atmosphere,” of course, is a convenient metaphor for specific technical effects; in the Banshees’ case, these effects were achieved through production technologies that gave the music a sense of greater space. The typical punk rock record often sounded as if there was very little space between the instruments and vocals in the mix; the sonic “image” was crafted to mirror the visual image of a listener directly in front of the stage, with the music blaring at her. By 1978 the Banshees’ productions radically refashioned this sonic image. On the Banshees’ 1978 “Pure,” for example, the guitarist plays sustained single-note figures in a minor key through an echo effect, while Siouxsie Sioux’s vocals, like a wailing ghost on some distant heath, are mixed in the background, creating an effect of greater distance between performers in the track’s ambience. This production also reconfigures the relationships of vocalist (typically the central figure in a classic rock mix), instrumentalists, and listeners. An effects-laden sound of guitar and bass dominate the mix, but the vocalist sounds as if she’s somewhere else, displaced from the stage.

The attempt to convey a sense of greater spatiality in the sound was central to Joy Division and the early Factory bands. In fact, when the U.K. music press described Joy Division’s music as gothic they were comparing it to the looming, imposing spaces of the gothic cathedral (Johnson 1984; Edge 1984). But the term was also used by the U.K. press to refer to the predominance of bass guitar in bands like Joy Division. The booming bass notes mixed in the foreground of Bauhaus’s classic “Bela Lugosi’s Dead” (1979) both anchor the song’s rhythmic groove and amplify its affective significance of dread and spookiness. Similarly, Peter Hook’s bass playing in Joy Division tended to dominate the mix and to carry the main melodic themes of the music, usually in a descending minor-third pattern. The music of such classic goth bands as Sisters of Mercy, the Danse Society, Play Dead, and the Cult is often characterized by a bass sound very similar to Hook’s. In the classic gothic mix, bass guitar and drums are foregrounded; guitars and sometimes even vocals are mixed in such a way as to suggest that they are being heard from a distance.⁹

The essentials of this classic gothic rock style had taken shape in the production of records by Joy Division and other early Factory Records bands. From the label’s inception in 1978 until about 1984, the principal producer of Factory recordings was Martin Hannett, whose technical innovations had perhaps more influence on shaping a gothic sound than any other producer. One of the most significant innovations of Hannett’s productions of Joy Division was to invert the classic rock audio mix. Bass and drum domi-

nated, while guitars—the iconic instrument of rock music—were mixed as if they were not played in the same room but at a distance. In some senses, it is this inversion of rock music audio production values that is the site of Joy Division’s articulation of a gothic sound. The melancholic longing staged by Curtis’s lyrics and vocals is paralleled by the audio mix. Indeed, Hannett’s unique style acts as a kind of metaphor of melancholia. According to Robert Walser (1993), heavy metal’s emphasis on volume and overloaded amplification, its staging of guitar virtuosity, and its hypermasculine aggressiveness signify power by overwhelming the listener with sound: “Distortion functions as a sign of extreme power and intense expression by overflowing its channels and materializing the exceptional effort that produces it.” Yet, as he goes on to note, “This is not to say that distortion always and everywhere functions this way; guitar distortion has become a conventional sign that is open to transformation and multiple meanings” (41–42). Walser’s comments seem especially relevant in considering Joy Division’s music, particularly since heavy metal has been often cited by both its critics and band members as an important influence. But Joy Division’s distorted guitars are placed at the margins of the audio mix, and the bass, drums, and synthesizer effects take center stage. In a sense, guitar distortion signifies negatively—it acts as a shadow voice to the more dominant bass and drums, and thus, I would argue, conveys loss, distance, absence, powerlessness. Unlike metal bands’ use of distortion and other guitar amplification effects, for Joy Division such effects act as metaphors of an *absence* of power.

Joy Division’s first album for Factory, *Unknown Pleasures* (1978), established the Factory label sound. Hannett’s production lent Joy Division’s music an atmosphere entirely lacking in its first, self-produced record, *An Ideal for Living* (1978), recorded under the name Warsaw. In this first recording Curtis’s lyrics often seemed in conflict with the heavy metal and punk dominance of the music; Hannett subordinated the music to the lyrics. *Unknown Pleasures* displays at least two significant audio levels: a background of partially obscured sounds of violence (such as smashing glass and muffled screams) and a foreground focused on bass sounds (bass guitar, bass drums). A synthesizer often acts as a bass line, creating extremely low, resonant sounds. The guitar tends to be recorded lower in the mix, augmented by a heavy use of echo effects.

On *Unknown Pleasures* Hannett made liberal use of digital delay, intensified the drum sound, and overdubbed to help produce a sense of dread, melancholy, and tragedy. On “Day of the Lords,” for example, the guitar uses digital delay and octaver effect, which immediately reproduces the notes played, only an octave higher or lower, thus producing the effect of

two guitars playing at once in different registers. After a bass-dominant introduction, Curtis sings:

This is the room, the start of it all
No portraits so fine, only sheets on the wall
I've seen the nights, filled with blood sports and pain
And the bodies obtained, the bodies obtained.
Where will it end?
Where will it end?
Where will it end?
Where will it end?

Underscoring all this the guitar, along with a sustained synthesizer treble note, produces minor harmonies to the repeated fifth line, echoing Curtis's resigned singing. The repetitiveness of the guitar line along with its doubleness through the octaver expresses both the monotony and inevitability of Curtis's question. Unlike heavy metal guitar, the distortion effects on the guitar signify not power but impotence. This is also supported by the relationship of bass to guitar in the opening theme, where the bass notes play a rising minor progression, while the guitar hits the same note throughout—in effect, the lower sound is heard rising, ascending to dominance in the mix, while the higher sound of the guitar, which in most rock music signifies power, goes nowhere. This contrast underscores the lyrics' vision of a world in which death, despair, and the low rise up and dominate.

Unknown Pleasures' longest track, "I Remember Nothing," places most of the musical emphasis on bass and drums, opening with a rising synthesizer bass note, followed by a drum pattern beginning on the bass drum in a plodding 4/4 time. An organ emerges holding a wavering minor chord as the bass strikes a death-knell single note that dominates the mix. Sound samples of breaking glass are mirrored by synthesizer cymbal effects that resemble both the sound of glass and water crashing against a shore. The guitar merely punctuates the introduction with a few stuttered notes, again mixed in the background of the recording. The effect of the production is to emphasize an unspecified dread underlying the lyrics:

We were strangers
Away too long
(Violent)
.
Violent more violent
His hand cracks the chair
Loses all reaction

And slumps in despair
Trapped in a cage
And surrendered too soon.

Throughout Curtis's singing, the lines "We were strangers / Away too long" and the barely whispered "Violent" are repeated in the background of the mix. Outside of the lines "Violent more violent / His hand cracks the chair," there are no clues in the lyrics as to the sense of dread and foreboding the song expresses; it is the production itself that gives the song its forbidding quality.

Hannett's production of *Unknown Pleasures* achieved an atmospheric quality that previously had never been heard in postpunk. According to Tony Wilson, "Martin was particularly interested in echo and digital delay and that the essential concept of what you do as a producer is to take all the sounds into your mixing deck, strip these sounds to their perfect, naked form and then . . . start creating imaginary rooms for each sound" (qtd. in Middles 1996, 111). In particular, Hannett's use of digital delay achieved a totally new drum sound for the band, one that would become a signature of the producer's style. A delay takes an audio signal and plays it back in delayed time, anywhere from a few milliseconds to several seconds. Used in tandem with a feedback control, a sound can be theoretically repeated almost infinitely—but as it repeats it decays and becomes quieter until it becomes an almost inaudible part of the ambient sound of the mix. As Durutti Column guitarist Vini Reilly explained, "Martin used that digital delay not as a repeat echo delay but to make a tiny, tiny milli-second delay that came so close to the drum, it was impossible to hear" (qtd. in Middles 1996, 111–12). In addition to using digital delay, Hannett would also record the separate instruments in unusual environments—at one point, he relayed Joy Division's drum to a speaker miked in a toilet. According to Mick Middles, "With the use of digital delay, [Hannett] had created the impression of *suppressed* power; of intensity of feeling that, at any moment, something might blow" (1996, 114; emphasis mine). Upon hearing the results, Pete Hook and Bernard Sumner apparently hated it. "Me and Barney wanted to be more rocky," Hook later said, "Hannett took it right *down*" (qtd. in Middles 1996, 115; emphasis mine).

The spacious and forbidding atmosphere suggested by *Unknown Pleasures* was even more intensified in Joy Division's second album, *Closer*. The first cut, "Atrocity Exhibition," opens with guitar notes fragmenting through a digital delay using a wave modulation setting, altering the wavelength of the reproduced note each time it is played. The effect results in something that sounds like bones clattering together rather than guitar notes. The drums

play a complicated and overbearing series of tom-tom beats punctuated by a high-hat closing sharply on the downbeat, sounding like a whiplash. Again the bass guitar and drums dominate the mix, with the bass establishing the musical theme. In the background another heavily distorted guitar is heard using a chorus flanger, which makes the notes sound screeched and splayed, giving the effect of howling.

The sequence of the tracks on *Closer*, like *Unknown Pleasures*, suggests a descent into a personal hell—only on *Closer* the “hell” seems to be literal. Hannett’s use of effects in the production serves to underscore the sense of descent, decay, and demise portrayed in Curtis’s lyrics. Like *Unknown Pleasures*, *Closer* opens with an intense, urgent portrayal of suffering—it is one of the most bombastic songs on the album. From there it moves into “Isolation,” which like almost all of Joy Division’s songs opens with the bass guitar establishing the harmonic theme. This song, like “She’s Lost Control,” takes up the pace of new wave dance pop in its crisp, metronomic bass drum and snare ground beat. The irony, of course, is that, unlike most dance pop, “Isolation” is about psychological self-abnegation:

Mother, I’ve tried, please believe me
I’m doing the best that I can
I’m ashamed of the things I’ve been put through
I’m ashamed of the person I am.

Here the guitar is practically nonexistent—instead a quavering synthesizer pattern punctuates Curtis’s singing, and bass and drums dominate the mix. Curtis’s vocals are miked with an echo effect that sounds flat and seems less dominant than one would expect—it sounds as if he is singing in a distant empty room. On “Passover,” Hannett records the guitar through a digital delay so that at significant points its notes decay down the harmonic scale giving them a sense of collapsing. This sense of decay and decline corresponds with the song’s coda—the guitar fades away, leaving only bass and drum; then the bass fades and the drum’s tempo slows, petering out to its last beats. Typical rock instrumentation is also undermined in “Heart and Soul”—again, bass guitar and drum dominate, while the guitar’s strumming of a minor-chord sequence in counterpoint to the heavily echoed vocals is barely audible. Throughout the song, a sustained minor chord on synthesizer wavers in the instrumental breaks. On other songs, such as “The Eternal” and “Decades,” the guitar is used as simply another underlying effect in the mix. A synthesizer chorus effect sustaining a chantlike drone runs through the plodding, funeral march of “The Eternal.” As the song ends, the sustained synthesizer notes decay and the musicians can be heard in the

studio leaving from their instruments, seemingly giving up. The last track, "Decades," seems the most self-consciously gothic on the album, complete with a Hammer film-style creepy harpsichord sound played through the synthesizer. This song seems to mark the final descent into hell, as Curtis's heavily echoed vocals intone some of his most eerie lines:

We knocked on the door of hell's darker chambers
Pushed to the limits, we dragged ourselves in
Watched from the wings as the scenes were replaying
We saw ourselves now as we never had seen
The trail of the trauma and degeneration
The sorrows we suffered and never were freed
Where have they been?

The instrumental break features a strings setting on the synthesizer whose sustained chords rise only to reach a final minor chord and then descend in harmonic progression. Martin Hannett has said that *Closer* was one of his favorite productions, and called it "the most mysterious: that album was made as closed as possible, kabalistic, locked in its own mysterious world" (qtd. in van de Kamp).

Hannett's inversion of rock sound is evident in almost all Factory releases from 1979 to 1984 by bands such as Section 25, the Names, Crispy Ambulance, and A Certain Ratio. Each varied the basic Hannett style, but in general bass and drums dominate the mix and the production emphasizes an expanded, spacious ambience. The consistency in the sound production of early Factory Records was mirrored in its sleeve art. Like many other figures in punk, Factory founder Anthony Wilson was inspired by art movements, and in particular by the Situationists and the pop art of Andy Warhol—the label's name cites Warhol's famous studio, which gave rise to the Velvet Underground. After Wilson took over the Factory Club, a dilapidated former reggae dance hall in Manchester, its first poster for the club was designed by Peter Saville, who had been finishing college in design and was heavily influenced by the constructivists.¹⁰ The success of the Factory Club shows led Wilson to produce a double 7" EP set, *A Factory Sample*, which became the initiation of the Factory Records label. In discussing the set with Saville, it was decided that the EP would be catalogued as FAC 2. As Saville said in 1980, "Everything Factory does is being designed, as opposed to being decorated" (qtd. in Brinkhuis 1998).

Peter Saville's neoclassical sleeve designs for Factory, with their lack of adornment, emphasis on clean, classic typography, preference for black and white, and lack of the usual pop record information (such as running times,

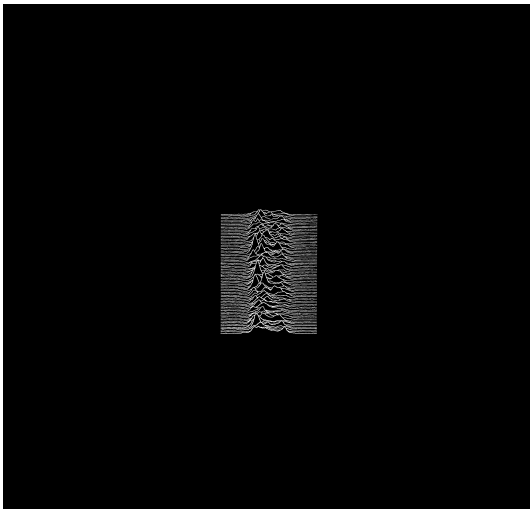


Fig. 2:
Joy Division, *Unknown Pleasures*
(1979), front sleeve

lyrics, or song credits), became a signature of Factory Records' style in much the same way as Hannett's aural productions. Vin Cassidy of Section 25 once said, "You could tell it was a Factory record just by glancing at it from across a room." Where Peter Saville's cover for *A Factory Sample* was mostly gray and archly ironic in its citation of constructivist style, his cover design of *Unknown Pleasures* was striking in its austerity and darkness (fig. 2). Record sleeves in pop music traditionally market records by presenting buyers with images they can identify with, usually through photos of the performers, which are often prominent and serve to signify the kind of music and cultural style they represent.¹¹ The *Unknown Pleasures* sleeve, however, graphically rejected this traditional marketing strategy and, at the same time, helped to signify the cryptic, stark music it contained. Centered against the record's black front sleeve is a series of wave patterns in white—apparently this image, selected by Bernard Sumner, is a series of radio waves recording the dying of a star. On the back of the sleeve, all one finds is the name of the band and the record title along with the label name and catalog number centered on the black background in white letters. In its original vinyl version, the record's inner sleeve was white with a small, cryptic black-and-white photo centered on one side. On the other side, the song titles are listed along with publishing, production, and design credits in black letters. The vinyl record labels reproduce the wave design of the front cover—on the A side, the label is black with white lettering, and it is subtitled "Outside." The B side is subtitled "Inside" and is white with black lettering. But all that appears on these labels beside the wave pattern is the band's name, the title *Unknown Pleasures*, the subtitle, and the rpms. The band members are not listed; the tracks on

each side aren't listed on the label; there are no photos of the band. This sleeve design was unique in rock music merchandising for providing audiences with no image of the records' performers and only minimal product information.

Such sleeve designs convey a sense of inaccessibility, of a blankness that is less the blank snarl of punk and much more the silence of the grave. Indeed, the covers of Joy Division's last official recordings are, in fact, funerary. The photos on the cover of *Closer* and the twelve-inch EP version of "Love Will Tear Us Apart" are of statuary at an Italian cemetery (figs. 3 and 4). The seven-inch version of "Love Will Tear Us Apart" looks like a tombstone (fig. 5).¹² While such packaging has become especially associated with Joy Division, other Factory releases during this period bore similar designs (fig. 6). The influence of the Factory sleeve-design style can be seen in the designs for many gothic rock records from the early 1980s to the present (see figs. 7–9). The blank neoclassical austerity of Saville's designs for Factory, especially after Curtis's suicide and the funereal cover of the posthumous *Closer* and "Love Will Tear Us Apart," became associated with a gothic style—the emphasis on dark colors and the lack of text became a way of conveying a sense of the implacable silence of the tomb—the album cover as crypt.

Atrocity and Goth Melancholia

The funereal blankness of the Factory style helped to convey a sense of dread that was underscored by references to historical atrocities, most specifically the Holocaust. Indeed, the repeated citations of Nazism in early Factory records created considerable controversy. From Joy Division's name to the graphics for concert posters and record jackets, Factory became notorious for its references to Nazism. The cover design by Bernard Sumner of *An Ideal for Living* featured a romanticized depiction of a Nazi youth banging a drum and a photo of a German soldier pointing his gun at a small boy (fig. 10). Although Ian Curtis at one time moved to a predominantly black neighborhood and spent much of his time hanging out in reggae clubs, according to Deborah Curtis, Ian voted Conservative, his politics became right-wing during his Factory days, and he was sometimes openly racist (Curtis 1995, 31, 35, 40, 56). On the 1977 live recording of "At a Later Date" that appeared on *Short Circuit*, Bernard Sumner can be heard shouting out before the band begins, "You all forget Rudolf Hess!"¹³ Crispy Ambulance used samples from recordings of Nazi rallies on *The Plateau Phase* (1982). And when the surviving members of Joy Division reformed as New Order, the new name seemed to be a self-conscious wink at the charges of Nazism. Despite



Fig. 3: Joy Division, *Closer* (1980), front sleeve



Fig. 4: Joy Division, "Love Will Tear Us Apart," twelve-inch EP (1979), front sleeve



Fig. 5: Joy Division, "Love Will Tear Us Apart," seven-inch single (1979), front sleeve



Fig. 6: Crispy Ambulance,
The Unsightly and the Serene (1982),
front sleeve

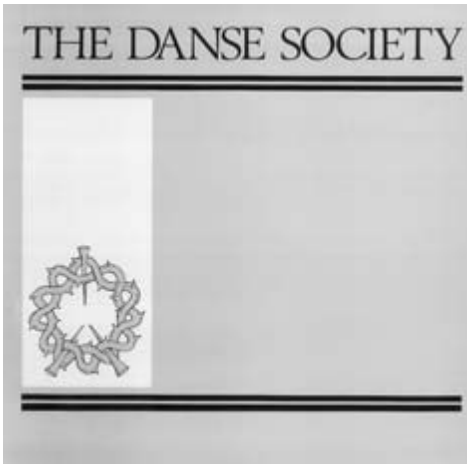


Fig. 7: The Danse Society,
"Somewhere," twelve-inch EP
(1982), front sleeve



Fig. 8: The Sisters of Mercy,
"Body and Soul," twelve-inch EP
(1983), front sleeve

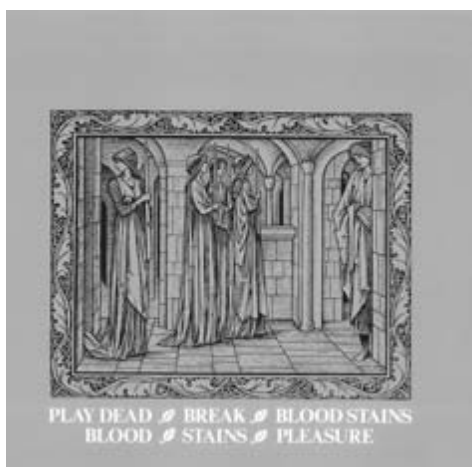


Fig. 9: Play Dead, "Blood Stains," twelve-inch EP (1984), front sleeve

repeated and often angry denials of their Nazi affiliations by the Factory bands, the rumors spread in the British music press that Factory had ties to fascist groups, perhaps even the National Front. According to Mark Johnson, "No swastikas were ever seen at their gigs (unlike other punk groups of the period), the band made neither racist statements (as did early Sham 69) nor political statements (or, for that matter, said much of anything at all)" (1984, 16). Yet it is hard to ignore the whiff of fascism around Joy Division and the Factory bands in these years.

Factory's use of Nazi iconography might be seen as an extension of the punk style of the late 1970s. According to Dick Hebdige, the use of the swastika in punk relied on its shock value: "It clearly reflected the punks' interest in a decadent and evil Germany—a Germany which had 'no future' " (1979, 116). Seeking to extend punk nihilism to its logical extreme, Factory bands deployed Nazi images and symbols in much the same way—as signifiers of evil, decadence, "no future." Yet while punk's uses of Nazi fetishes may have primarily been used for iconoclastic shock value, such icons for Joy Division and the Factory style took on a stronger sense of nihilism—they signified that all life is atrocity, the concentration camp is the paradigm of existence, and history compels us to failure, demise, and apocalypse. Punks displayed swastikas, Gestapo death's heads, and jackboots together with an ensemble of signs as an aggressive attack against established cultural norms; but the neoconstructivist graphics and the lyrics' allusions to the holocaust in Joy Division and early Factory style serve to cast an eerie, somber pall. Hebdige has argued that the Nazi symbols in punk style "had been wilfully detached from the concept (Nazism) [they] conventionally signified, and although [they] had been re-positioned . . . within an alternative subcul-



Fig. 10: Joy Division, "An Ideal for Living" (1978), front sleeve

tural context, [their] primary value and appeal derived *precisely from [their] lack of meaning; from [their] potential for deceit*" (117; emphasis mine). Yet for Joy Division, it is indeed the Holocaust's denotative yield that lends Nazi iconography its signficatory and stylistic power. The horror and tragedy the iconography conventionally signifies is central to Factory's use of such signs to promote the morbid, nihilistic vision of its music. It is not an emptying of historical referent so much as an introjection of the historical as metaphoric of personal melancholic identity. When Curtis sings in "Ice Age" (on *Still*, 1981): "Seen the real atrocities, buried in the sand . . . I'm living in the ice age / Nothing will hold, nothing will fit," the focus is not on mass murder, but on how mass murder is, however repulsive such a reductionism might be, metaphoric of personal suffering.

In a sense, then, Joy Division and the early Factory bands gothicize historical atrocities. Just as traditional gothic literature externalized anxieties about self and other, exploring the darker side of the Enlightenment ideal through extravagant settings and bizarre characters, the Factory bands' allusions to such horrifying historical signs as Nazism served to allegorize what they presented as inner psychological turmoils and self-abnegation. Just as gothic fiction's vampires and monsters shadowed the Enlightenment, the Nazis represented for the Factory bands the sign of modernity's failed ideals. But as has long been argued, the English gothic was itself a sublimation and erasure of the nation's anxieties about its encounters with the colonized other.¹⁴ To some extent, the citations of atrocity in Joy Division and Fac-



Fig. II: *A Certain Ratio, To Each . . .* (1981), right-inside gatefold sleeve

tory bands is the sign of a racial history that is visible in its own absence.¹⁵ None of the other bands I've discussed engage race in any way more explicit than in their references to the Holocaust. At the same time, though, their musical style was indelibly inflected by the general attraction to Afro-musics among white British working-class and art school youths of the Thatcher era. It has long been recognized that the innovative sound of Public Image was in large measure due to Jah Wobble's rearticulations of the Jamaican "dub" sound in his bass playing.¹⁶ Similarly the predominance of bass in the Factory bands may be traced to Public Image's experiments with dub and the Factory clubs' promotion of reggae performances. To what extent might we understand the dread of the Factory style to be a white rearticulation of the dread of reggae subculture?

In some ways, the melancholia of the Factory bands might be read as staging a mode of whiteness, an identificatory position marking itself by its absence, enacting its own investments in that absence that defines it in a racist system ruled by whites.¹⁷ Although the whiteness most often associated with goth subculture has been read as the pallor of the corpse, it might also be seen as obviating racial whiteness.¹⁸ Despite the participation of minorities in goth, its music-making communities are overwhelmingly white, and thus we might ask how the affects of nihilism, despair, and melancholia that have been staged by goth bands and their record companies are metonymic of a white identity. If, as Freud argues, melancholic identity is organized around loss qua loss, perhaps the Factory bands and later goth bands articulate whiteness as the indefinably lost, the absence around which white racial identity is constructed.

Many musicologists and cultural critics emphasize the importance of pleasure in rock.¹⁹ Rock is seen as a way to rearticulate the “powerlessness of youth” by acting as a stage for the “empowerment of ‘pleasure’ ” (Grossberg 1990, 116). But what about bands like Joy Division whose music is resolutely intent on staging apocalyptic states of existential horror? If the music of such bands seeks to organize “pleasure,” then, at the least, we need to complicate what is meant by “pleasure.” This is where a Freudian notion of melancholia might be useful, to understand how one might derive a kind of pleasure from the anguished longing for something indefinable, from longing itself. As I have argued, the Factory bands’ music was produced so that it almost seemed organized around absences, thus staging a melancholic style that seeks to display the emptiness of the subject as its spectacle. For the Factory bands, the “atrocities exhibition” renders a theater of racist historical tragedy as a gothic spectacle of absences, an exhibition of the spectral self, a funeral for identity.

Notes

1. By “alternative” I mean the varieties of independent rock musical styles in large part inspired by punk. The term is controversial but provides a neat and widely accepted catchall to indicate the general field of style and taste in which Joy Division is typically situated by critics. The band’s importance in this market is undeniable. Fifteen posthumous collections of unreleased studio and live material and repackaged “best of” material have been issued since 1981. After media giant London Records acquired the Joy Division catalog following the bankruptcy of Factory Records, it rereleased Joy Division’s LPs on CD and also released three repackaged collections of Joy Division recordings over a ten-year period, culminating with 1998’s *Heart and Soul*, a four-CD box set. Since 1998, three releases of live recordings have also surfaced, the latest being a recording of a 1979 concert released in 2001 as *Les Bain Douches*. Since 1990, at least five tribute albums have appeared; the most famous, *A Means to an End* (1995) on Virgin/EMI, included the techno wizard Moby’s version of “New Dawn Fades.” A tribute album by American goth bands, *Ceremonial*, also appeared in 1995 and featured covers by such bands as Lycia and Corpus Delicti. Other artists who’ve covered Joy Division songs are as diverse as Grace Jones, Paul Young, 10,000 Maniacs, the Swans, Bush, Galaxie 500, Smashing Pumpkins, and Nine Inch Nails. Kurt Cobain, who, like Curtis, committed suicide, also acknowledged Joy Division’s influence. More recent alternative bands, such as Low, Longwave, Doves, Interpol, and others have cited Joy Division as influential. Joy Division even inspired a chamber orchestral work, *The Eternal*, composed by Hans Ek and performed by the Nau Ensemble in 1999. Over 150 different bootlegs of Joy Division concerts, outtakes, and studio material currently exist on the market. A recent *New York Times* style section feature reported that Joy Division was the most popular band regu-

larly spun by DJs at the latest hot spot of the "new" new wave, Lit. References to Joy Division have appeared in the art world's recent trend in gothicism. Slater Bradley's digitally enhanced Victorian "ghost photography," for example, features a reproduction of a Joy Division performance in which the figure of Ian Curtis has been altered to look like a ghost. A May 2002 group exhibit at the Daniel Reich gallery in Chelsea, New York, "Unknown Pleasures," included a portrait of Curtis by Amy Gartrell. The spring 2002 release of the independent U.K. movie *24-Hour Party People*, based on the memoirs of Anthony Wilson, has brought even more mainstream attention to Joy Division and Curtis. A biopic of Curtis is in production and is set for release in 2006. See Cotter 2002 and Chaplin 2002.

2. Paul Hodkinson's survey of participants in the 1997 goth Whitby Festival Weekend, a major biannual event attracting hundreds of goths, details the sources for goth clothes and accessories, showing that the vast majority of his respondents bought their goth attire at independent local and nonlocal (i.e., via mail or Internet) shops. That is, they did not predominantly make their own clothes. See Hodkinson 2002, appendix, table 6, 202.
3. Respectively "Insight," "New Dawn Fades," and "Day of the Lords," on *Unknown Pleasures* (1979).
4. See Deborah Curtis, *Touching from a Distance*. Interestingly, Bernard Sumner once famously commented that one of his favorite movies was goth cult favorite *Nosferatu*. Sumner went on to describe gothic as a state in which "the atmosphere is really evil, but you feel comfortable inside it" (qtd. in Edge 1984, 34).
5. See Thompson and Greene 1994, 41–51. For significant examples from the Internet, see Gothgurl n.d.; Gunn n.d.; House n.d.; Nelson n.d.; Porter n.d.; Scathe, *An Early History*, n.d.; and Wake 1994. Contemporary reviews of Joy Division in the U.K. music magazines *New Musical Express* and *Sounds* often referred to the band as "gothic."
6. This can be seen from the earliest music press articles on New Order, such as Greil Marcus's review of New Order's 1982 concert in San Francisco, "Life after Death" (Marcus 1994); and Scott Isler's 1983 "Only Human" to more recent articles, such as a 2001 London *Guardian* article about New Order's reunion concert, where Ian Gitlins writes: "It is, of course, the spectre of Joy Division that eternally haunts New Order's music and shapes people's reactions to it." I thank my colleague Richard Zumkhawala-Cook for calling my attention to the anecdotes about heckling at New Order concerts.
7. The song's title was inspired by the novelist J. G. Ballard's scandalous book of the same name.
8. This was also true of Joy Division, whose guitarist Bernard Sumner was first inspired to form a band after seeing a Sex Pistols concert in Manchester. As Sumner put it, "I saw the Sex Pistols. They were terrible. I thought they were great. I wanted to get up and be terrible too" (Marcus 1989, 7). It is also interesting to note that Siouxsie Sioux, one of the originators of gothic rock, was a key figure in the punk revolt, one of a clique of Sex Pistol fans known for its extreme fashion

sense and who made a scene in the studio audience of the Pistols' *Today* show appearance. The bondage look popularized by Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, whose clothes shop, Sex, catered to S/M tastes, established some of the enchantment with a decadent, macabre fashion sense that would be reified by goths.

9. This does not typify all goth music, however; another tendency in goth, characterized by groups associated with the Batcave, such as Sex Gang Children and Alien Sex Fiend, took more of its carnivalesque abandon from punk. Such bands often performed in elaborate, garish makeup and costumes. But where punk attire emphasized trash culture and aimed at repulsing middle-class values through a self-conscious (often parodied) proletarianism, this first wave of "glam" goth often drew its inspirations from B-grade horror movie images of ghosts, vampires, and space aliens. Another tendency in goth, epitomized by Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, and the Cure, also emphasized a theatrical look, but one largely inspired by neoromanticism, the occult, and late-nineteenth-century decadence. Male performers wore heavy, dark eyeliner, often black lipstick, and pancake foundation to emphasize an "undead" appearance. Bands such as Nosferatu, Faith and the Muse, and Shadow Project exemplify this style, which has extended the "undead" look of earlier goth bands into an almost "faux-medieval" style of long, flowing black robes and antique mystical ornamentation (pentagrams, ornate crosses, rosaries, etc.). Despite various differences, the emphasis on bass sounds over treble and the liberal use of production effects characterizes almost all variants of goth.
10. In a 1984 interview with James Nice, Saville said, "The first work I ever did for Factory was a poster (FAC 1) on which the Factory Sample was also based. It was certainly constructivist in style, though the sleeve for OMD's [Orchestral Maneuvers in the Dark] *Electricity* was more neo-classical. I was twenty two and in my last week's [sic] at college, and becoming aware of the great tradition of Twentieth century graphics, as well as certain schools such as the Russian constructivists, the Bauhaus and De Stijl. I was really into Jan Tschichold and Die Neue Typographie of the 1930s, which was exclusively typography and graphics and reflected the mood of the time. Thus my first studies were reflected in the sleeves of my first records."
11. For more detail on the importance of visual images in the marketing of pop music, see Negus 1992, 61–79. Negus interviewed the director of one marketing firm who would ask people to tell him the first thing that came to mind when they thought of a particular genre of music. "The most common response was for people to reply with a visual image rather than an artist's name or piece of music. . . . '99 per cent of people give answers that relate to the visual. . . . But there are still a lot of people who say 'the music speaks for itself.' It doesn't" (66).
12. Actually, as Saville and others at Factory have explained many times, the cover is a photo of a gray piece of metal that had been acid-washed and engraved. Many critics and fans claimed that the sleeves for Joy Division's last recordings, released after Curtis's suicide, were deliberately exploiting the tragedy with funereal designs; Factory denied this, claiming that the sleeve designs had been developed

weeks and months before the suicide. This explanation is highly plausible, since record productions usually take considerable time, and Saville's, especially, were often very labor-intensive and difficult to produce. Yet I'm somewhat skeptical. Throughout these early years and even later, Factory was often disingenuous about its designs. As many insiders in the Factory scene have noted, the label often considered several different designs for one record. And given Anthony Wilson's well-known zeal for promotion, it's just as likely that Factory was fully aware of the significance of these jacket designs.

13. According to Mark Johnson, the (in)famous reference to Hess was inspired by the media coverage of the Nazi leader's heart attack in Spandau Prison and was meant to call attention to Hess as an icon of inhumanity. "Bernard [Sumner] was making more of a comment on man's inhumanity to his fellows than appealing to a Nazi sentiment" (1984, 16).
14. See, for example, Botting 1996.
15. A Certain Ratio was unique among Factory bands of the early period for its open embrace of Afro-musical styles and its allegiance with antiracist groups in the United Kingdom. Interestingly, the inner gatefold image of ACR's first LP, *To Each . . .* (1981), presents a photo of Nazi officers with a superimposed image of a black man looking down at them from a balcony (fig. 11).
16. "Jah Wobble" is a pseudonym and wordplay for John Wordle, a white working-class bassist who since leaving Public Image has gone on to work with North African and Arabic musical styles.
17. For more extensive approaches to whiteness, see Lipsitz 1998; Roediger 1999; and Dyer. As Richard Dyer notes, "The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position in white (which is to say dominant) discourse is of a piece with its ubiquity" (1988).
18. Ironically, as Hodgkinson has shown, participants in goth are often characterized by an open-mindedness to heterogeneity. Yet, as Hodgkinson also notes, this position is articulated alongside a high propensity among participants toward strong demarcation of boundaries of acceptable goth identity. See Hodgkinson 2002, 70–71, 77, and 197. While the whiteness of goth might be obvious in such observations, it is interesting to note that the racially minoritized have surprisingly widespread representation in goth subcultures around the world. In our own participation on the alt.gothic newsgroup, Lauren Goodlad and I have engaged in and listened in on a number of conversations with self-identified goths from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia. In her participation in goth communities in Seattle, Goodlad has observed a relatively substantial presence of Asian Americans.
19. For examples, see Frith 1997 [1980]; Laing 1997 [1985]; Grossberg 1990 and 1992; and McClary and Walser 1990.



MATERIAL DISTINCTIONS

A Conversation with Valerie Steele



It may or may not be part of the job requirement for the chief curator and acting director of New York's Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology to be a good dresser, but Valerie Steele is. Clearly unembattled by writer's block, Steele is the author and editor of twelve books on fashion, has taught at Columbia and the Fashion Institute of Technology, and is in addition the founding editor of the journal *Fashion Theory*, published by MIT Press. In the spring of 2001, we arranged to meet and discuss goth fashion.

We decide to meet on Memorial Day, the day scripted for national nostalgia. This is, as it were, fitting in that our topic is a studious version of historical revisionism. Naturally, I was curious what she would wear. Given the occasion, it seemed that black would be the clear choice. Apparently we had come to the same conclusion, because when she appears, she's wearing a long, slim black skirt, short sleeves, with the only hint at another color given by her tortoiseshell glasses, a near-cat's-eye frame that falls somewhere to the left of the academic and to the right of the demure bookstore clerk in a 1940s film noir. Her hair is pulled cleanly back, and after some small talk, she asks if I mind if she smokes. I tell her I would have been disappointed if she didn't, and we begin.

Steele first became interested in the cultural history of fashion at Yale, where she worked primarily on European cultural history, writing her dissertation on the erotic aspects of Victorian fashion. The recent entry of academia into fashion history, a development premised on the rise of cultural studies, led me to ask her about the evolution of the field.

VS: When I was in graduate school, fashion was generally regarded as a despicable subject. My favorite example of that was at a graduate school party,



Fig. 1: Valerie Steele.
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a professor at Yale said, “What are you working on?” and I said, “Fashion.” He said, “Oh, that’s fascinating. German or Italian?” It took me a minute. I said, “No, *fashion*. Like Paris. Not fascism.” He just said, “Oh,” and he turned around and walked away. It was not even worth talking about such an idiotic subject.

Even years later, when *Lingua Franca* asked me to do an article about fashion and academia [“The F-Word,” 1991], I called a lot of academics and many of them refused to be quoted by name. They said, “No, I’m not going to talk about fashion on the record.” Because it’s just so looked down on; it was really something which was still [in 1991] seen as so bourgeois and sexist and consumerist. It was really material, not intellectual—kind of beneath contempt. Then a couple of years later, when I started my journal [*Fashion Theory*], I knew that there were individual academics who’d been looking at aspects of fashion, whether in anthropology or cultural studies or art history, and it seemed that there was a need for a magazine where people from all different disciplines, internationally, could present their research and learn from each other. Because otherwise, we wouldn’t be very likely to be seeing research in different fields; fashion studies was such an incredibly interdisciplinary thing.

JB: How do you define the word *fashion*?

VS: Well, *fashion* is a verb as well as a noun. It's to make things, to fashion them. Generally, when people think of fashion, they think you mean only high fashion, women's garments. But in fact, the term applies more generally to any kind of clothing or even bodily display that in some way fashions the physical appearance and persona that you're presenting to the world, in a way perceived as fashionable. In other words, fashion overlaps with the general category of clothing, but fashion is more than that. There are elements of fashion in traditional clothing; for example, in the Ming Dynasty, lots of Chinese literati were complaining that fashions were changing really rapidly, and that there were style centers like Suzhou, which would launch new trends, and then these would spread from city to city. Or even earlier, in tenth-century Japan, in Heiankyô a term of praise was to say something was "imayo okashii," up to date. If you wore certain clothes with a certain range of colors, that might be in fashion, and the next season it would be no longer up to date. So there's fashion-oriented behavior, even in so-called traditional cultures.

At the same time, a lot of people in subcultures today tend to think that what they're wearing is not fashion, that is, it might be antifashion, or outside of fashion. But it isn't—in fact, you can't really escape from the fashion system. In one way or another, it's reacting to fashion. And it's often almost immediately incorporated into fashion, as with hippie styles being incorporated into fashion; or punk, notoriously, being incorporated into fashion. Or, of course, goth styles. So even when the people who are making and wearing the clothes don't think of the clothes as being fashion, they can be.

JB: That brings up antifashion fashion, and the dream, or the allure, of believing that you're escaping from the fashion system. In terms of goth fashion, how would that assimilation play?

VS: Well, goth fashion is one of a number of different subcultural youth styles that have developed, particularly since the 1950s. So you had rockers, you had mods, you had hippies, you had glam rock, and glitter, you had punks—and you also had new romantics and goths.

Most of these youth cultures were and are associated with particular kinds of music, and also with certain lifestyles and attitudes. But that's true actually of all kinds of mainstream fashions as well. An Armani person is somewhat different from a Versace person, just as a punk might be different from a goth. It's a different set of associations.

These subcultural styles tended to develop outside the mainstream of either high fashion, as it's institutionalized and created in Paris, primarily,

and also outside the mainstream mass clothing system. But it doesn't mean it's outside of fashion. I mean, there are still people manufacturing, making, buying, wearing, all of these clothes. You might say it's a particular kind of niche fashion.

JB: You invoked the 1950s in terms of youth culture, subcultural movements. Was there a particular movement in the 1950s you were thinking of?

VS: Well, I think that you really start to see it with the rise of rock and roll and with teenage cultures, particularly in America; but then also, already by the mid-1950s, in England as well, with the King's Road people. Mary Quant opened her first shop [Bazaar] in 1955, even though she didn't become internationally famous for almost another decade.

You had earlier versions too. You had zoot suits and so on in the 1930s; young people had had an influence on fashion, even long before that. Twenties fashion in many ways was a young person's style. Even earlier, in the Italian Renaissance, a lot of the most outrageous men's wear was worn by young men. If you look at images of very high doublets and codpieces and so on—most of those things tended to be worn by younger men. People like Machiavelli talk about how older men tend to wear black, and long robes, and so on. It was really younger men who were tending to be more body-conscious and outrageous in dress. Which makes sense, because the clothes got extremely physically revealing.

JB: At the point that you're describing, black is associated with age?

VS: With maturity.

JB: With social standing?

VS: Well, with seriousness. To some extent social standing, but it hadn't become codified yet.

JB: Would you call that a youth culture?

VS: No. It's not really a youth culture yet. You see a long range of slow change, whereby certain elite fashions start to spread throughout the culture, away from just a court or a particular city. As it does that, you also start to see variants in age display that are less controlled than they are in traditional small-scale societies, where clothing is much more like a uniform. The unmarried girls wear a particular thing, and the married girls wear another thing: that's all very codified. But with the gradual development of fashion, you get the appearance of fashion trendsetters, and then circles of influence coming out from them. So you have this long period, especially starting from the Renaissance, on up through the eighteenth century, where fash-

ion becomes more and more a widespread social phenomenon. And then of course in the nineteenth century, when you get the Industrial Revolution and mass urbanization, then you get a quantum leap forward toward modern fashion as we understand it.

JB: So where does goth fashion come from? Does it recycle and reincarnate material from certain provinces that you could identify?

VS: When I first came to the museum [at the Fashion Institute of Technology] in 1997, after having spent a decade teaching at FIT, I did an exhibition on fifty years of fashion, the last fifty years, the major trends in fashion.¹ One of the things I wanted to have was some sort of goth-looking outfit. I wanted something that was street style.

JB: Why did you want that?

VS: Because I wanted an example of an influential street style, one that in fact had had an impact on high fashion, and from there had trickled down to mass influences. Very often you will find things will have come up from the street, be picked up by high-fashion designers, like Dolce and Gabbana did goth things, and then it goes down to a mass market. Goth was a style which was still very much around [in 1997]. There were a couple of people at the museum who had been goths when they were younger. They donated a couple of items of clothing to the collection. When I wanted to put up a mannequin that was wearing some kind of goth style I pulled out what we had—it was something like a black corset, not enough to make a whole outfit. I took one of the younger staff members, and we went down to the Lower East Side, to little gothlike boutiques, and looked to see what kind of things we could put together that would make an ensemble. Maybe a black lace skirt, some kind of crucifix, things like this. I felt that, and still feel that, youth, street styles are such a major influence on high fashion and mainstream fashion that I wanted to make sure in the exhibit that we didn't concentrate solely on upscale fashion or even upscale avant-garde fashion like Rei Kawakubo, so that we also tried to get things that were subcultural.

JB: How would you define *subculture*?

VS: *Subculture*: meaning something which is not part of the mass culture, and also not part of an elite culture. Usually there's a very strong overlap between youth cultures and subcultures, but they're not quite the same. Every time Britney Spears or someone wears something which is knocked off by Old Navy—that might be youth-culture fashion, but it wouldn't be subculture. But if it was something that developed out of a youth culture and music style, and little designers associated with that culture started making it, and

then it was bought and worn to clubs, it would be developing out of that subculture. For example, you see that a lot with fetish. When I worked on the fetish book, I talked to people who were small-scale producers of fetish gear, and I asked them, "What do you think of Versace doing all this fetish-bondage clothes?" They got really agitated, and kept saying, "He's ruined everything. Now there are all these people wearing everything, and . . . it doesn't *mean* anything to them."

JB: It doesn't "mean" anything to them?

VS: [*Laughs*] Yes, "They're not *really* into this." Whereas the originators—the people who had been making it, the people who were part of that culture—they wore it, they lived it.

JB: To what degree are subcultures tied to urban centers? Do you see goth or other subcultural formations occurring in Dubuque?

VS: Yes, but they're usually spin-offs from bigger cities. Culture in general is an urban phenomenon. You don't find a lot of examples of high culture or subculture emerging from rural areas. It's usually from urban areas. And often it will spread from one urban area to another.

JB: Yet you look at *Vogue* magazine, and there are fantasies of trailer trash, fantasies of the provinces.

VS: When someone like Galliano looks at a trailer-trash thing, and then makes it part of a Dior show, there's a very strong component of irony, as there is with *Vogue* when they pick up on it. But when you look at goth or punk subcultures, or hip-hop, or grunge, there's a fairly high degree of self-awareness about it. You're wanting to create a particular look which in some way counters mainstream looks.

JB: To what degree is irony part of a goth look?

VS: It's probably there—

JB: And the crucifix, that would be one way to think of it?

VS: That's a beautiful way to think of it. There is usually some kind of genuine interest in spirituality, but there's also definitely an *épater le bourgeois* feeling about this: that you're wearing a glow-in-the-dark crucifix doesn't mean that you're a Christian in any kind of normal sense of the word.

JB: So that's the difference between parody and irony? You could read assaulting the bourgeois element as mocking it through looking like it, versus an ironic incorporation.

VS: But there's also a genuine romanticization of spirituality: unironic. Not ironic in the kind of smart-ass way that we usually think of. For example, if you look at a lot of goth visuals, like calendars and magazines and record covers, there's all kinds of elements of religiosity, which are meaningful within the culture. But they tend to be wrapped up with ideas of death. So you'll find crucifixes, just like you'll find coffins, or vampire elements: all of these are things about death and the undead, and the beyond, and the night.

JB: Take a goth coffin, or a crucifix, or any other object that comes to your mind. How is that object different from a fetish object?

VS: There's a big overlap. A sexual fetish is like a magic charm that enables you to perform sexually, for a third- or fourth-level fetishist. But we all fetishize objects and body parts to some extent. Fetishizing seems to be a normal—if you can say that—the norm, anyway, in terms of our approach to sexuality and objects that are meaningful to us. So, I'd say that a coffin is an important *prop*, or a crucifix is an important *prop*, in a goth *mise-en-scène*. Or a corset is, or a black Victorian dress is; all these things are important components of a dramatic *mise-en-scène*. But the story being told isn't necessarily the neosexual story that you'd find in sexual fetishism, where the corset is there, not as an object, but as a story that you're talking about: "And there was a young boy who was forcibly corseted, and turned into a slave . . ." There's a *story*; Robert Stoller [1991] says that a fetish is a story masquerading as an object.

JB: If a fetish is a story masquerading as an object, how is that different from a *mise-en-scène*?

VS: They're obviously related. You're using objects to create a scene, a theatrical scene, within which you act out a particular story which is meaningful to you. So there's a very strong component of fetishism in all sorts of gothic accoutrement.

JB: Is there irony in fetishism?

VS: Very, very little. Hard-core fetishists are ultrasincere about it.

JB: So it's an issue of authenticity.

VS: Yes.

JB: You've talked about music—what are some other major influences on goth fashion?

VS: The clothing elements tend to draw on a couple of historical paradigms, one being a kind of medieval-Renaissance, "old-world" thing. But that's

less important than the Victoriana. That seems to be as far old-world as most goths are really interested in. The idea is something not modern, old fashioned. Then there's also of course a very strong component of things associated with the night, with death; so that black, again, is overwhelmingly *the* most important color. That's a color whose significance is overdetermined. Black is the color of night, and so therefore by extension, of death. It's also a color which has been associated with evil—the devil is the prince of darkness—but it's also a color which, again, for centuries, has been associated not just with mourning and death and evil, but also with authority, so that judges and executioners would wear black. And with asceticism, so that nuns and priests would be wearing black. It's got these layers and layers of meaning. It's also a color that's been associated with a certain kind of almost diabolical elegance, with the charisma of deviance, so: black leather jackets. With earlier subcultures, like the whole beatnik look, so: black shades, black turtlenecks, long black dresses. There's layers and layers of meaning. And also just the little black dress, this icon of being chic.

I think that for goth, primarily there's this dark side: it's a bit sexy, and evil, somehow threatening; it's not wholesome. My son's in high school, and a couple of years ago one of his teachers wrote home and said, "We don't know, is he depressed or something? He's wearing black all the time." My son dismissed this, and said, "Don't they realize that we live in New York—look around, everybody's in black." But it's certainly not a color which seems upbeat or happy. It's a moody color. I remember talking once to [the designer] Ann Demeulemeester, and she said, "Can you imagine a poet wearing anything other than black?" Black has a whole lot of these connotations which would appeal to a very romantic sensibility. I think that some of the nineteenth-century fantasies about it really do go to this idea that the nineteenth century is not just the century that invented Dracula, but also somehow it's romantic, it's dangerous: it's the Fatal Man, the Fatal Woman. There's something very appealing, again, sexy in a dark kind of way.

JB: And yet you mentioned asceticism. I want to push that a little further.

VS: Yes, absolutely. People tend to think that fetishists are sex maniacs, but they're not. Very often they're ambivalent about sexual intercourse. Instead you develop a whole other sexual scenario that's a sort of substitute sexuality.

JB: It's compensatory?

VS: Well, I don't want to psychoanalyze it, but it's not necessarily orgiastic. There's a strong element of replacing one kind of sexuality with an alternative kind, and I think that the idea of asceticism is appealing within goth

culture because it makes sexuality not just something which is accessible. You know: The hippie's healthy, and it's "normal to be naked," and to fuck like rabbits; but instead [in goth] it's: "No, in fact this is ringed around with taboos. It's forbidden to us, and yet there it is; we're breaking these taboos, to get toward it." It's almost like a Catholic sense that the more you say this is taboo, the hotter it would be.

JB: So asceticism as denial, and the eroticization of that asceticism?

VS: Right.

JB: What are some material forms of this?

VS: For example, you tend to have a body which is covered up. Not always—you also have shocking displays of bare breasts, and so on, but you'd be more likely to have a long skirt, as opposed to a miniskirt. You're more likely to have high, buttoned boots as opposed to bare feet. The eroticism seems to move from the body onto some of these things that conceal the body.

JB: We keep moving between fetish and goth in a way that—

VS: Yes, in fact when you look at a lot of the clothes, it's only the context that's going to tell you, is this a fetish or goth outfit, or is it both, or is the designer drawing on elements of both. Context is going to define almost any kind of clothing.

JB: Can you sketch a scenario in which the left fork of the road goes to goth, and the right fork of the road goes to fetish?

VS: It's going to be relational as well as contextual. So you might say, Well, if you had a black corset, it could be either. If it's black velvet, it might be goth; if it's black rubber, it might be fetish. But even there, it's going to get messed up. The velvet is probably going to be goth. There's not too many velvet fetishists around any more. But you certainly could have a rubber or a leather corset which could be part of a goth ensemble.

JB: So there is an interplay.

VS: Absolutely. Because a lot of the things that are meaningful, the idea of sexuality being dangerous or taboo and all of that, appear in both of them.

JB: Is it possible to imagine an asexual form of goth?

VS: I can't see it. For a start, as a subcultural style, it's very much a young person's style, and so sexuality is really an issue. One difference between fetish and goth is that goth still seems to be primarily a young people's style,

whereas within the fetish community, you'll see both people who are wearing it as part of a fetish club scene kind of thing, and then you'll find people for whom this is a permanent lifestyle.

I remember once I went to Skin Two, the fetish clothing exposition in London, and there were a couple of sales girls there, wearing the little leather corsets, and they're chatting, making fun of "those old mackintosh guys." Meaning middle-aged men who were hard-core fetishists, who were not part of the club scene, who were not hip, and who were not wearing this because it was a subculture fashion, or part of a scene where you went to clubs. This was their *life*.

JB: And the mackintosh guys are signaled as hard-core sexual fetishists because they're wearing *mackintoshes*, they're not wearing . . .

VS: Well, they could wear the other things; and they're happy the stuff is being produced: they could buy it. But the point is [fetishism] is crucial to their sexual life, and therefore to their whole life. People who are really into this—they're *really* into this. It's boring! It's all they'll talk about.

JB: Is goth more out, as in "out of the closet," than fetish?

VS: I don't think it's a question of being closeted. Fetishizing is the norm for men. Look at *Playboy*. [The models] all have high heels. It's just that some men are really, *really* into high heels.

JB: And only high heels.

VS: Right. So in a sense, fetishism is ubiquitous in the culture. People who make this central to their sexuality are a core, but it's throughout the society. I'm trying to think what the comparable core to goth would be. I guess the core obsession is death. From that point of view, your übergoth person would be a necrophiliac. Those people are few and far between, outside the realm of novels. I don't really think that that's a major theme within goth subculture as a whole. There's a romanticization of death, of course, and that goes straight back through early-nineteenth-century romantics—*The Sorrows of Young Werther*² and opium smokers, and all of that—but I don't think that's quite the same as sexual perversion's relationship to necrophilia. With the fetish people you can see a continuum: (1) shoes; (2) yes, really shoes; (3) yes, *only* shoes. But [for goths] is it really: death, *really* death? I don't see that it's quite comparable.

JB: In a way it has to do with the notion of context that you were invoking earlier, or even—not *irony*, there needs to be another term for it—but about the resonance of symbols. A fetish object has the symbol contained *so* within

it. It's the one thing that contains all things, whereas the superdead version, as in a necrophiliac, would not be operative in the same way.

VS: For all that, in a lot of goth images, you'll see people playing with the visuals of necrophilia, in coffins, or stretched out in graves. Maybe there is a core of necrophilia to it, but my sense is there's more a kind of the romanticization of the idea of one's self being dead.

JB: I'm reminded by this of Freud's description of the uncanny [1919], in which you see a live thing—I always get this mixed up, and I don't know what that means—when you see a dead thing acting like a live thing, when you see something inorganic assuming organic or mobile properties.

VS: Well, that's closely associated with fetishism, because fetishism is the substitution of an inorganic object. Walter Benjamin [1973 (1935)] talks about how the essence of fashion is fetishism, because it's the substitution of the dead covering for the living body. It's the living face covered with makeup, or the living body covered with fur or leather. It's a simulacrum; it's about the replacement of a living being with the object, or a flickering back and forth between animate and inanimate.

JB: In Freud, that awakens anxiety: he talks about the Hoffmann story [“The Sandman”] where the protagonist is dating someone who turns out to be a robot. This is quite speculative, but I'm struck by your description of Benjamin's image of fashion as covering something up. Henri Bergson, in his essay on comedy [1999 (1911)], talks about laughter being the response to seeing an animate object, a person, suddenly acting like a machine. Laughter is the rebuke offered—we cannot become machines. Laughter is not a liberating response; it's a form of chastisement. I was thinking of that because of the absence of irony in fetishism that you were talking about (although irony doesn't always qualify as funny); could that absence of irony be tied in some way to an allowance for the [goth] wobble between the inorganic and the organic?

VS: You may be on to another connection between goth style and fetish style, with this back and forth between living–dead, artificial–animate. There seems to be a different kind of story being told. Maybe the story has to do with the fear of death: “I'm dead—oh, no, I'm not; I'm just pretending to be dead. I'm just posing in the coffin.” Versus something about a fetish story about a certain kind of vulnerability, which is usually summed up in terms of castration anxiety. It does seem to be a fear of some kind of vulnerability or inadequacy, something that can be assuaged by the fetish object.

JB: Somewhat relatedly, in terms of prosthesis, one of the things that people often fail to get—not consistently, Donna Haraway obviously did—is its function not as compensation but as supplementation: making new possibilities, giving rise to possibilities that never would have existed otherwise. It's not about compensating for the absence of something, it's about becoming something that never would have been possible otherwise.

VS: It's possible that you could imagine that as being in a sense, though, still compensatory. For example, a friend of mine is writing a novel, and one of the scenes in it has a character who can put on or take off prosthetic genitals of both sexes. And yet, you might say that the fear that that covers up is the fear of being trapped as one [sex] rather than the other. By putting both of them together, you can overcome that predicament.

JB: The best of both worlds. You get Tiresias for that. Goth, though, doesn't invoke automatism. It's about organic possibility, in that romantic way that you were talking about, about being more alive—

VS: Yes, even when you're dead. That's the paradox about the undead, with vampires. That you're dead, but you're not. You're still animate. And furthermore, you can't die, because you're already dead. So, again, you can have it both ways.

JB: To what degree is goth fashion bourgeois or antibourgeois? Can you read a fashionable goth body as either married, unmarried, single, et cetera?

VS: Fashion in general, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century, has rejected the procreative body. You don't have the mother, ever, as a fashion archetype. Now, you sort of did, earlier, with the emphasis on very voluptuous curves, but since the twentieth century, the ideal has been a much younger [figure]. My favorite example was a beauty book from about 1900 that talked about how Venus used to be the female physical ideal—but now it's Diana. You see this shift from about 1910 on, where fashion is moving strongly toward the young female body. It's thin, it's relatively underdeveloped, in terms of not having this voluptuous hourglass figure [anymore]. It's thin and narrow-hipped. People thought of it in the 1920s: was it androgynous, was it a boy? Not boys, though; it's a young, *thin* female body, a rejection of maternity. There's not really any role for maternity in modern fashion.

JB: Although what about the closing shot of the fashion show in Robert Altman's movie *Prêt-à-Porter*; you always have the bride's gown at the final moment of the catwalk, and—do you remember this?—in Altman it's a naked *pregnant* woman.

VS: Well, first of all, Altman doesn't understand fashion at all. He totally missed it. Even the endings with the bride I think had to do more with the structuring of the industry for certain key occasions, occasion-specific dressing. Bridal dressing is one thing where people will pay a fortune for a dress, so it makes sense to say, "You know what, by the way, we make bridal dresses, too." It's an economic thing. Still, it's posing her up at that last virginal moment, before she might turn into, god help us, a mother, and cease being fashionable.

JB: Goth female bodies are quite voluptuous. There's constriction going on, with corsets, but the secondary sexual characteristics are prominently on display. Bosom, butt, and hair—there's lots of hair.

VS: There's lots of hair, that's true. The hair is sexual, but it's not necessarily maternal, or procreative. And the breasts themselves, even by the eighteenth century, were being seen more as erotic parts for the delectation of the husband. I mean, you gave the kid to a wet nurse. The breasts didn't belong to the baby. *[Laughs]*

JB: So you're suggesting that the goth female body is in fact not a procreative one.

VS: I think that fashion bodies in general are not procreative, and that goth bodies are no exception to that. I don't think they're unusual in that respect.

JB: So what constitutes goth sexuality?

VS: From the clothes, the message is, "Yes, we're sexual, we're violating taboos by being sexual," and that's what makes it sexy. In a way it's a rejection of parental sexuality. You're saying that it's not about parental, procreative, socially acceptable sexuality: "No, this is about taboo, forbidden sexuality." Whatever is your worst taboo that you can imagine, whether it's violating an oath of chastity, or having sex with the dead, that's what this is about. Not what your parents do.

JB: Yeah, it's kind of impossible to imagine goth Mom and Dad.

VS: Well, Morticia [from *The Addams Family*], in a way is a kind of goth. So it's not inconceivable—

JB: Which is a great pun.

VS: *[Laughs]* It's some kind of family romance.

JB: I was thinking about Morticia in contrast to Elvira, Mistress of the Dark.

She's the goth queen who made it on the market. How would you read Elvira's outfit?

VS: Since it's mass culture things, it's almost a kitsch image of goth femininity.

JB: And she uses irony.

VS: Yes, yes, she does.

JB: But verbal irony. Or is there a difference between the verbal irony that she's deploying and the irony of the dress, with its display of her breasts?

VS: I don't know. Everything in contemporary culture has become so ubiquitously ironic that it's hard to escape that. There may be a greater degree of irony within goth subculture than is apparent from just looking at the artifacts. The artifacts often look very kitschy and over-the-top anyway—based as they are on so many kitsch prototypes.

JB: What do you mean by that?

VS: Well, all the Victorian mourning imagery, mourning jewelry—all of that was already kitsch one hundred and fifty years ago.

JB: Do you mean it was consumed as such?

VS: It was consumed by the masses; it was mass-produced. It was taking something which was as profound as death and mourning and turning it into a mass-produced commodity.

JB: But it wasn't consumed in a way that would have been ironic?

VS: Oh, no. But I think most kitsch is not. It's consumed innocently, naively. People think it's beautiful.

JB: We've danced around this: when one thinks of a goth body, is that gendered more male or female? You were talking about the character in your friend's novel who assumed alternative genitalia, or alternate genitalia, actually—is there the same fluidity in goth fashion? This may have to do with the different streams feeding into goth culture, but the asexual, new wave body—David Bowie might be an early example of that—versus a highly feminized presentation of the body, versus . . .

VS: No, I don't think that what you're calling the Bowie body is asexual; it's more ephebic. It appeals both to adolescent girls and to homoerotic desire. [In goth,] you certainly see the ephebic body—the thinness, the youth, the paleness—these are all classic romantic images of the Fatal Man. And then

there's the Fatal Woman, being more or less voluptuous or [pathetic], depending on your variant.

JB: When you say "the Fatal Man," or "the Fatal Woman," what do you mean?

VS: As in Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* [1951], where there would be some man who would be the masculine equivalent of the femme fatale: someone who draws you to him through the force of charisma, but at the same time is himself withdrawn, sad, melancholy, isolated, pale, thin. It's not what the later nineteenth century or the present thinks of as a macho type.

JB: What about haute couture designers who have been directly influenced by goth culture: one example is Versace's *Dominatrix Drag*, in 1992—is that maternal?

VS: I think Versace's female is much more a fetish female. It's the phallic woman, as opposed to a clearly goth prototype. Dolce and Gabbana did some clear goth looks, because goth has been so associated with London; you see more of this with some early Galliano and some of the other lesser known English designers. The Italians, like Versace, use more the phallic woman. She's powerful, she's leather-clad, and she's got a whip. She's not crawling into a coffin.

JB: The Anglophilia that you're describing with goth is interesting; I would think that race and nationality empty out when you're talking about goth. How can you think about race when you're thinking about goth? Yet there seems to be a national element to what you're saying.

VS: Certain nationalities I think are in fact more drawn to one kind of fetish than another. The English are conspicuous for an interest in S-M, in corsets and bondage, and the whole goth thing. French and Italians much less.

JB: Why is that?

VS: It may have something to do with a culture that's in some way puritanical or controlling. But it's not just a history of puritanism as such, because there's an awful lot of fetish in Japanese culture. And that's not sexually puritanical, but it's controlling, very controlling of children in a lot of ways. Certainly some cultures seem more drawn toward perverse sexuality, or certain stereotyped perversities.

JB: Is goth fashion circumscribed, then, by national boundaries?

VS: Well, let me put it this way. I don't see goth being a style which is likely to take over in Brazil. Brazil has its own flirtations with various kinds of

sexual fantasies, but they tend to be more into transvestitism, rather than aestheticization of bondage and things like that.

JB: If you were curating a goth exhibit, what would some of those objects [included] be?

VS: I would try to get things, first of all, from music groups associated with goth music. Then, with small clothing boutiques catering to kids who went to goth clubs. If you look at goth magazines, there are always little advertisements in the back for stores—in Atlanta, in the suburbs, wherever—where there are kids who go to goth clubs. I'd want to get that kind of thing. And then I would want to look through a million look books and videos, to try to figure which high designers—apart from Dolce and Gabbana—have picked up on goth or on things in some way related to goth, like some of the fetish looks, and so on. Those would be the three categories I'd be focusing on: the kids in clubs, the music groups, and the high-fashion appropriation of the look.

I would also try and do some kind of a historical contextualization, so it would look back to where the term *goth* came from, and the idea of goth at first as barbaric, and then later, how gothic things started to be romanticized from Horace Walpole on; you started having people creating gothic buildings, and building ruins in the back of their châteaux—the architecture and all that. And its use as a motif in the decorative arts, and then looking at, again, what Mario Praz called the “romantic agonies” it went through, from romanticism through decadence in the nineteenth century. Were there certain themes, iconic images, clothing forms that kept reappearing: for example, the history of black clothing, or was there any interest in shrouds? That's a theme that comes up in a certain amount of gothic imagery. What sort of history is behind the imagery of shrouds? And then I guess I would also want to look at some of the related vampire imagery, including—what would be wonderful would be to try to get for example, some of Eiko's incredible costumes from *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. She did the costumes for that, just as she did the costumes for *The Cell*. She's a really, really brilliant costume and set designer. The scenes with the female vampires in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* were so intense and beautiful, that I would love to try to get some of those clothes and see what exactly someone who's so visually brilliant was doing with how she dressed the undead.

Oh, we'd have to get some mourning things too. We'd probably have to get like a real widow's gown, mourning jewelry, hair jewelry, those rings. I think some of that, mementos of the dead, and of mourning, would be an interesting way to begin to contextualize goth.

JB: What about *The Matrix*?

VS: There's elements of goth/fetish in there. Absolutely.

JB: I was talking to an eleven-year-old about goth and she said, "So, it's like *The Matrix*, right?" She knew what goth was, and she goes to Brearley. [Laughs] Her sense is that it's people who wear black, but her association was with *The Matrix*.

VS: Yes. Subcultures are not separate. We can talk about them in a kind of reified way, and say, "I was talking about the difference between goth style and fetish style," but in reality . . .

JB: It's more fluid.

VS: It's much more fluid.

JB: Well, even while believing that, how would you differentiate the techno, *Matrix*-y absorption of that romanticism?

VS: It's much more hard and aggressive, obviously, the *Matrix* look. It's much more hard, shiny; that's much more like hard-material fetishism. Goth seems to be more about materials which used to be highly fetishized, the soft fetishes—the velvet, the lace, et cetera—but which are much, much less a part of sexual fetishism in contemporary culture.

JB: You know, I had never thought about material distinctions. What else would fall into that category?

VS: Well, velvet, lace, silk, even the emphasis on shrouds. I mean, that's a kind of fetish which I never saw in any nineteenth-century account. *Psychopathis Sexualis* doesn't talk about shroud fetishism, but it talks about linen fetishism, and apron fetishism, and all these things which died out completely. Now, it's: "Forget it. It's leather, it's rubber. It's hard, it's black, it's shiny." There's none of this people having orgasms over velvet or silk the way they used to. Those kind of soft, feminine materials are still much more a part of goth style.

JB: This is completely speculative, but that fetishism of adult babies . . .

VS: Oh, yes! Yes!

JB: That would be a fetish of soft material, like terry cloth; it's clearly not lace, but clearly keyed in terms of . . .

VS: But those are explicitly perceived not so much as feminine [than] as infantile. Those are those people who are fetishized as stuffed animals.

JB: Plushies.

VS: Yeah, I mean, I thought my people were weird. [*Laughs*]

JB: Yeah, at least they don't look like anything at Disney. But that's really interesting. What channels the rescription of fetish objects in that way?

VS: That's a big question. There's really no clear answer about that. [Robert Bienvenu] just did a great PhD dissertation, which is coming out as a book, about producers of fetish paraphernalia. He also notes the switch to the hard media, but no one's been able to come up with a clear reason for why this should be such a major shift, especially in something like sexual fetishism, which changes only very slowly and gradually. Fetish has a tendency to cling to older forms.

JB: In terms of the hardness that you're talking about, I think of *Vogue's* use of what was called "supple metals" in the 1920s. We don't need to go back to Freud, but the conjunction between bodies and machines was so lively—as it were—in terms of Fordism and how bodies worked into factories, how women's bodies were conjoining or adjoining cars, and how their bodies fit into these shapes.

VS: The idea of the hard body also has to do with the concept of the masculine body, as opposed to the softer, female body, which may have something to do with the rise of the hard, masculine fetish materials.

JB: What would be the ne plus ultra of that "hard, masculine fetish material"?

VS: If you could imagine a way of combining leather and rubber: a material which would have some of the characteristics of both. The hardness, the shine, the creakiness—something like if you could meld patent leather and rubber. Something like that would be the quintessential hard fetish material, as opposed to some kind of silky-soft, lacy, see-through veiled thing, which would be the female fetish material.

JB: Do you understand fashion, generally, or goth fashion, specifically, as liberatory or oppressive? I'm invoking, I know, a binary that is extraordinarily reductive—but how would you respond to that question, or nuance it?

VS: I think it flips back and forth. Those binaries—living/dead, animate/inanimate, oppressive/liberatory, masculine/feminine—are meaningful to us, but it's the slippage that matters. It would be contextual whether it comes down on one side rather the other in any given specific instance. I think that a lot of people have found "dark side" aestheticism fascistic inasmuch

as it has an aggressive, militaristic [resonance]. On the other hand, so many of the same styles and garments could, it seems to me, just as easily be read as part of a kind of a romantic, individualistic, anarchistic struggle against class, or mainstream society, which would be seen to benefit the hegemonic force—against which the individual is struggling. So I don't think it's one or the other. It's always going to be a question of who's wearing it, and when, under what circumstances. No style has meaning in and of itself. A high heel doesn't *mean* anything just sitting on a table. It only acquires meaning as we project it into that.

JB: In the work that you've done, in which you're explicitly talking about notions of power—the fetish stuff clearly leaps to mind—what is your reply to a response that says, "This is making patriarchy safe"?

VS: Well, the knee-jerk feminist response to fetishism is to see it as patriarchal and oppressive to women. And in general, I think that most of the women that I talked to found the idea of working on fetish fashion more or less repulsive.

JB: "Repulsive" because it was politically "wrong"?

VS: That it was beyond politically "wrong." That it was perverted. It was somehow nasty and horrible. So again, patriarchal, but patriarchal in the sense that foot binding would be: *viscerally* oppressive to women. It seemed to me from the beginning that this was far too simplistic a construction of the phenomenon. On the other hand, I don't have much sympathy either for the flip side of it, which is, "Well, it's all liberatory; now women are powerful, and so women can dress up in fetish gear if they want to," because that's also clearly, again, a construction that doesn't do justice to the nuances of what's actually going on. I try to explore both what men were finding erotic about fetish fashion—which did often have to do with phallic symbolism, and with ambivalence about female bodies—and also what women found appealing about it, when they did find it appealing—which some did, particularly younger women. And what kind of fantasies they were constructing around something like a high heel. In both cases there frequently were power fantasies. What was interesting, though, is, contrary to what feminists would assume, most male fantasies had less to do with "There's a woman in high heels who can't run away from me, so I'm going to catch her and rape her," but on the contrary, "There's a woman in high heels who's going to *walk all over me*." Women's fantasies also tended to be like that: "I'm in high heels, and I can say, 'Get down on your knees.' " So in both cases, for rather different sets of reasons, there were often power fantasies, or stories about gender slippage.

Men tended to be more devoted, as it were, to particular kinds of fetishes. Women were much more promiscuous about what they felt like at any moment. One day they were a boot person; the next day they were a mule person. But men [thought,] "This is what I like: women in boots, or women with practically naked feet in high sandals." Whereas with women, it's much more of a sense of role playing, and picking up and dropping multiple roles.

Notes

1. See Steele 1997.
2. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published in 1774, but its impact was felt well into the early nineteenth century.



GEEK/GOTH

Remediation and Nostalgia in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*



Early in Tim Burton's 1990 film *Edward Scissorhands*, the hero, played by Johnny Depp, spies an electric can opener on the counter of the suburban family that has half adopted him. The expression on his face as he watches the can opener work is what we might expect if he had seen a long-forgotten face from his past. In the first of three flashbacks to his existence before suburbia, Edward imagines the primal scene of his creation—an oddly anthropomorphized, pseudo-Victorian assembly line in a comic-gothic mansion, presided over by that icon of 1960s horror films, Vincent Price. While the can opener might be interpreted as a fetish of a suburban existence that, try as he might, the hero never truly can enter, it is also a reminder that Edward, with garden shears instead of hands, is a kind of machinic assemblage. His "scissorhands" mark an alienation from others that is fundamental to the film's depiction of adolescent identity: to be is to cut and to be cut. The assembly line—which opens cans of pink paint, breaks eggs, mixes batter, rolls dough, and eventually produces a heart-shaped cookie that Price holds up to a mechanical torso—renders this alienation visually: Edward is a being cooked up from spare parts, cumbersome or outmoded technologies, and strange recipes. While critics of *Edward Scissorhands* have seconded Burton's claim that its "strongest impulse" (V) lies in his investing teenage angst with the timeless quality of fairy tale or myth, much of the film's appeal lies in its defamiliarizing of everyday technologies.¹ If the assembly line of the hero's "birth" emphasizes his originary alienation from a human—well, at least suburban—community, it is the discarded, tacky, and generic objects of suburbia rather than its inhabitants

that are invested with an uncanniness that escapes or transcends rational explanation.

In this essay, I want to suggest that *Edward Scissorhands* has achieved a cult status among subcultural audiences—science fiction fans, B-movie aficionados, and goths—because it (re)stages a familiar tale of teenage alienation by exploiting a filmic nostalgia that paradoxically locates moral and psychological authenticity in the amateurish technologies of Burton's beloved 1950s and 1960s monster movies. his fascination with nostalgic images of B-movie filmmaking lies at the heart of the appeal of *Scissorhands* and *Ed Wood* (1994). A director who breezily rejects literary traditions—"I didn't like to read [in high school]," he says, "I still don't" (qtd. in Salisbury 2000, 6), Burton is a profoundly anti-intellectual filmmaker, who nonetheless shrewdly exploits his recognition that the mimetic touchstone of late-twentieth-century identity is not great art but old celluloid. In *Ed Wood*, the hero's naive faith in his art and the has-beens and oddballs with whom he works make him a poster child for a persistent aesthetic idealism. In effect, the films asks its audience to show *Glen or Glenda* and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* the indulgence that Theseus demonstrates for the mechanicals' performance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if imagination amend them" (5.1.213-14). This indulgence depends on our recognition that the recipients lack any capacity for self-reflection or empirical judgment: Ed Wood is no more capable than Bottom of understanding the inappropriateness of his performances—whether in Angora drag or in explaining to Orson Welles that he, too, is an artist true to his vision. In contrast, *Edward Scissorhands* is less a self-conscious parody than a generic hybrid that even the studio did not know how to market: the film superimposes a fantasy vision of suburbia on a gothic fairy tale. The would-be monster is let loose in a surreal suburban environment, one cut off from any socioeconomic, political, or even historical grounding. In this respect, the hero's flashback from the can opener to the assembly line points moviegoers toward a semiotics of self-referentiality, both a strategy and an ethos of remediation.

Edward Scissorhands and *Ed Wood* do not simply rehash or allude to old films but, to use Jay Bolter's and Richard Grusin's (1999) term, they *remediate* previous technologies of film making as both a self-conscious artistic strategy and an ethos. In describing the logic of remediation, Bolter and Grusin extend Marshal McLuhan's analysis of the technologies of electronic communication into the digital age. In 1964, McLuhan maintained that old

media do not disappear: they are subsumed by, coexist with, and compete against new and emerging media, becoming the very “content” that these newer media represent.² Bolter and Grusin argue convincingly that all media cannibalize and subsume previous technologies of representation in their efforts to reproduce a true or authentic experience. All media—visual art, print, television, film, and the World Wide Web—remediate a complex archaeology of assumptions, values, and representational strategies in an ongoing quest to approximate ever more closely an unmediated reality and thereby to transcend mediation. This desire to transcend representation, however, is governed by the irony that our perceptions of “reality” are shaped by conceptions of verisimilitude derived from previous generations of media. Our expectations about what constitutes immediacy, then, are structured by our perceptions of an always mediated reality—a reality, in other words, that is always in the process of becoming obsolete. In this respect, the logic of remediation calls into question traditional descriptions of a reflection theory of art: there can be no representation outside or beyond previous techno-mediations of reality because such mediation always has constituted the “content” of what we assume to be “real.” Remediation may produce, as Bolter and Grusin argue, an obsession with newer and more technologically sophisticated means to approach an ideal of absolute verisimilitude, but it also generates a dialectical nostalgia for earlier technologies that once constituted—in our individual and cultural-historical pasts—the “true,” the authentic, the seemingly originary “reality” in which we used to trust (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 17–43).

Even as Hollywood films in the 1980s and 1990s made billions from computer-generated effects—a hybridization of traditional filmmaking, material special effects, and computer and digital animations—these new technologies produced a dialectical desire to return to an older generation of technologies of representation that, as McLuhan suggested, have become the moral, aesthetic, and psychological *content* of these new hybrid forms. In analyzing what she calls the “double operation of nostalgia” in films of the 1980s, Pat Gill argues that audiences can recognize and laugh at the “synthetic” nature of the filmic past and yet also enjoy what they take as “the authenticity of that past’s simple pleasures and truths” (Gill 1997, 164; Boym 2001, 17–28). In *Scissorhands*, however, such “pleasures and truths” rest in the logic of remediation so that any anxieties “about the continued usefulness of historical and traditional forms” paradoxically are assuaged by a taken-for-granted faith in the timelessness of such mythic forms (Gill 1997, 164). In one sense, Burton’s fascination with old movies can be seen as a nostalgic homage to earlier generations of low-budget Hollywood films

that both provoked and assuaged such anxieties; *Mars Attacks!* (1996) parodies the invasion films of the 1950s in which evil aliens served as convenient stand-ins for godless communists. Burton reshoots scenes from Wood's original films with a loving attention to detail, such as the shower curtain that serves as the airplane cockpit in *Plan 9*. Yet, in another sense, he depoliticizes nostalgia by refusing to pose questions about history and traditional forms of representation. The standard of fidelity—artistic, moral, and psychological—is less to “synthetic” images from the past that supposedly represent authentically tradition-honored “pleasures and truths” than to an ethos of remediation that depicts such authenticity as a function of filmic technology.

Gill's description of a nostalgia for an authentic representation of the real also implies ironically an investment in technologies of representation, technologies always in the process of displacing the real. At the climax of *Edward Scissorhands*, when Edward is pursued to the mansion's gates by a mob of suburbanites, Burton comments wryly, “The angry villagers. We decided against giving them torches” (V). While his allusion to *Frankenstein* emphasizes the ironic distance between furious peasants chasing the monster to his destruction and the suburban caricatures who pursue Edward, it also reveals the primary strategy Burton employs to transform his hero into a mythic figure: nostalgia for a filmic tradition that we recognize as long past. For Burton, then, McLuhan's electronic “global village” has become a nostalgic repository for the “truths and pleasures” of love, identity, community, and art. These truths and profound experiences are cobbled together not out of ethical or sociopolitical beliefs but out of celluloid fantasies. The inept strategies and clunky technologies of Wood's filmmaking—the bizarrely out-of-place stock footage interspersed throughout *Glen or Glenda*; Bela Lugosi's inane soliloquy that opens that film—serve as the only possible content of a film such as *Ed Wood* because they testify to the profound ironies that underlie such techno-nostalgia; our awareness of how bad Wood's films are allows us to recapture something of the uncritical innocence that we once supposedly experienced when we first were terrified by the waking dead of *Plan 9 from Outer Space*.

The genesis of *Scissorhands*, a film about “a character who wants to touch but can't, who [is] both creative and destructive,” was a drawing that the director had done as a teenager of a boy with scissors for hands (Burton, qtd. in Salisbury 2000, 87).³ No narrative, no story, just a visual image of techno-alienation. This drawing, says Mark Salisbury, who edited Burton's interviews, was a “cry from the heart,” and “expressed his inner torment at being unable to communicate with those around him” (2000, xv). Edward,

says Denise DiNovi, Burton's coproducer, is "the artist who does not fit into the world (qtd. in Hanke 1999, 102). As such overblown comments may suggest, *Scissorhands* is the most autobiographical of Burton's films, and it capitalizes on his nostalgia for authentic alienation—teenage angst transformed into an "extended parable about a shy punk-being" (Howe 1990) who can never fit in to his surroundings. In a revealing comment on his youth, Burton declares that "I was pretty much against society from the very beginning" (Salisbury 2000, 4). But "against" in his movies never really takes the form of social satire, critiques of commodification and corruption, or indictments of prejudice. Particularly in *Scissorhands*, "society" is a refracted version of the Burbank in which he grew up, a suburb that Burton describes as "weird"—a "mysterious place" in which, he confesses, he was "never quite aware of how people were feeling" (V). To the extent that Edward represents the ur-teenager who feels alienated from his or her environment, that alienation has its foundation in Burton's experience at the California Institute for the Arts, where he enrolled on scholarship in 1976. There, for "the first time," the eighteen-year-old animator encountered what he calls "similar outcast types, people who were ridiculed for their liking *Star Trek* or whatever" (Salisbury 2000, 7). For Burton, alienation is defined primarily in terms of a subcultural identification, and ridicule itself becomes a consequence of a self-styled geek's attraction to the myths that *Star Trek* represents. Sociocultural identity is not a function, it seems, of political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, or even allegiance to an avant-garde movement with discernible aesthetic aims. Outcasts morph into Trekkies, and the assertion of one's individuality—one's resistance to "a very puritanical, bureaucratic, fifties nuclear family environment" (4)—can be expressed only in terms of subcultural allegiance. In Burton's case, this resistance takes the form of his fascination with "monster movies," which offered him a means to glimpse the "emotional subtext" (V) of socialization.

In affirming rather than satirizing an ethos of subcultural identification with the aesthetic of cheap monster movies, *Scissorhands* differentiates itself from a self-conscious postmodernism, what Fredric Jameson describes as a "mesmerizing new aesthetic mode [which] emerged as itself an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way" (1992, 21). The experience of history, as Jameson suggests, requires a narrative structure, a logic of causation, and an analytic—even if such an analytic is implied or operates in the gaps and inconsistencies in a dominant ideology. The suburbia of *Scissorhands* has no history and engenders no analytic; its mythology finds its expression only

in the remediated, televisual terms of subcultural identification. Unlike the science fiction films of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Peter Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990), for example, Burton's movie offers no means to imagine alternatives to the alienating and confusing world symbolized by his recreation of Burbank (Telotte 2001). Without its "standard Hollywood ending" (Ebert 1990), the film lacks any significant narrative momentum. Burton, his screenwriter Caroline Thompson, DiNovi, and many critics describe *Edward Scissorhands* in generic terms that are experiential and moral rather than narrative: in his voiceover to the DVD, Burton calls it interchangeably a "fantasy," a "fairy tale," a "fable," and a "parable" (V). The opening sequence is set in a bedroom that evokes the sentimental nostalgia of a Norman Rockwell painting. Burton offers an indefinite time of childhood, when a child's questions about the origin of snow can be answered only by the conventions of a grandmother's fairy tale that began "a long time ago." Her story serves as a frame for a narrative, but this frame exists in a kind of timeless filmic present that superimposes the rhetoric of a nostalgic past on a caricature of late-twentieth-century suburbia. "Long ago" is manifest visually as a surrealistic vision of 1970s suburbia, but a 1970s divorced from any sense of a dynamic history: markers of historico-cultural specificity—hairstyles, clothing, and even automobiles are downplayed, as though the generic American subdivision could be experienced only as a kind of remediated version of what Roger Ebert calls a "goofy sitcom neighborhood" populated by "emotional clones of the Jetsons."⁴ The outcast hero in this timeless world of a suburban fairy tale therefore cannot be a postmodern cyborg who forces viewers to imagine the fragmented nature of a "terminal identity," but is instead a goth-humanistic embodiment of what terminators and robocops must learn: an ethics of generosity in alienation.

Edward's true home is a gothic mansion straight out of a thirties horror film that looms comically over a subdivision of pastel-colored houses. The mansion is surrounded by topiary sculptures that provoke an aesthetic admiration from the first suburbanite apparently to see them, the Avon lady Peg Boggs (Diane Weist): "It's so beautiful." This beauty stands in stark contrast to the interior of the castle: as the camera follows her up a long staircase and into a huge, half-roofless room devoid of furniture, Burton and his cinematographer, Stefan Sczapski, provide a visual analog both for the simplified interior landscapes of suburbia and for the hero's alienation from that pastel-colored world. In this scene and later ones in the mansion, the cavernous interior recalls Dr. Frankenstein's castle stripped of its

Promethean scientific equipment. Sczapski and Burton highlight contrasts between dark gray stone, shadows, and the diffused light that comes through either high-set gothic windows or the hole in the roof on the upper floor where Edward has taken refuge. The first shot of the hero as he emerges from the shadows to meet Peg emphasizes his irrevocable marks of otherness: his leather and metal getup, and the huge scissorhands.

Peg's first lines begin a refrain that, with variations, is repeated whenever Edward first meets the denizens of suburbia: "Put those down," she says in horror. Then, realizing that "those" frightening looking blades are part of this odd figure, she asks the archetypal question that haunts those characters (from Ovid's metamorphs, to Bottom, to the Wolfman) who have undergone a transformation from human to monster: "What happened to you?" This question is one we have heard in countless horror movies; it presupposes a prescissors, physical integrity, even an essential identity—a "you," in short, to which something unspeakable has happened. In the horror films Burton invokes throughout *Edward Scissorhands*, this question categorizes the visible difference of monsters as signs of scientific hubris or techno-medical arrogance: a mad scientist has transformed an unwilling victim (or occasionally himself) into a fly-headed quasi-human freed from the constraints of morality and, in some cases, mortality. Later in the film, the police surround a house they believe Edward has tried to rob and demand that he come out with his hands up. As Edward walks slowly toward the police, his scissorhands held out slightly from his sides, Officer Allen (Dick Anthony Williams) yells, "Get your hands up," and then "Drop your weapons!" When the blades do not fall to the ground, Officer Allen is given a third line that is endemic to the horror genre: "Looks like we got a psycho." As embodiments of juridical-social powers that always misunderstand the outsider, the police interpret the scissors as an unambiguous threat; difference is monstrosity, and monstrosity is moral pathology. But in the earlier scene, Peg quickly realizes that Edward has nothing to drop: "Those are your hands?" she asks twice. Her recognition that Edward is a being assembled from industrial artifacts defuses the threat that his scissorhands represent. Edward can only reassert his difference from the ideal of normalcy that he has learned from his dead inventor: "I'm not finished." Much later in the film, in a flashback to one of the scenes of his extended creation, this sense of being "unfinished" is elaborately and poignantly associated with Edward's difference from a world of mutability and death. At this point, however, the scissorhands emphasize his loneliness, isolation, and, judging by the scars on his face, his vulnerability to the difference that his hands represent.

In the interviews collected in *Burton on Burton*, the director describes the idealized father figure who provided him with a means to deal with youthful alienation: Vincent Price. Burton “idolized” the actor as a youth and shot an unreleased film about him. He describes Price as “an amazing person, so elegant, and [with] such an amazing mind . . . [a man] extremely generous with himself and his feelings and all” (V). Burton’s rhetoric, notably the throwaway tag “and all,” suggests the significance of his psychological investment in Price and the characteristic role the actor played in horror films such as *The Mad Magician* (1954), *House of Wax* (1954), *The Fly* (1958), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), and *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* (1971): “Vincent Price was somebody I could identify with. When you’re younger . . . you find your own mythology, you find what psychologically connects to you. And those [horror] movies, the poetry of them, and this larger than life character who goes through a lot of torment—mostly imagined—just spoke to me in the way that Gary Cooper or John Wayne might have to somebody else” (qtd. in Salisbury 2000, 5). The “poetry” of the horror movie, for Burton, resides in the tormented mad scientist and his belief in a vision of technology that seeks to undo death, revive dead lovers, and pursue revenge for infinite and unredressable wrongs. But if the deranged genius of Saturday matinees offers an alternative mythology to the hypermasculinity of Gary Cooper and John Wayne, this figure is brought to filmic life in an always remediated form: the movies to which Burton implicitly refers are knock-offs of *Frankenstein* the film, not Shelley’s novel, pastiches of horror clichés rather than probing adaptations of Poe’s fiction. Burton finds his “poetry” and “mythology” precisely in a logic of remediation that paradoxically inverts the moral valence of “imagined” torment. The mad scientist is no longer creating a monster but transforming spare parts into a moral being.

Lying in bed his first night in the Boggs’ house, Edward recalls a scene from his education by the inventor. As the camera pans from the suburban bedroom to the gothic interior of the castle, Vincent Price’s voice begins an etiquette lesson. The camera pauses briefly: a large book, filled with water-color sketches, stands on an easel. A gust of wind blows the pages sequentially, and a series emerges that charts the stage-by-stage transformation of a featureless metallic but vaguely humanoid figure into Edward: the last image is of the hero as he appears in the movie, a human with scissors for hands. If the hero is not “finished,” the scissors logically represent some early or intermediate stage in the process of creating a human being—once we were all scissorhands—but those marks of our assembly-line production as socialized beings have been erased and forgotten. Underlying this identification of the techno-evolution of a human being with ideological pro-

cesses of socialization is a crucial strategy of subcultural self-identification: we are all in process, and, in theory, unfinished. Edward can be appropriated as a kind of goth everyman because he represents the strangeness within the process of interpellation—the sense that the process of normalization has been arrested and we are all stamped with an irrevocable mark of incompleteness that is both blessing and curse.

The camera comes to rest on Edward sitting stiffly in a chair while his inventor reads to him out of an old and tattered etiquette book. “Let us pretend we’re in the drawing room and the hostess is serving tea. Now many numerous little questions confront us. . . . Etiquette tells us what is expected of us and guards us from all humiliation and discomfort.” The advice is absurdly decontextualized, and its terms of quasi-Victorian respectability are so far removed either from the gothic interior of the mansion or the pastel surreality of suburbia, that even the inventor admits it is “boring” and proceeds to turn to reading “poetry,” a limerick. When Edward awkwardly grimaces, his inventor responds, “That’s right. Go ahead, smile. It’s funny.” This, in a sense, is a familiar scene: the always failed socialization of the outsider. The rhyme and playfulness of the limerick suggest a means of connection through a kind of humor and feeling that does not require Emily Post. But socialization itself is a weird and mysterious process that baffles just about everyone we see in the movie, not just Edward.

If Depp’s performance as Edward recalls “one of the silent movie clowns, who exists on a different plane,” his status as “a universal figure” rests paradoxically on his revealing the fundamental lack of interiority that constitutes human identity.⁵ Late in the film, as Edward is about to be released from police custody, a psychologist analyzes this strange and silent figure: “His awareness of what we call reality is radically underdeveloped.” Officer Allen, becoming more sympathetic as the film goes on, asks, “But will he be all right out there?” The psychologist responds with the punch line, “Oh, yeah, he’ll be fine.” Burton’s comment on this exchange is revealing: “That scene was for those people that don’t think my films have any psychological value [or] foundation to them” (V). This ironic anticlimax to the prospect of Edward’s facing a jail sentence and the director’s wry dig at his critics underscores the episodic nature of the film: Burton’s tableaux of alienated innocence do not readily admit social or psychological interpretation. With no analysis to offer, such vignettes are deployed with only a skin-deep realization of their sociocultural and ideological suggestiveness (Žižek 1991). If the scissors mark the threat of castration and thus signal Edward’s potential entry into the symbolic order, their status as instruments of his exclusion and self-directed violence are comically obvious: as one seven-year-old asked when he saw the film, “How does Edward pee?”

The very obviousness of Edward's dilemmas makes him an easy figure for the goth subculture to appropriate.

With its trademark black, pseudo-Victorian garb, goth subculture betrays a fascination with a technological sublime by using metal, leather, and lace to appropriate the odds and ends of rust belt industrialism as a mode of self-conscious resistance to a consumerist culture. The goth sensibility embodied by Depp in his Scissorhands costume discloses that, as Michelle Kendrick (1996, 144) puts it, "technology has always been an affective agent" in the "dialogical relationship" between the material world and human identity. Burton is astute enough to focus visually on the persistence of old technologies within the new; they acquire a mysterious significance that resists rational explanation but that mediates our desire for an authentic experience and identity through the appropriation of late industrial technologies of machinic assemblage and consumerist desire. Style and identity are cobbled together by the designer Bo Welch, the special effects "wizard" (V) Stan Winston, and Burton to invest outmoded technologies that have been discarded or forgotten—old garden shears—with a seemingly foundational significance. Edward is both assemblage and icon composed of "latex, leather, naugahyde, and black tape"; his appendages were inspired, says Burton jokingly, by late-night television ads for K-Tel products and the Pocket Fisherman utility tool (V). Rather than parading a stock humanist horror at the prospect that identity is always technologically mediated, the director celebrates an identity that is only skin, or leather-suited, deep. In his stifling getup, which made shooting in the Florida heat and humidity extremely uncomfortable, Depp is not so much a representation of a subculture that has been appropriated by a mainstream filmmaker but an amalgam, a visual archaeology of consumerist odds and ends. His fictive body becomes a paradoxical site for subcultural appropriation precisely because its components are, as Groucho Marx used to say to contestants on his quiz show, everyday items found around the house.

Edward is a goth icon to the extent that he is a hybrid creature: part silent-movie comedian, part B-movie monster, part suburban Frankenstein, part Pocket Fisherman, and part Siouxsie and the Banshees fan. The leather and metal-studded suit which Depp wears may, for all we can tell, be Edward's skin: he awkwardly puts clothes on over the latex and black tape. This layer of latex, leather, and Naugahyde serves as both a goth style statement and a visible expression of who Edward is. His physical experience seems oddly familiar, a remediated image of a Hollywood monster who neither ages nor loses his essential innocence. In this regard, Edward is a hip, goth version of the angels and ghosts that Molly Rothenberg has identified as a crucial symptom in recent films—those fantasy beings "implanted with a foolproof

moral compass'' who embody our desires to be delivered from the necessity of making ethical choices (1997, 36). Because we recognize Edward as always and already misunderstood, he embodies an alternative to the gimcrack processes of socialization that leave the inhabitants of suburbia baffled, insecure, or hostile. His scissors, in this regard, become the sign of a defining passivity, a difference that allows him to experience the processes of subjectification and interpellation as a perpetual innocent who wants to please but can never begin to understand the self-interest of others: Kevin wants to bring him into class for show and tell; Joyce wants sex; and all the suburban housewives line up to have their hair cut. He seems to experience the world as a dialectic of unmotivated kindnesses and impossible demands, particularly from women, to assimilate.

These demands are often implicitly or explicitly sexual. Alone among the male characters in the film, Edward has the innate ability to provide a kind of suburban jouissance: he is an artist. His garden-shear hands have, it seems, a will of their own: women's hairdos, poodle cuts for neighborhood dogs, and elaborate topiary sculptures emerge from Edward's frantic clipping, although the hero seems to have no frame of reference for such art. (Depp wore the elaborate scissorhands off the set to improve his ability to manipulate the scissorhands apparatus.) While he is repeatedly poking holes in waterbeds and leaving cuts on the faces or limbs of those he loves, Edward turns his preternatural clumsiness, not to mention the threat of violence, into the liberal-humanist enjoyment of creation. He is, after all, both a work of art and a technological assemblage, a kind of goth Pinocchio whose primary reason for being is to produce art. His hands transform the remnants of a fossilized industrialism into precision tools. Stripped of their overt functions of consumerist gratification, the blades that define him as "unfinished" mark a nostalgia for an art beyond or before remediation and imitation. In an economy in which technology is always the means to an end, the only way to safeguard morality is to create spontaneously or to please others rather than one's self. Edward's art, then, is not the product of an internal "torment" nor an erotic desire, despite the sexual pleasure that the neighborhood vamp, Joyce Monroe (Kathy Baker), experiences as he cuts her hair; rather Edward's sculptures seem a natural expression of his fundamental innocence, his desire to create an art that is beautiful but without utility: hedges that look like dinosaurs, shaggy mutts transformed into aestheticized poodles.

The characters in *Edward Scissorhands* are baffled by their environment and their interactions with others. When Edward first looks into a mirror at

Peg's house, tentatively tapping the glass with one of his blades, it is obvious that he has never seen his reflection before. Despite the inventor's etiquette lessons, socialization for Edward is always a new and mysterious process, one that never seems to take. Yet ironically he seems no more out of touch than anyone else in suburbia. Peg's husband Bill (Alan Arkin) knows less about women than a being who has "been cloistered away in [a] castle too long" and seems more puzzled by his daughter's sexuality than he is by Edward. He confesses that he has given up trying to understand "teenage girls [who are] all crazy. I don't know what it is. They reach a certain age. They develop those gland things. Their bodies swell up. . . . I try not to think about it." Like most of the other adults in the film, Bill does not really accept and sympathize with Edward's difference but remains oblivious to its significance. The only recourse that he and the others have is to run through the gestures—perform the suburban rituals of barbecues, fatherly chats, and attempted seductions—that would signify his assimilation into their world. Even Peg, a "fantasy Avon lady/guardian angel"—"a character [Burton] wished for in that environment" (V), deals with Edward's otherness by applying cosmetics to his "fair" complexion. The concealing cream that she applies to his face only highlights the fact that he cannot be assimilated. As our great poet of baffled incomprehension, Burton registers rather than investigates the claims of style in shaping the dialectic of resistance and conformity that define subcultures.⁶

To be baffled is to recognize that one should be able to interpret or analyze phenomena: Bill should have a clue about his teenage daughter, Joyce should be able to guess at Edward's inability to understand, let alone respond to, her advances. *Baffled* has a host of related emotional and physical connotations that point to interruptions or deflections within a system—to be baffled is to be frustrated, prevented, deflected, or regulated. Consequently, one cannot write, "My Chihuahua was baffled by calculus," because there is no chance that these two registers, canine understanding and differential equations, could ever coexist. The baffled response of the characters in *Scissorhands* thus points both to the ways in which the "normal" world is always in the process of revealing how "weird" it actually is and to the desires that are invariably frustrated.

Edward's only defense against the strange dynamics of suburbia is to fall in love. The growing attraction between Kim and Edward fulfills every geek's fantasy that a beautiful woman will overlook his physical appearance, recognize his emotional depth, understand his art, and validate his self-worth. This plot turn threatens to enmesh Edward in a world of mimetic desire as the rival to the high school stud. But true love in the film is almost without

or beyond discourse. Before Kim tells Edward at the very end of the film that she loves him, their courtship is a matter of meaningful looks and understated expressions of sympathy and eventually empathy. In commenting on the film, Burton describes Depp's and Ryder's performances explicitly in the rhetoric of remediation: both actor and actress have "a silent-movie quality" (V) that defines their attraction as one which can be communicated solely by appearance—makeup, wigs, expressions—and the technologies of filmmaking: lights, camera angles, close-ups. Love neither finds nor needs a language, and these scenes of meaningful looks stand in stark contrast to the discourses of teenage sexual attraction, which are tinged with aggression, violence, and self-interest. Edward's rival for Kim's affections, Jim (Anthony Michael Hall), mocks and threatens the hero, hits his girlfriend, sucks up to her parents, and struts like "Eddie Haskell on steroids" (V). Jim has no real interiority, no set of motivations other than getting money to buy a van in which he and Kim can have sex. On some level teenage villainy has become an outtake from *Leave It to Beaver*. To be glib, popular, and athletic in *Scissorhands* is to adopt a conventional language that the film implies is hostile, irrelevant, or misguided.

By the time Edward and Kim have their big love scene, though, the ending already has been written in a rash of remediated scenes and plot devices that demand little of the audience. Jim's villainy and Edward's injured innocence are vehicles to reiterate the poetry of geek alienation: sensitivity and creativity are always marks of a difference that threaten the "weird social dynamic" (V) of suburbia. When an angry mob of mostly women forms to exact some sort of suburban vengeance on their former hairstylist, even Peg concedes that "it might be best if he goes back [to the mansion]." On the run from the "angry villagers" and the police, Edward returns to the Boggs' house to find Kim. In close-up, she asks him to do what the other women have, in one way or another, demanded: "Hold me." Edward's response underscores the inability to touch that defines his difference: "I can't." Nonetheless, Kim places his arms around her and rests her head on his shoulder. This scene, Burton says, "is what the movie was based on" (V). But as Edward hugs her, his eyes stare into the distance, and the film offers the third and last of the flashbacks to his existence at the castle.

The shot fades to the inventor giving a present to Edward; although "it's a little early for Christmas," the old man crosses the room holding up a pair of human hands. Edward touches them gently with his blades and gently plants a kiss on one of them as the inventor looks on. Then the inventor's face turns from a benevolent smile to a pale grimace; his eyes stare past the camera, and then he falls to the floor, dead. As he falls, he drops the hands

and they shatter. Rather than flesh, they seem a brittle simulacrum of identity, a lack of difference that can be only illusory. The hands exist—and can exist—only as a disembodied gift that can never be attached. To have hands, rather than to desire hands, is to destroy the artist, to make him complicit in the regime of self-interest. For his part, the inventor dies without having voiced a rationale for his desire to create a human being. His benevolence remains inscrutable—socializing Edward in etiquette but leaving him unfinished, without hands, as though human identity somehow must be earned by mastering the protocols of a gothic redaction of Miss Manners. Vincent Price has been misrecognized: he is not the father nor even the image of an idealized masculine identity, but a mortal, subject to time, decay, and death and apparently tormented by demons we do not understand to chart a bizarre evolutionary course for his creation from a primitive machine to a fully formed human. After Edward tenderly strokes his inventor's face, Burton cuts to a head shot of the hero who looks wonderingly, perhaps incomprehensibly at the blood on three of his blades. Even as the scene fades back to his holding Kim, the trace of blood signifies, yet again, his separation from humanity. To belong to the human community, even a community of stylized suburbia, is to embrace a world of self-interest, unsatisfying sex, unfulfilled desire, decay, and death.

Again and again, the film hammers home the point that to love is to suffer separation. The climactic scene that severs the lovers irrevocably resorts to conventional Hollywood violence: Jim attacks Edward, Kim saves her true love, and then Edward finally skewers Jim, who falls from a window in the ruined mansion. As the "angry villagers" gather around Jim's corpse, Edward says good-bye, and Kim offers her final farewell: "I love you." Although she lies to the crowd to protect him, telling them that their goth nemesis is dead, her confession of love signals their irrevocable separation. The last scenes of the movie return viewers to the frame narrative. The aged grandmother, the wizened Kim, concludes her story by acknowledging that "she never saw him again." She does not want to go up to the mansion again because she is "an old woman now" and she wants Edward to remember her "the way [she] was." The loss of love is the price she pays for a "normal" identity—she has a grandchild and presumably a family of the sort that inhabits the film's surreal suburbia, which now improbably exists unchanged in the mid-twenty-first century. Burton concludes with a shot of Edward, who is unchanged. Still living in the mansion, he sculpts figures of suburban life, and the shavings, arcing from the ruined window, come down to make snow. The snow is a marker of Edward's art and a marker of his absence. It is a placeholder for an enjoyment that is forbidden, marked

as impossible by the scissors, by Edward's ageless difference. If these fantastic creatures that Edward earlier had carved into the hedges of suburbia point to the independence of art and imagination, then these figures—the memories of his (lost) suburban existence—in front of the mansion project the “real” world into that realm of imaginative recreation. Suburbia itself has become the stuff of myth or fairy tale rather than of satire or analysis. Only the snow remains. He comes down the mansion's stairs into the garden, pausing to clip several stray leaves on the way, and the last shot we see of him is standing in a garden full of sculpted figures from his suburban past.

Edward Scissorhands allows us to begin to think through the complex strategies of subcultural appropriation. It is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a “postmodern” film that explores problems of technology and identity, nor does it offer a social critique. It is a series of images and vignettes. Burton's descriptive vocabulary is laced with references both to sixties television shows and to the advertisements—the Pocket Fisherman—that have become integrated into the late-twentieth-century experience of watching *Leave It to Beaver*, Vincent Price movies, and *Star Trek*. Like *Ed Wood*, *Edward Scissorhands* finds its art—its poetry—in playing back refracted images of a culturally mediated experience, and it invites its readers to find for themselves nostalgic truths, values, and emotions in a fictive originary innocence, an imagined time of silent film stars and true love, of Saturday afternoons when *Plan 9 from Outer Space* was actually playing in a theater. The remediation is the message.

Because remediation implies a consciousness of older media as content, the stylistic images always are in the process of anatomizing themselves, making themselves available for appropriation. The components of Depp's costume—latex, leather, Naugahyde, and electricians' tape; spiked hair, white makeup, vivid scars—in a sense demand to be taken not as fashion but as what passes for essence: identity itself is an assemblage of spare parts and throwaways. Out of the detritus of consumer culture comes a visual artistry of alienation and difference that paradoxically celebrates the uniqueness of being perpetually misunderstood. While blades for hands have never caught on, the technologies of assemblage have—for goths, for some science fiction fans, and for more than a few Hollywood executives who hope that they are investing in the next *Batman*. Ultimately, Burton spins out a cultural fantasy: style located in the very processes of remediation; a resistance “against society” without either analysis or remedy, and an individuality

that seeks its origin myths in the nostalgic experience of the televisual Oz of a fetishized and imaginary youth.

Notes

1. Burton's voiceover commentary (V) is quoted from the tenth anniversary rerelease DVD edition, 2000.
2. For a useful assessment of McLuhan's work, see Kroker 1997.
3. The cocredit that Burton received for the story stems solely from this drawing. See the interview with scriptwriter Caroline Thompson (n.d.).
4. For the film, Burton's company took over approximately fifty houses in Lutz, Florida, outside of Tampa, and painted them in various pastel shades—a hallucinogenic version of the Burbank of Burton's childhood (V).
5. Ebert 1990. One wonders, in this regard, what might have happened to the film if some of the other actors interested in the role of Edward—Tom Hanks, Robert Downey Jr., Michael Jackson, William Hurt, or Tom Cruise—had been cast. See Hanke 1999, 101–2.
6. See Hebdige 1981. See also Hall and Jefferson 1995 and Muggleton 2000, 118–25.



THE AUTHENTIC DRACULA

Bram Stoker's Hold on Vampiric Genres



Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is an amalgamation of a number of vampire stories, including historic accounts of Vlad the Impaler. While far from being the first vampire novel, it undoubtedly has had the strongest hold on popular cultural productions of the Dracula story throughout this century. The gentlemanly, Eastern European–accented count is so ubiquitous and embedded that virtually every American adult and child is familiar with him. Various domesticated through such figures as *Sesame Street*'s Count von Count and the cereal Count Chocula, and turned into slapstick comedy by Abbot and Costello, among many others, this image bequeathed by Stoker also continues to influence more serious representations and feed a diverse and widespread fascination with the nature of vampires. Goth subculture in particular has appropriated the signs and symbols of vampirism from Stoker's *Dracula*—a novel that reflects the imperial anxiety of its specific historic moment—to create a place within which mainstream culture can produce a sympathetic monster. According to J. Gordon Melton, the vampire has functioned as “the single most appropriate image” for the subculture (1998, 123).

Over time, through a long proliferation of stage and screen adaptations, the character and narrative context of *Dracula* have transmogrified in striking ways. Some of the most powerful of these changes evolved in the tradition of Hollywood gothic, which displaced the victims from the center that they occupied in the Stoker narrative and made the count the central figure and subject of the story, a tortured instance of the romantic antihero. And yet, paradoxically, this tradition at the same time instituted the practice of authorizing these developments by appealing to Bram Stoker—his authority

ipso facto raises a vampire movie above a mere Hollywood creation of the fantastic monster and beyond our expectations of the generic chase-and-kill movie. This tension between the authority invested in Stoker and the changes wrought by Hollywood on his story is reproduced in goth subculture. For although Anne Rice's novels (the most popular vampire narratives since Stoker's 1897 novel) and the gothic rock of the late 1970s and onward have extended Hollywood's privileging of the vampire and transformed him from alien villain to alienated victim, goth subculture, driven in part by a preoccupation with self-definition, continues nonetheless to posit Stoker as an authenticating source.

One of the most striking tensions in the vampire narrative tradition plays between sympathy for, and detestation of, the vampire. He is both a monstrous, calculating predator, and yet again, depending on whose vampire he is, a lonely, haunted outsider trapped by his need for blood. The degree of sympathy or detestation varies greatly from author to author, film to film, and time to time, and while there is no strict linear or dialectical development of this tension, I am suggesting a general pattern that will help clarify Stoker's particular influence in the twentieth century and the subversion of that narrative strain in the vampire genre of the 1970s and onward—the period of goth subculture's emergence and ongoing influence.

While there were many vampire stories published during the nineteenth century, those of John Polidori and Sheridan Le Fanu are relevant here because they were quite popular. Stoker, who became most popular of all, knew and was influenced by them, and their idiosyncratic views of vampires have become codified aspects of the genre. Polidori's "The Vampyre: A Tale" (1819), for instance, thematizes the presence of the vampire in two utterly remote venues—the folklore of the uneducated peasants and the books and fancies of the educated aristocrats. The story is about Aubrey, an aristocrat who believes that the "congeries of pleasing horrors" of his books were not to be found in real life, until he meets Lord Ruthven, a strange and severe nobleman who becomes a source of excitement for a bored aristocracy. Aubrey believes he has found the hero of a romance with the supernatural qualities he so wants to study. But he resists the idea that Ruthven could be a real vampire. In his aristocratic folly, he dismisses the vampire stories that the peasants have used to keep real vampires out of their midst; it is only the aristocrat's flirtation with the reality of the supernatural for amusement that reintroduces the vampire to the peasants and opens the way for the vampire to circulate in London society. Polidori's vampire is dangerous because he is a social being "who passe[d] years amidst his friends, and dearest ties" (38) without their knowledge. Here Polidori ex-

plores central territory of all classic vampire narratives: the causes that provide the vampire his opportunity to insinuate himself into the community. That vampires have always existed in our world and go about unbeknownst to any but a chosen few becomes a staple of modern goth classics such as Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1977) and Whitley Streiber's film *The Hunger* (1983).

In Le Fanu's vampire story "Carmilla," friendship and seduction are also used as the means by which the vampire gains her victims' acceptance. "Carmilla" has many of the traditional elements of Gothic fiction: a castle, complete with a "Gothic chapel" and a "steep Gothic bridge," ruins, isolation, and a motherless, innocent young girl. Le Fanu's story differs from Polidori's in that the vampire is a woman who seduces women. A second difference is in the sources each author offers as proof of the existence of vampires and for descriptions of their attributes. In Polidori's tale, the only source is the folklore of Aubrey's Greek hosts; the vampire is a novelty to the English aristocrats and thus unrecognizable as such. In Le Fanu's story, the vampire is not only the subject of folklore, but also the object of scientific and religious study.

Polidori provides only a very limited description of the vampire: he's pale, has a piercing stare, easily seduces women of good and poor virtue, can rise from the dead if exposed to moonlight, and needs to drink the blood of one lovely young woman every year to sustain his existence. Le Fanu offers more detailed, if not more ambiguous, characteristics of the vampire: she is amphibious in nature, sleeps in the grave by day, has a strong blood lust, a powerful grip, may arise anytime, anywhere from a suicide who led a wicked life, turns her victims into vampires, and can only be destroyed by staking, decapitation, and burning of the corpse. Most striking is the way in which she stalks her prey:

The vampire is prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. . . . But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent. In ordinary ones it goes direct to its object, overpowers with violence, and strangles and exhausts often at a single feast. (337)

The narrator's neuter "it" adds a sense of monstrosity to the vampire's womanliness, her seeking after "sympathy and consent" from another woman, her urgent desire for companionship—but not from a man. This

type of female/female vampirism is taken up in the 1983 film *The Hunger*, a goth cult classic in which style, androgyny, and queer desire are the essence of the vampire.

In both Polidori's and Le Fanu's stories, the human characters have no sympathy for the vampire once he or she is revealed; they recoil from the sympathetic ties the vampires had worked so hard to build between themselves and their potential victims. And even before the unmasking, the reader is made to be suspicious of the vampire from the start and thus prevented from entertaining sympathetic feelings for him or her. While Stoker draws much from these stories, there is a crucial difference between his vampire and theirs: Count Dracula doesn't use seductive arts to get Lucy and Mina, however erotically charged the bloodsucking scenes and descriptions may be, nor does he circulate in their society. From the opening of the novel we, along with Jonathan Harker, are repelled by Dracula; he has long nails, his breath is putrid, he is old, and he is evil, and thus seduction in the usual sense isn't really a possibility. He has one specific point of contact with the English women he plans to vampirize and that is through his ability to buy, with his unused, accumulated capital, an empty London estate. Like much late-nineteenth-century gothic, Dracula betrays anxieties over a flagging British imperialism, but with a special emphasis on the fear of racial miscegenation. Once on, or in, English soil, Dracula furthers his plans to attack Lucy and later Mina, but in stealth—not, as twentieth-century movie adaptations have it, by becoming a member of English social circles. That tradition of the movie genre comports more with the stories of Polidori and Le Fanu than with Stoker, and yet, more often than not, that tradition is attributed to Stoker. Even in the introduction to a useful 1992 filmography of vampire movies, John Flynn offers this description of Stoker's novel:

Having dominated his Transylvanian homeland for centuries, [Count Dracula] moves into Carfax Abbey and instantly attempts to impose his values and way of life upon the citizenry of England. At first he is welcomed into the finest homes and quickly establishes himself as a visiting nobleman, a man of great importance. His Old World charms and mysterious sexual allure cause heart flutters in Mina Murray, Lucy Westenra, and other women he encounters. However, the charm and sexual allure are merely illusionary. . . . The vampire is forced to flee to his homeland to reestablish his world and power base. Bram Stoker's novel brilliantly explores that unknown territory of the soul where love, imagination, and mutual satisfaction become sex, fantasy, dominance, submission, and degradation of spirit—all central to our understanding of the vampire mythos. (4)^t

The British society that Flynn describes, in its susceptibilities to an Old World visitor, seems more like the representations of displaced New World culture in an Old World costume so familiar in American film. In most vampire movies about Dracula, the count is seen as the social, aristocratic vampire of Polidori's story. In Bram Stoker's novel, however, the count is a very isolated being who attempts to perfect his assimilation of English culture and language not in order to join their society, but to move among the people undetected and to conquer their society. In the movies—especially since Bela Lugosi's famous portrayal—the count's accent is part of his foreign charm: in the novel, it is one of the attributes he tries to tone down so as not to call attention to himself. It is an ironic result of nearly a century's worth of vampire movies that Stoker's novel should be described not as it is written, but instead according to the metanarrative derived from the film tradition. Mainstream audiences have been attracted to the various incarnations of the Dracula figure because he is identifiably foreign and seductive. But, significantly, goths—though they are not indifferent to the attractions of seductive foreigners—are particularly drawn to the vampire because of his spiritual isolation and his failure to assimilate.

One of the most readily apparent features of the Hollywood renderings of the Dracula story is the radical foreshortening of character. Most film versions change the roles and relationships among all the characters, collapsing the young men into one or two characters, combining the roles of Mina and Lucy to create a single female lead, and reducing or eliminating the roles of Van Helsing and Renfield. In Tod Browning's 1931 film starring Bela Lugosi, for instance, Dr. Seward is Mina's father, Renfield is the one who travels to Dracula's estate, not Harker, and Lucy is Mina's friend, but there is no Arthur Godalming or Quincey Morris. The setting is 1920s London, and this is the first of many vampire films to follow in which Count Dracula enters fashionable society and befriends his potential victims—in this case, he meets them at the opera dressed in the proverbial tails and cape. In this movie, as in both Polidori's and Le Fanu's vampire stories, the vampire attacks the poor quickly and violently without the protracted seductions saved for the upper-class women. Before Lugosi's Count Dracula enters the opera house to begin his seduction of Lucy and Mina, he vampirizes a flower girl—who has an exaggerated Cockney accent—on the street. The rest of the movie shows Lugosi trying to make vampires out of Lucy and Mina and fighting off Van Helsing, who alone knows that "Dracula is no legend, but an undead creature." Although Universal Pictures secured the film rights from the Stoker estate and although in the opening credits the Browning film identifies Bram Stoker as the author of *Dracula*, it is only very loosely based on the novel. In fact, the movie follows more closely the stage ver-

sion produced by Hamilton Dean, which, after a successful run in London, opened in New York in 1927 starring Bela Lugosi and was a big hit.

Normally, being true to the original written version is far from necessary in a film—in fact, often the best films are unabashed adaptations. But this makes it all the more curious that so many Dracula movies so insistently represent themselves as telling the authentic Bram Stoker story of Dracula. Even Christopher Lee, the most famous portrayer of Dracula since Bela Lugosi, having played the count or a related vampire in fifteen movies, felt that authenticity to Stoker was important: “The stories as I’ve had them given to me have had almost no relation to the book . . . which is my reiterated complaint. . . . Though in France I have made a version in which I played Dracula exactly as Stoker described him, I was always against the whole tie and tails rendition. Surely it is the height of the ridiculous for a vampire to step out of the shadows wearing white tie, tails, patent leather shoes and a full cloak” (qtd. in Wolf 1972, 174). In fact, Lee claims that he never watched any other performances of Dracula until well after making his films, and that when he got the first role with little time to prepare he “had to hurry off to read the book . . . [and] played it fresh, with no knowledge of previous performances” (176). This is about as strong a claim as one can make for being truly inspired by Stoker alone, without any of the taint of years’ worth of film versions. Although it was important to Lee to play Dracula as he believed Stoker had intended, his characterization and the storyline of his first Dracula movie, *The Horror of Dracula* (1958), make significant departures, which became influential in many vampire movies to follow. Lee will always be remembered for his emphasis on the seductive appeal of Dracula, and the film for its focus on the sexual nature of the vampirizing scenes and the explicit gore of the staking scenes.

In the same interview, Lee brings up another innovation: “With Dracula there is something else. The loneliness of evil. The terrible poignancy that exists in such a character. . . . There is also sadness, resignation. The feeling of a man who would like to be free. Remember, in Stoker’s book, when he is killed, there is a look of peace on his face” (178). It’s true that in the last pages of the novel Van Helsing notes that, even moments after Dracula’s “red eyes glared with [a] horrible vindictive look,” he dies with “a look of peace.” Lee, however, uses that brief moment to instill in Dracula’s whole character the aspect of the alienated victim that influences the vampiric genre in the years to follow.

Jesse Franco’s 1970 Dracula movie, starring Christopher Lee and Klaus Kinski, is titled *Bram Stoker’s Count Dracula*² and was planned to be the first movie to be true to Stoker’s novel. The movie begins with a written preface

that attempts to situate it against Stoker's novel and yet mistakenly places the novel in the 1920s: "Over 50 years ago Bram Stoker wrote the greatest of all horror stories. Now for the first time, we retell, exactly as he wrote, one of the first—and still the best—tales of the macabre." This is enough to convince whoever wrote the promotional material to call it "the first of all Bram Stoker's many classic horror films," making Stoker a twentieth-century director as well. This version is perhaps one of the weakest adaptations. Jack Palance, who starred in Dan Curtis's 1974 *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, claimed in an interview following the video release of this made-for-TV movie that he had agreed to play the part because he "knew it would be authentic." Again, the question arises: authentic to what? It is far from the Stoker story; Harker is turned into a vampire and the character of Renfield is left out altogether. More important, Curtis introduces the theme of reincarnation to the Stoker story, a theme that will be taken up by Coppola in his version, also titled *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. The plot revolves around the historical relationship between Dracula and Vlad Tepes, and Dracula is made out to be a victim of his vampirism; he travels to England not to overtake the race, but only to be reunited with Mina, who is supposedly his lost love.³

It seems that all these movies try not, as they claim, to be true to Bram Stoker's novel, but to a particular ideal of his vampire, Count Dracula, and not as a distinct character so much as a central and centering presence. In the novel, the count's appearances in human form are rather limited: we learn most about him in the opening section when Harker is held prisoner at the castle. After that, there are two brief encounters with him in London, the horrific scene in which we find him in Mina's bedroom, and finally at his death in the last pages of the novel. The movies, on the other hand, make the count the focus—moving the people who fight him from the center. The other characters are used only insofar as they are able to become foils for the vampire's activities. What the movies take from Stoker is not the story but the overpowering presence of the vampire. It was not until 1978 that BBC Productions made a movie, *Count Dracula*, directed by Philip Seville, that follows Stoker's novel closely, even portraying the use of the journal as the means of telling the story. By this time, however, in the history of the genre, the focus had come to be on the vampire, and this version, true to Stoker, is not. In *The Celluloid Vampires* (1979), Michael Murphy notes that Louis Jourdan, the actor who plays Count Dracula, does not offer a "powerful portrayal. Perhaps this is as it should be for this film. For when Stoker wrote his novel, Dracula was not the forceful main character that dwarfs all others, as for instance, Christopher Lee does in his performance" (185). Consequently, while it received critical acclaim, the movie "did not attract much of a view-

ing audience'' (Flynn 1992, 255).⁴ Being true to Stoker and thus making the vampire less of a presence goes against generic expectations. Ironically, the film tradition that continues to have the most powerful influence in the genre is that which tries both to tell Stoker's story and to give Count Dracula a central place on screen.

In his introductory essay to *Bram Stoker's Dracula: The Film and the Legend* (1992), Coppola writes, "Mainly it was that no one had ever done the book. I'm amazed, watching all the other Dracula films, how much they hold back from what was written or implied, how they play havoc with the characters and their relationships. . . . Aside from the one innovative take that comes from history—the love story between Mina and the Prince—we were scrupulously true to the book" (3). Coppola thus fits squarely into the tradition of claiming to be true to the novel. He considers the historical preamble that depicts Vlad the Impaler fighting the Turks and the subsequent suicide of his wife Elizabeth to be an informative frame within which to place the "real" Stoker story, even indicating this break between frame and contents by flashing onto the screen the words *Bram Stoker's Dracula* after the historical introduction is over. But in fact the historical setting is integrated into the Stoker story to the point that it radically changes it from a story of invasion to a romantic tale of reincarnation, retribution, and redemption. In other aspects of the film, Coppola's attempts at authenticity are much more successful. Unlike most other movies, Coppola uses the complete Stoker cast of characters—including the Texan whose supply of Winchesters in the final scene inspires Coppola to treat the end "like an enormous John Ford shoot-out" (Coppola and Hart 1992, 3) picking up on the Western influence in Stoker's gothic tale. But although Coppola renders certain aspects of the novel into film in a rather studied way, the influence of the film tradition is clearly discernible. This film, as most others, is interested in looking at the vampire. In fact, in describing his desire to accurately convey Stoker's novel, James Hart, the screenplay writer for Coppola's movie, calls his vision of Count Dracula that of a "tragic hero" (Coppola and Hart 1992, 7). And yet this is precisely what he is not in the novel. His death is no tragedy; in fact, it is the triumph of the whole story. Its heroes—the men and one woman who alone manage to vanquish Dracula's evil presence from England and the world—are his intended victims. The film tradition has transformed Stoker's Dracula from evil predator to romantic and tragic hero. And, while the script maintains the overall plot of Stoker's novel, the infusion of the story of Vlad's attempt to reunite with his wife Elizabeth, reincarnated as Mina, not only allows the count to be in many more scenes but makes him the lonely and seductive figure of so many earlier Dracula films.

In Stoker the vampire story belongs, literally, to the victims. The narrative exists because they maintained letters, journals, telegrams, and even phonographic recordings memorializing the events. It is Mina Harker's collation and chronological ordering of these "scraps of evidence" that allows the characters to succeed in killing Dracula—the typewritten transcriptions actually drive the plot. At the end of the novel, seven years after the event, Jonathan Harker notes, "We were struck with the fact, that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing. . . . We could hardly ask any one, even did we wish to, to accept these as proofs of so wild a story" (444). It is an irony of this narrative that the technologies (the telegram, the phonograph, and the typewriter) that the novel makes so much of are a foil to authenticity, thus making it impossible to prove Dracula's existence to anyone. Van Helsing closes the novel with this thought: "We want no proofs! We ask none to believe us!" (Stoker 1979 [1897], 449). The characters abandon the notion of proof and resign themselves to the fact that the reader's experience of the story as mediated through their manuscripts will always lack authenticity. Filmmakers, on the other hand, claim, by the simple attribution of Stoker's authorship, that the viewer's experience of the story as mediated through the film is authentic. Coppola uses this same authenticating device, not merely as a wooden convention, but as an expression of his intention to display the real story of Dracula as captured by Bram Stoker. Coppola goes a step further by providing a historical framework to situate what is, after all, only a novel, thereby adding a realist dimension that further romanticizes his version of the vampire story.

Coppola uses the historical framework to create an origin—the making of a vampire—and also to provide a resolution to Dracula's condition—not just death, but some satisfying closure to a sad life. That aspect of the film has a strong tradition in vampire movies. As I have shown, in film, Count Dracula is from the beginning portrayed as a seductive aristocrat, and as the twentieth century progresses, the focus is less on his evil nature and more on his romantic allure. That allure, for instance, made Frank Langella famous for his portrayal of the count in the 1979 remake of the original stage play—a far cry from Bela Lugosi's Dracula. The "historical" part of Coppola's movie is intensely romantic in this tradition. Other vampire movies that have contributed to the romantic theme are those in which the vampire seeks a cure for his or her vampiric nature. Whether it's through psychiatric help (as in *Dracula's Daughter* [1936], in which the vampire is told essentially to overcome her problem by repressing the urge); or through a blood cure (as in *House of Dracula* [1945], in which Dr. Edelman tries to make an anti-

toxin to kill the vampire parasite in the count's blood, and in *House of Dark Shadows* [1971], in which a doctor gives Barnabus injections that affect the extra cell in his blood, curing him temporarily of vampirism), these movies portray vampires who would like to revert to normal lives. The cures fail, leaving the vampires more desperate for blood and love. Similarly, in Coppola's movie, Dracula's reunion with his reincarnated love is not enough of a cure; in the end, he cannot make Mina a vampire. And although the movie closes with pious gestures toward the eternity of love, the count dies without having achieved a true reunion with his love. The failure of the cure, of finding relief from the torture of isolation, is a major component of the modern goth sensibility.

While other stories were written in the twentieth century whose vampires are just as evil and threatening as Count Dracula, or more so, none gained quite the interest and popularity as Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*.⁵ While it is true, as is often noted, that Rice's approach to the vampire narrative is a subversion of the genre as codified by Stoker's novel, it is continuous with, to a degree, the vampire narrative in the film tradition. Just as the movies tend to portray Count Dracula as a lonely, haunted outsider, even at times as an unwilling victim of his vampirism, the vampires in Rice's novels are alienated outsiders beset by the sense of their limits even as they enjoy an often celebratory awareness of great powers. In this, Rice goes far beyond the vampires portrayed in the movies; Rice is popular among goths because her interesting and powerful vampires (as opposed to the caricatures of the Paris theatre or Eastern Europe) are not trapped by the conventions or clichés of the genre. She has developed in them what was compelling about Stoker's Dracula in the first place, but which has been lost to the Draculas of decades of movies.

With the characters of Louis and Lestat in *Interview with the Vampire*, for example, the transhistorical vampiric existence, which is accompanied by a nearly pure form of leisure, is one of the aspects of the vampire that Rice elaborates on from Stoker. Just like Dracula, Rice's vampires are potentially immortal, live and learn over centuries, have more than enough money to allow them to live in the world and occasionally among the living in high style, and the only requirement they must meet to survive is blood, which they can have at will. The ways in which Rice's vampires differ from Stoker's are the very ways in which the movies develop the vampire character. For example, Rice brings the sensual and the erotic nature of vampires to the surface, and she creates in Louis a reluctant vampire, one who experiences both the ecstasy and the repulsion of the kill, very much like the Dracula of the movies. While the vampire stories of Polidori, Le Fanu, and Stoker are

all sexual—both hetero- and homosexual in nature—Rice extends the erotic nature of the vampire by emphasizing the androgyny of vampiric relationships. Companions can be of either sex, and the ecstasy of the kill derives solely from the kill and in spite of gender. But Rice exceeds the movies' focus on Dracula by expanding the scope to communities of vampires. Relationships with human beings become almost nonexistent. In fact, there is very little narrative from a human point of view, few moments in which people even suspect a vampire menace in their midst. The journalist in *Interview with the Vampire* even expresses a desire to become a vampire, in spite of hearing about Louis's woes. Our attention is focused on the loneliness and isolation of the vampire. Louis especially evokes our sympathy in his helplessness, alienation, and sense of insignificance—even as consequences of his power and potential immortality. He has some aspects of the tragic hero because his acutest suffering arises from the conviction that there must be moral significance to his condition.

While Stoker's *Dracula* is an important source in goth subculture—it's virtually a reference for the authentic vampire—it is the transformation of Stoker's vampire through decades of movies, along with the revisionist vampires found in novels like Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* and Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* (1992), that speak to the aesthetic of modern gothic subculture. As Melton notes in *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead*, the vampire provided an important icon for those who, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, were drawn to gothic rock with its gloomy and even morbid aesthetic, and "nonconformist stance vis-à-vis the dominant establishment" (1998, 123). And yet although the signs of belonging in this subculture often are taken from the vampire (the colors black, red, purple, and white; the hairstyles, the makeup; the teeth and fingernails), the ethos is that of the victims in Stoker's novel. That is, the fact that the Harkers and Dr. Seward can't prove the authenticity of their experience of Dracula makes the whole of their young lives a private, underground affair, fraught with experiences of death, madness, drugs (Dr. Seward was an admitted addict and both Lucy and Mina are sedated with opiates), and an overwhelming eroticism. All of this has its goth appeal. However, at the end of *Dracula* the victims are re-integrated into normal life, bearing none of the signs of their experience, whereas goth subculture has produced and continues to produce narratives that celebrate the alienated outsider, creating a fantasy of power obtained by virtue of remaining unassimilated to one's larger culture and supporting a panoply of overt signs to betoken that status. Not surprisingly, then, these narratives have transferred the character of victimized youth to the vampire, the ideal icon of such a fantasy because of the extremity of his alienation.

Notes

1. Unfortunately this mistaken plot outline of the novel leads Flynn to incorrectly claim that many films are "much the same as Stoker's novel." For instance, he says of Browning's *Dracula*, "Sometimes the film's development is too literal" (1992, 35), when in fact it departs from Stoker's novel greatly, and he suggests that Curtis's 1973 *Dracula* "was basically the same as Stoker's originally" (224), yet this film radically changes the character of Dracula.
2. The version I saw had this title, but according to Murphy 1979, the film, having been an international effort, was known by a number of titles and is commonly referred to as *El Conde Dracula*.
3. This is a story line Curtis used before to tell the story of a different but also popular vampire—Barnabus Collins of the daytime soap *Dark Shadows*. In 1970 Curtis made a feature-length movie, *House of Dark Shadows*, in which Barnabus Collins is released from his coffin after two hundred years and falls in love with a woman who looks exactly like his long lost love from his former life.
4. Flynn also notes that it received stronger ratings in later showings. This may be the result of renewed interest in the "authentic Dracula."
5. Consider, for instance, Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* (1975) and Whitley Strieber's *The Hunger*.

Part V



COMMUNITIES





“WHEN YOU KISS ME,
I WANT TO DIE”

Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Gothic Family Values



B*uffy the Vampire Slayer* attracts goth viewers not only because of its obvious relation to goth themes and styles but also, I argue, because it champions its own kind of family values, offering a twist on civic republicanism as a social and communal ideal. The show deploys the macabre, decadent, and supernatural to develop certain moral and social themes that simultaneously mirror and critique goth culture. What is recognizably goth style—dark, outré, otherworldly—functions as an aesthetic spectacle. Yet *Buffy* also enacts a moral struggle through this aesthetic: the tension between an anti-communal drive to fulfill self-centered material or sexual desires and resistant acts that maintain the integrity of an alternative community. Two key relationships—between Buffy and her vampire lover, Angel, and between Buffy and another slayer, Faith—illustrate the show’s attempt to create an alternative community even if, in the end, it reasserts normative values.

This essay emphasizes the distinction between the civic republican ethos (that of a democratic community in which each member contributes to determining the overall power and influence of the republic) and the ideologies and values of today’s Republican Party, with which it has little in common. My understanding of civic republicanism draws on J. G. A. Pocock’s authoritative account in *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (1975). Pocock traces the development of republicanism in the Machiavellian era. He argues that Florentine notions of republics, civic virtue, and hierarchy left “an important and paradigmatic legacy: concepts of balanced government, dynamic virtue, and the role of arms and property in shaping the civic personality” (viii). Pocock also shows that Florentine republican thought reflected a belief in a balance

between all elements involved in society, so that each individual was defined by his or her duty. *Buffy*'s central community of friends and family mirrors this model, especially in terms of the quest to maintain balance in its self-created system of virtue and morality, the very principles of the "republic" to which all adhere.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer's critical and popular appeal rests on its reputation as a unique and unpredictable teen drama that also reflects common experiences and struggles.¹ Throughout its nearly two hundred episodes, the show puts forth its own set of what I will call "goth ethics": a nexus of valorized, moral behaviors that center on preaching restraint even though it also encourages diversified expressions of sexual and gender identity. Although goth culture critic Gavin Baddeley (2002) refers to *Buffy* as "goth lite," I believe that the show's glorification of death, championing of suffering, and romanticization of alternative communities give the show a degree of goth credibility.² But, ironically, the reason may have more to do with its stress on virtuous ethics than with the more conventionally gothic features alone. *Buffy* appears to offer the best of everything to admiring critics and to devoted viewers: that is, the show focuses on conventional youth-oriented themes but presents them within an atypical formula full of vampires, monsters, and other otherworldly phenomena. Thus the show can have it both ways. On one level, it is a subversive alternative to more mainstream teen dramas, offering a comparatively radical conceptualization of gender, sexual, and family identities. Yet, in the end, as this analysis will show, the show reinscribes the mainstream norms it appears to reject.

Like goth culture, *Buffy* relies on key contradictions that have long developed in gothic genres. According to Baddeley:

Gothic is sophisticated barbarism. It is a passion for life draped in symbolism of death. It is a cynical love sentiment. It is a marriage of extremes such as sex and death. It uses darkness to illuminate. It believes duty is vain, and vanity to be a duty. It is the compulsion to do the wrong thing for all the right reasons. It is a yearning nostalgia for the black days of a past that never was. It denies orthodox reality and puts its faith in the imaginary. It is the unholy, the uncanny, the unnatural. (19)

Buffy cultivates the same paradoxical qualities, with special emphasis on the dangerous clash between duty and vanity. Most paradoxical of all, perhaps, is the way in which the binding force of alternative communities is shown to depend on maintaining the tension between several contradictions.

Yet *Buffy*'s moral lessons are, at bottom, deeply conventional, inviting a wide range of viewers (not all of whom may regard themselves as identi-

fied with goth or the gothic) to sympathize and live vicariously through the main characters. Speaking to this blend of the outrageous and the conventional, creator Joss Whedon explains in his November 8, 2002 interview on *Fresh Air*: "I wanted to create a fantasy that was emotionally completely realistic." He goes on to stress that each show focuses on one organizing principle: "The audience has been through this." As if in tacit agreement with Whedon, in their reviews of the show, television critics frequently assert their own personal connection to the characters and themes, reinforcing the sense of their universality. For example, television critic Deborah Netburn, who watched *Buffy* with a group of friends in college, writes, "Despite the fact that it was about a skinny blonde with superhuman power it was television in which we could actually see our own struggles and issues reflected back at us" (2000, 24). Yet for all the inclusiveness implied by such language, Netburn's article begins by distinguishing between her own viewing cohort and those who huddled in front of the television to catch *Felicity* or *Beverly Hills, 90210*. Critics such as Netburn thus affirm the seeming contradiction promoted by the show's creators: *Buffy* is at once alternative and universal.

Buffy follows the vampire-staking and demon-attacking trials of Buffy Summers, a pretty teen with divorced parents, mediocre grades, and plenty of adolescent angst. At the age of fifteen, Buffy learns that her destiny is to be a vampire slayer. Buffy's mother Joyce is, until the end of the second season, oblivious to her daughter's double life. Her father, who lives in Los Angeles, never learns of her true identity. Buffy is an only child during the first three seasons, but in the fourth she inherits a sister when a group of monks decides to turn a source of powerful energy into Buffy's sibling, Dawn, implanting memories of her in both Joyce and Buffy.

Slayer lore, most often woven throughout the show via Rupert Giles, school librarian and Buffy's "watcher" (adult trainer and guide), dictates that once a slayer dies, another must immediately take her place, assuring a continuous matrilineal source of power. Slayers are also always female and must perform their duties for as long as they live. Buffy's two closest friends (Willow is a computer geek; Xander, just a geek) know and guard her secret, as does Angel and later, Cordelia, the shallow, self-absorbed rich girl (given depth later by a romantic relationship with Xander) who initially serves as Buffy's foil. The vampires themselves are cartoonish buffoons with a penchant for 1970s fashions and most of the time, because their strength must increase with age, Buffy easily finds and kills them before they are any real match for her. By and large, however, Buffy's most violent conflicts have more to do with her emotional attachments than the physical prowess of her

foes. In fact, Buffy's pure brawn almost always surpasses that of her nemeses; what gets in her way is typically the pull between serving her own self-interest and saving her friends (and by extension, the world).

As the title character, Buffy functions as a feminist icon, taking charge of situations, driving the plot, and destroying those who threaten her world. Feminist critics such as Frances E. Early (2001, 11) argue that the show is "preeminently a narrative of the disorderly rebellious female" offering models of both transgressive masculinity and femininity.³ Buffy's sheer physical strength means that she can pulverize most any male or demon she meets. Buffy thus achieves a kind of feminist community, defined by a kind of "sisterhood" (which comes to include both men and some demons) in which an ethic of care predominates. Yet the community also cultivates oppressive practices, including rules and tasks that echo patriarchal norms.

Buffy's true love, Angel, is an anomaly: a vampire with a soul. Sired by Darla, a vampire who, in eighteenth-century Ireland, bites a drunken Angelus so she may have a lover and student, Angelus is a particularly violent vampire. We learn in later seasons that his past was excessively bloody and obscene, even for a vampire; he focused almost exclusively on pious young women, first romancing them and then torturing them by killing their friends and families. Only after these young victims lost their minds would Angelus turn them into vampiric companions. These games and schemes lasted over a century until Angelus was punished by the family of one his victims, forcing him (now Angel) to face the consequences of prior acts. Plagued by guilt and self-hatred, Angel wanders in near total isolation for centuries until he meets and falls in love with Buffy. There's no real atonement possible for crimes of the magnitude Angelus committed, but helping and caring for Buffy becomes the measure of Angel's worth.

Buffy and Angel: Sid and Nancy or Ozzy and Sharon?

The show quantifies Buffy's success in terms of the effect her victories and defeats have on her family and friends, which is in keeping with the show's focus on putting community over self. In large part, even though Angel now stars in his own eponymous spin-off show, *Buffy's* plots are still directly or indirectly tied to the love story between Buffy and Angel. While thus incorporating (and sometimes parodying) the conventions of teen life and romance, the show simultaneously manages to convey a subversive edge by delaying the gratification of a happy ending to this star-crossed love affair between vampire and slayer. In so doing, the show both incites the unsatiated desire of its viewers and foregrounds unsatiated desire as a theme.

Yet, in later seasons especially, the domestication of Buffy's and Angel's

relationship gives way to the kind of normalcy the show (ostensibly) resists just as its moral didacticism veers toward the more conservative and mainstream. Buffy and Angel meet when Buffy first arrives in Sunnydale. The physical attraction is immediate and intense, especially because at this juncture in their story, Buffy doesn't know Angel is a vampire. As Buffy and Angel later pull away from their first kiss, however, Angel transforms into his vampiric self, the first suggestion that reckless sexual passion threatens not only Buffy, but also the entire world. Heartbroken and confused, Buffy later learns of Angel's curse and the two come to the conclusion that they cannot be in each other's lives. They share a final kiss and, as Buffy walks away, we see that her crucifix, pressed up against Angel's chest during their kiss, has branded him.

Such sadomasochistic undercurrents, blurring pain and pleasure, are made all the more tantalizing insofar as Buffy and Angel, despite their better judgment, cannot stay away from each other and risk harming everyone around them. A kind of s-m play characterizes the doomed relationship, with each taking a turn physically or emotionally dominating the other. For instance, when Buffy and Angel team up to fight various enemies, Buffy inhabits the traditionally male role by determining the fighting strategy while Angel alternates between following her lead and comforting her. At times, Buffy and Angel fall into a traditional courtship pattern, but with their expected gender roles reversed; for instance, Buffy arrives late for dates after hours of slaying and jokes about her "rough day at the office." Angel also plays against masculine type when he urges sexual restraint.

While certain elements of the relationship thus resist mainstream norms, insofar as Buffy and Angel are able to contain their urges they produce beneficial and even healthy communal effects. On the other hand, much of the drama derives from their apparent inability to do so, providing many opportunities to represent the anticomunal impact of romantic love. Sexual attraction is presented in the light of private gratification, in tension with public duty. Thus, when Buffy and Angel have an intimate moment their mutual attraction typically distracts them from the surrounding dangers creating adverse social consequences. As they become more involved with each other the pair withdraws from the alternative community, some of whose members deeply resent Angel's presence in their lives.

Because the group's survival depends on Buffy's finally rejecting this all-consuming romance, the first stage of their relationship comes to a literally hellish conclusion. After Buffy loses her virginity to Angel, Angel wakes from a deep sleep and, in an act that reveals his reversion to the soulless Angelus, lustily bites the neck of a prostitute. The effect of this trans-

formation is to reestablish traditional roles. Angelus represents a ravenous, libidinous masculinity; Buffy, in keeping with the patriarchal tradition of the virgin/whore dichotomy, offers a healthy, loving alternative to the sordid violence and sexual irresponsibility with which the prostitute is associated. We later learn that Angel's curse stipulated that should he ever achieve a moment of perfect happiness, he would lose his soul immediately. Loving sexual contact thus unleashes Angel's dark, supernatural impulses. Buffy, in turn, learns that gratification of her personal desires poses the gravest danger to the wider community.

From the start of his return to Angelus, Angel focuses exclusively on torturing Buffy by making her fear for the lives of her friends and family. Clearly, he knows that the only way to defeat Buffy is to destroy those around her. In an episode ironically titled "Innocence," Angel explains that "To kill this girl—you have to love her."

Angelus's desire to possess Buffy is still urgent, but without the domesticating sentimentality. Buffy returns to a militant, solitary role, remote from sexual pleasure. She thus moves emphatically from seeking sexual fulfillment to affirming a steadfast belief that duty to her calling and family far outweigh such selfish concerns. The only way Buffy can defeat Angel/Angelus, and thus save her community, is to send him (literally) to hell. Her decision to kill her lover is depicted as an individual rite of passage, a way for her to reclaim her lost virginity and, in a sense, redeem herself, though one that is dictated by communal imperatives.

The Goth Politics of Buffy's World

The apparent finale of Buffy's and Angel's romance, which occurred at the end of the show's second season, affirmed the virtue of sexual restraint and the threat of decadent pleasure. It is true that some later episodes included a healthy sexual relationship between Buffy and a new boyfriend as well as some other monogamous relationships that posed no apparent threat to the community. Yet, upon Angel's return to Buffy's life (with his soul restored) the tensions returned anew. In the third season, such conflicts were to some degree mediated by the scapegoating of men (figured as beastly) as well as of Faith, a vampire slayer depicted as the embodiment of reckless, hedonistic femininity. Interestingly enough, Faith is the character most easily identified as goth: she has dark hair, wears combat boots, and, in the manner of goth culture, she translates emotional pain into a kind of glamorous style. Faith's negative representation turns on her outsider status; the consequent message is that nonconformity is tolerable only within the context of an alternative community.

Because Buffy is so consumed by romantic difficulties, she fails to notice that Faith has wandered to the dark side. Unlike Buffy, Faith has no biological family and no watcher. Like a petulant younger sister, Faith yearns to establish her own identity free from Buffy's guidance and advice. For a while, she succeeds in luring Buffy into teen transgressions: dancing at clubs until all hours and, most importantly, reveling in the fun that slaying violence provides. For Faith, slaying is a primarily sexual release or, in some cases, foreplay (in one episode Xander loses his virginity to Faith after they fight some zombies together).

In fact, Faith embodies the very hedonistic impulses Buffy and Angel try so hard to squelch. Faith joins the Other Side (led by the evil mayor of Sunnydale) while Buffy and Angel continue to fight their sexual urges. Yet, despite such contrasts, Faith is in some ways not unlike Buffy, since she longs for the communal acceptance and larger purpose that have given Buffy's life meaning. Unfortunately, in Faith's case, such purpose entails a plan to destroy the world. With her dark hair (contrasted to Buffy's long, golden locks) and her combat boots (in contrast to Buffy's trendy clothes) Faith takes comfort in marginal emotions and experiences, mainly selfishness, callous disregard for others, and lusty violence. In fact, Faith eventually transforms into Buffy's foil, and she becomes the antislayer—still killing vampires, but for the sake of sport and personal alliances, not because of any sense of communal duty. Whereas Buffy and Angel had exercised terrific restraint to save the world, Faith disciplines her single-minded desire to kill Buffy in favor of a more thoroughgoing gain: to destroy the whole world, along with Buffy. Faith thus provides a counternarrative to Buffy, offering a glimpse of what Buffy's fate might have been had she succumbed to the temptations of self-indulgent rebelliousness.

Buffy and Angel end their relationship with one final consummation that strikes a blow against Faith and the selfishness she represents. Angel must drink Buffy's blood, an act that saves Angel's life, figured now as akin to helping the world. There's only one caveat: he can love Buffy from afar, but he can no longer be near her. In a highly erotic revisitation of the loss of Buffy's sexual virginity, Angel bites Buffy and effectively brings closure to their volatile relationship. Buffy's neck remains scarred, and the show suggests that just as Buffy's blood now flows through Angel's veins, so Buffy will remain attached to him. Their estrangement, however, marks a permanent transition in Buffy's life—not simply from high school to college, but from sometime solitary hunter to confirmed component of an energized group.

The final seasons of *Buffy* emphasized the strength and unity of Buffy's family, even in the face of severe ruptures. First, Buffy embarked upon a

disastrous affair with Spike, while Willow indulged her lust for vengeance against those who killed her lover, Tara. Both actions destabilized the cohesive family unit and threatened to destroy not only the social structure of Buffy's circle, but also the entire universe. Yet the series didn't stray far from its central themes, even as it showed the protagonists descending into the chaos of complicated sexual relationships and unchecked rage. In fact, the very last episode expanded Buffy's circle to include a team of young slayers-in-training who came together to help Buffy, once again, save the world. After an intense battle against forces of evil, Buffy and her friends survey the ravaged Sunnydale, and contemplate their future. Faith says to Buffy: "You're not the one and only chosen anymore. Just gotta live like a person. How's that feel?" Buffy simply gazes into the distance and smiles, and the scene fades to black, signaling the end of both Buffy's reign as slayer, and the show. By this point, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has come full circle, taking Buffy, and the viewers, back to a time in which "regular" life—a life where individuals could choose their own path and not sacrifice themselves to rescue civilization—was possible. At the same time, even as a smiling Buffy contemplates her freedom, it's clear that in order for her to live as she wishes, another alternative community of slayers and their cohorts has to exist.

The result of this renegotiation is that, by the end of the fifth season, Buffy performs the ultimate sacrifice, giving up her own life to save the world from destruction. This denouement assures the continuance of Buffy's community and of Angel's isolation. In so doing it affirms the mystical union of all members of the gothic republic, which emerges as the show's final goal. That said, Buffy is, of course, resurrected in season six, thus enabling yet another cycle of temptation and restraint, desire and duty, though this time in relation to a new lover, Spike.⁴ The show's thematic structure over several seasons remains remarkably static: the only thing that appears to change on the show is the villain who threatens Buffy's group. What remains fixed is the conceit of one group member's desires hurting the whole. At the same time, it maintains its interest in championing civic republicanism by appearing to resist traditional, hierarchical arrangements (there's never a clear-cut hero or heroine on *Buffy*) allowing less prominent characters such as Xander and Spike to take a turn as the moral center of the group.

Still running in syndication, the show remains one of the most innovative and subtly, but effectively, political on television, even as its parade of monstrous antagonists and reluctant antiheroines no longer seems as stunningly original as it once did. What appeared to be so subversive in *Buffy*'s early seasons—a show centering around a female with amazing physical prowess; a series of supernatural storylines highlighting very conventional

themes and moral lessons; a love affair between a vampire and a vampire slayer serving as the show's controlling metaphor—now seems part of an ideal civic world, where everyone has a valued role and selfish desire can transform itself into world-saving power within an alternative family unit.

Notes

1. The Internet community of *Buffy* fans, best represented by the official site (<http://buffy.com>), continues to thrive, even now that the show is longer on the air. During *Buffy*'s run, the hundreds of sites devoted to analyzing each episode encapsulated the show's role as both subversive television with goth appeal, and a model of healthy communities. *Buffy.com* contains summaries of all the episodes, descriptions and pictures of nearly every villain, past and present, an interactive game, and a selection of virtual postcards. However, during its heyday, the site's most popular section was its non-threaded message board, which archived a week's worth of messages and featured a core group of posters. While the show aired original episodes, these posters frequently made a point of separating themselves from those who posted on the show's other newsgroups and nearly every post ended with a series of tags and "shoutouts" (quotes from the show and a list of names and initials of fellow board visitors and friends the poster wanted to greet and acknowledge). As a result, the emphasis was on a well-established community (many had been posting regularly since the Web site began) that kept out "trolls" (those individuals who post merely to inflame or insult). Real debate, including a lively discussion that likened Angel/Buffy to Nabakov's Humbert Humbert/Lolita, peacefully co-existed with more frivolous discussion and games, like the "Hottie of the Month" polls. Those who visited the Bronze made a point of steering clear of other message boards, and often criticized its atmosphere as too combative. As one poster put it: "There aren't even any hugs. It's not like one big happy family. It's more like one big . . . opposite of happy family."
2. "At best, however, *Buffy* is Goth-lite. Most of the Gothic elements that draw connoisseurs to the genre—decadence, deviance, death—are mere window-dressing for the show's prime-time themes of teen trauma and adolescent angst if they're there at all" (Baddeley 2002, 104).
3. In addition to Early's, there are several feminist readings of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that touch on the gender dynamics of slayer lore and the show's reputation as a feminist, postmodern television show. Two of the most notable are Harts 2001 and Owen 1999.
4. In the sixth season, the show juxtaposes Buffy's secret sexual affair with Spike to Willow's dependence on more elaborate, dark magic.



THE CURE, THE COMMUNITY, THE CONTEMPT!



I have never been able to put my finger on exactly how I managed to “go goth.” I grew up in Scarborough, Maine, where there were no real goths after whom to fashion myself and no goth bands on the radio to inspire me. How did I even come to know that goth existed? What would have possessed me to build a life so far outside the mainstream?

In grammar school I longed for other children to be interested in me; by middle school, I longed to be interested in them. The more isolated I became from my peers, the more I looked to music to connect me to the world beyond myself. The first musical genre with which I identified myself in my early teens was glam metal. (Glam *metal*—Poison and Bon Jovi—should not be confused with glam *rock*—Bowie, T. Rex, etc.) It was the mid-1980s, and hair bands were everywhere. I was about thirteen when, inspired by the video for Mötley Crüe’s “Girls Girls Girls,” I decided that I wanted to be a stripper when I grew up. I started running with the young, apparently rebellious (though we were about as dorky-clean as kids could be) “glam metal scene,” where I had friends who made me laugh and gave me an excuse to dress up. There was enough energy in that music to get me on the dance floor, and of course, enough tears-on-the-guitar-strings ballads to indulge my adolescent angst. I loved the androgynous men, the sexuality-on-your-shirtsleeves attitude that surrounded that era of music. It made me desire, and it made me feel, or at least long to feel, desirable. My interest in metal was perhaps over-the-top but was otherwise unremarkable. After all, I was raised in a working-class family, and—as Chuck Klosterman has documented in his astute, hilarious, and absolutely on-target *Fargo Rock City* (2002)—glam metal was the music of the blue collar. Yet as my older “metal” friends began graduating from high school and getting jobs I knew I’d never want, it became harder to relate to the people around me. Almost

none went to college, and most of those who did dropped out after a semester or so, usually due to financial constraints. I began to drift away from glam metal music, but it didn't take long to find a more suitable musical identification.

My new home found me at age fifteen, when I saw my first Cure video on MTV. The music on their 1989 *Disintegration* album was like nothing I'd ever heard before. In this new sensory world, order and cacophony, harmony and distortion, joy and pain were combined into one gorgeous mass of energy and difficult emotion. Within weeks I had the fatigues, red lipstick, and black Doc Martens that would march me straight into gothdom. An older cousin, noting my rapid transformation, turned me on to a chemical-free alternative dance party at a club called Zootz in Portland, where I learned about artists like Skinny Puppy, Sisters of Mercy, Ministry, the Smiths, and the Cult. Zootz introduced me to more than new music; it showed me a new world full of people who not only related to music the way that I did but also combined passion for music culture with aspirations for higher education and upward mobility (which is perhaps why such music is sometimes called "college rock").

By the mid-1990s, I had moved to New York City on an academic scholarship to Barnard College and was spending every Saturday night at a midtown nightclub called (in an echo of the famous London precursor) the Batcave. The Batcave was a "regulars" party, where the same fifty or so "Cavers" would faithfully fill the room every weekend. Most of us fell within a ten-year age gap, and once we all got to know one another, Saturdays at the Batcave felt more like visiting a weekly family reunion than a nightclub. What made the Batcave so special for me in those days was the fact that we cared about and supported each other, fiercely and unconditionally, even after the music stopped. Any Caver in a band could count on me to be at every show, just as I knew I could expect them at my readings. I even mounted my senior thesis in theater at the Batcave with a generous amount of financial and promotional support from the venue's staff; their assistance was instrumental in earning me an A and the departmental cash prize.

The camaraderie I experienced at the Batcave was, as the music of the Cure had once been, unlike anything I had ever encountered. I didn't know I was capable of the level of connection I reached with so many in those tiny rooms. We celebrated together when one of us passed the bar exam, started a small business, or graduated from college. We mourned together when friends were lost. Romantic partners came and went, and sometimes were exchanged, but the discomforts that often wreak havoc in tight social groups rarely misshaped our circle for long. We were family, and no matter how upset we got with one another from time to time, our bonds remained

firmly intact. Even now, over ten years later, these are the people I turn to for support. One of them, in fact, is now my husband, and ours is far from the first Caver-Caver union to progress to that arena.

We were thrown out of our den when the Batcave closed for expansion in late 1997, and the disruption to our social fabric was significant. We went to other parties, but nothing felt like home. A long evening at a trendy bar for young executives found a handful of us in strategizing mode. As we sipped our kamikazes and rued the fact that we were, in fact, sipping kamikazes in the financial district, it became clear that something had to be done. It seemed we faced two choices: we could sit around and complain about the state of "the scene," or we could fix it. We decided on the latter. We had the drive, we wanted to dance, but most of all, we were lonely.

We settled on the name Contempt! because it best described our feeling toward the club fare that was being offered in New York at the time. Events in those heady days of the new economy seemed to take great pride in fabricating elaborate dress codes and exclusive policies. It was nearly impossible to make new friends among strangers. There were very important people, and then there was everyone else. What's interesting is that, at the time, by virtue of the years we'd been in the scene and the connections we'd made, we were actually among those privileged scenesters. But we felt that we'd rather pay to get into a club with an open, positive attitude than be "comped" into clubs that prided themselves on exclusivity. We wanted to go to goth clubs to escape the rat race, not to participate in one.

What we thought New York needed was some scene solidarity, so we began brainstorming about how to make our party as inclusive as possible. Guest lists were the first things to go. For our first year in business, even our on-site staff, from the doorpeople to the DJs, was required to pay to get in, not only because we needed the cash as a young organization, but also because we wanted no social division between staff and clientele. A low, \$5 cover charge would allow people with tighter budgets to become a part of the scene. One of the most heated debates regarded the adopting of a dress code; while some argued in favor of dress codes as a safety measure to ensure that "people off the street" wouldn't come and harass the "locals," we ultimately decided that any dress code created a hierarchy that was unnecessary and counterproductive to our inclusive mission. Our DJs would play requests; the prematched DJ setlists that had become commonplace at other clubs would be unacceptable. We decided on a BYOCD (bring your own CD) policy that would enable patrons to make requests and thus open our floor up to a wide range of music and give local bands a venue for club exposure. Our DJ contributed his skill as a computer programmer to create a play-

list monitor that displayed title and artist information for each song as it was being played in order to further assist in promoting local bands and to make it easier for people to identify and purchase new music in the genre.

We took our ideas venue shopping and got an offer from a legendary underground club space called Mother. Each of us donated about \$20 toward the required \$400 deposit, and then we hit the streets, begging everyone from our brothers to our bosses to come have a drink at the party. We survived our first event and earned enough money to have a second, then a third, then a fourth. As we met with increasing success, we saw the potential for Contempt! to extend beyond the visions of its founders. Our next task was to give the organization a clear and formal structure so that its foundation could survive long after the final charter member dropped off the committee.

When officers were elected, I was honored with the first official chairship. I immediately set to work on a checks and balances system. The first component of the system would ensure that no single person had the authority to make a decision that substantively affected the event, including the chair. The second component established guidelines for handling funds that would ensure that every total, from individual door shifts to entire event profits, was verified by at least two separate parties. Because this venture grew out of so many friendships, I did not want there to ever be a reason to suspect a committee member of financial wrongdoing. I also developed our voting system to ensure that a wide variety of opinions and tastes would be involved in the creation of our events from its very foundation.

What I used to call "The Little Party That Could" has succeeded beyond my wildest expectations, which has turned out to be both a blessing and a curse. At Mother, we were thrilled to get one hundred people in the door. Now we draw between three hundred and five hundred, which presents a new set of administrative and ideological challenges. Venues that are suitable for these "midrange" numbers in New York City are diminishing for a variety of reasons, and the loss of those venues poses a significant threat to the development of any countercultural music-based community. The venues that remain are growing prohibitively expensive, and most desire weekly commitments from their promoters. Our monthly format thus forces us to move frequently. Because we believe that it is unfair to ask a volunteer staff to oversee the demands of a weekly event, we instead must embark upon frequent venue searches that get longer and longer and force our events to become fewer and farther between. But the harder it gets for Contempt! to survive, the harder we work to make it happen.

Although we try to accept the impossibility of pleasing everyone at all

times, I think everyone on the committee feels at least slightly defeated when we hear that a person or group has left the event unsatisfied. Still, even when they are hissing at each other on Contempt!'s online posting board, it seems clear to me that our guests believe in our mission and are not only reaping the benefits of the changes we have made to the New York goth scene but are proud to have had a part in making those changes stick. In fact, I believe that the most heated exchanges on the board are a direct result of the passion that people feel toward the event.

I am proud to say that eight years and over eighty events later, Contempt! is still here to give restless souls a place to call home, and, incredibly, our initial \$20 investments are still footing the bill. I attribute our success to our belief in our mission and to our sensitivity to our guests as individuals. We know that the girl who brings in a different "hair metal" CD every month probably looks forward to Contempt!—since we are likely the only venue willing to humor her with those three minutes of dancing bliss. When a local industrial band wants to test its new single on a pulsing dance floor, they can depend on Contempt! to give it a spin. Most important, no matter how crowded we become, we still make it a point to say hello to the new guy standing alone in the corner. Yesterday he might have been a banker or a biker or a bikini model (or even a misfit from Scarborough, Maine), but tonight, if we make him feel comfortable enough, he might just be himself.

This essay has been as much about my own journey to social acceptance as about the steps that I have taken to make that journey a bit easier for people like me in the future. When conventional ideas about peer pressure and conformity are reconfigured, a sense of belonging to a specific social community can provide the support necessary for embracing and exploring one's own individuality. While it is true that the gothic community has its own social mores, from dress code to dance-floor etiquette, I believe that the individuals attracted to this subculture as a way of life are far less rigid about the idea of conformity than the casual observer or scene tourist may suspect. While our shared aesthetics may be read to imply a certain homogeneity, the reality is that we're probably as diverse as any large urban, college-educated population in the United States. While it may not be surprising that many of my friends are actors, musicians, DJs, and artists, eyebrows are often raised when I reveal to the curious that my goth circle also includes lawyers, airline pilots, doctors, psychotherapists, editors, professors, computer programmers, and small business owners. We are white, black, Native American, Asian. We come from upper-, middle-, and lower-class economic backgrounds. We are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, agnostic, Wiccan, atheist, and yes, as the stereotypes suggest, even Satanist. What we

share, somehow, is a limited set of norms, values, and aesthetics that differs in some ways from mainstream America.

I am a gothic person because gothic people make sense to me. I understand their etiquette because it is my etiquette. I can appreciate their struggles and aspirations because they are generally similar to my own struggles and aspirations. In truth, I could do without the harassment I still get when I walk down the average American street in my gothic attire, and I sometimes wonder if it's OK to be safely into my adult years and to still consider myself a member of a scene. But at the end of the day, I take great comfort and maybe even a little pride in feeling that I have a place in the world (call it what you will—a scene, a club, a group of friends, a support network, a subculture), and further, that maybe I've created a place in that world for someone else who needed one.

Note

For information about the current status of the Contempt! Organization, visit www.contemptny.org.



PAUL HODKINSON

“WE ARE ALL INDIVIDUALS,
BUT WE’VE ALL GOT
THE SAME BOOTS ON!”

Traces of Individualism within a Subcultural Community



Scholars have recently raised extensive challenges against the understanding of youth cultural practices as consisting of committed involvement in collective groupings. In particular, critics have questioned use of traditional theories of subculture to understand youth lifestyles, arguing that such theories have overemphasized the role of collective norms and boundaries, leading to insufficient focus upon features such as internal diversity, external overlaps, or the movement of individual young people between groups (Muggleton 1997; Bennett 1999). From this postmodern theoretical vantage, young people’s identities are regarded as multiple and ephemeral. Youths do not form fixed, mutually exclusive subcultures, but draw from and cross-cut various style categories at different stages in their personal development. The use of subculture as a means to understand the lifestyles of young people, then, is rejected at least partially on the grounds that it underestimates the extent to which youth cultures have become individualized. David Muggleton, for example, has argued that contemporary youth culture is characterized by “individual subculturalists moving quickly and freely from one style to another as they wish. . . . they do not have to worry about contradictions between their selected subcultural identities, or agonize over the correct mode of dress, since there are no longer any correct interpretations” (1997, 198).

Such a view can be compared to the broader processes of individualization described by prominent social theorists (e.g., Bauman 2000; Beck-Gernsheim and Beck 2001). For example, Zygmunt Bauman argues that it

has become increasingly rare for the lifestyles of individuals to be dominated by the demands of any particular collective grouping. Instead, individuals float freely between a plethora of ephemeral, “until further notice” allegiances, always seeking to keep their options open by avoiding significant commitment to anything in particular (2000, 148).

Yet the notion that commitment to substantive collectivities has been replaced by fickle, individualized patterns of identity was not borne out in my three years of ethnographic and interview research on the British goth scene. Rather, my research suggested the resilience of characteristics that are often associated with subcultures: for example, collective distinctiveness, shared identity, group commitment, and autonomy (Hodkinson 2002, 28–33). That said, though the goth scene placed discernibly collective demands upon its members, it simultaneously accommodated certain elements of individual difference that, however limited, were of importance to participants. Drawing on research findings from the late 1990s as well as more recent data, this chapter explores some of the ways in which goths sought to assert elements of individual sovereignty without threatening the collective properties of their subculture. The point of such analysis is not to celebrate either individualized or collective patterns of identity, but rather to explore the nature of the relationship between the two. By way of doing so, I will examine three crucial aspects of the goth scene in which this relationship manifested itself: shared ideals and identity, stylistic practices, and recent developments in goths’ use of online communication.

Ideals and Identity: Collective Commitment or Individual Self Expression?

One of the telltale signs of a substantive subcultural community is the existence of a set of shared ideals and values that are espoused consistently from one individual participant to the next (Hodkinson 2002, 30). In cases when shared ideals emphasize the importance of commitment to the group, the subcultural community becomes even more central to the lives of its participants. Consistent with such a scenario, the interviewees in my research frequently celebrated their level of dedication to the goth scene as an identifiable set of shared styles and practices. Such committed involvement to goth was often contrasted with the perceived trend-following fickleness of mainstream youth. For example, Richard celebrates his belief that, because it involved conscious divergence from mainstream practices, involvement in the goth scene was, by definition, a committed choice: “It wasn’t just music for background listening or whatever . . . because you’re not being like everyone else—you’re making a concerted effort to be like that [goth], therefore that’s what’s important to you . . . you obviously mean it.”

Like Richard, many goths in my study expressed commitment to the subculture through their shared passions and conscious identifications with one another. This collective identity, which was usually regarded as more important to them than any other element of their lives, often resulted in the expression of fierce feelings of loyalty, especially when the subculture or its members were felt to be under attack from the media or from members of the general public. In one interview, this collective defensiveness was illustrated when I directly asked how important involvement in the goth scene was to the respondent's overall sense of identity:

CARL: It is very important. . . . I do take it all very seriously. Like on Ricki Lake when they had a load of vampires on . . . there was goths too, and they were slagging them off, and I was having none of that—I was swearing at the TV.

PH: But why, though? You don't know these people.

CARL: Well, I know, it doesn't matter . . . to me I've got a very camara-derie-type attitude. It's a sense of like-minded—all these like-minded people have to look out for each other.

The importance of group commitment, as a collective ideal, can also be demonstrated with reference to the ways goths classified and judged one another. The highest levels of status, or what Sarah Thornton (1995) terms "subcultural capital," usually were afforded to those who demonstrated the greatest devotion to the goth scene—whether through longevity of participation, the perceived quality of their record collection or appearance, or the extent of their knowledge about the subculture.¹ Conversely, many expressed a dislike of "teeny-goths," or those who were deemed to display insufficiently intense involvement, usually because of their inadequate knowledge or experience. Some respondents said that they specifically avoided pubs and bars that were known to be frequented by such individuals. In one such case, my probing for an explanation prompted the following exchange:

PH: Why don't you like teeny-goths?

NAOMI: Well, there was one lass who comes out in Leeds who wears like a witch's hat-type thing and I was on the dance floor one time and she came up and said, "Oooh, you're a goth, aren't you?" . . . and she's like, "What goth stuff do you like—do you like the Sisters?" And I said, "Well, no, because I liked them when I was about fourteen," do you know what I mean? And she goes, "Oh, well, you can't like many goth bands, then!" . . . I mean, I guess they've got to start somewhere.

Naomi's anecdote indicated disapproval of what she deemed to be a naive interpretation of the goth look and a narrow and undeveloped knowledge of goth music.

Goth respondents consistently emphasized the importance of collective commitment to the scene, whether expressed through a strong sense of goth identification, through frequent contrasts to "normal" youth, or through the distribution of subcultural capital. Significantly, however, respondents simultaneously stressed ideals such as individual freedom and self-expression. Thus, even as they celebrated their intense dedication to a set of communal values, goths sometimes talked enthusiastically about the diversity of their subculture, celebrating it as a refuge from normalizing peer pressure. Such sentiments resembled the ideologies of authenticity and self-expression that Simon Frith (1981) has associated with rock music. For example, I received the following responses to a self-completion questionnaire conducted at a goth festival:

In your own words, please explain: What is the goth scene all about?

NIK: Self-expression—I think to me this sums it up. All the music, people and culture are so refreshing and free.

SARA: What ever you want it to be.

ROB: An entire culture where anything goes.

The desire to emphasize individual freedom as a positive quality of the goth scene also was illustrated in some of the interviews I conducted. In the following example, the respondent seeks explicitly to reject characterizations of the subculture as a standardized collective style enforced by peer pressure: "A lot of people have a stereotypical idea of a goth night, where it's black frilly shirts, black boots, long coats, and long black hair, but even in the goth scene its a lot more diverse than that—you can wear anything." Such celebratory comments about individual difference were somewhat intermittent and, as already indicated, were rather contradicted by the emphasis also placed—often by the same respondents—upon group commitment and conformity. Yet the apparent desire on the part of otherwise card-carrying subcultural participants, to play down the influence of shared norms and play up the assertion of individual sovereignty, demonstrates a fascinating tension in goth subcultural discourse. It may reflect a defensive consciousness among goths that, although their tastes and practices made them distinctive in a collective sense, the apparent similarities of style within their group rendered them somewhat vulnerable to the very accusations of sheep-like behavior that they sometimes leveled against mainstream youth.

The tendency for members of apparently collective youth groupings to emphasize individual self-expression rather than conformity to collective norms has been noted in a number of recent studies and interpreted in contrasting ways. According to Thornton, the tendency of U.K. clubbers to distinguish between the individual diversity of their crowd and the homogeneity of mainstream culture exemplifies a collective ideology that should be treated with skepticism. By contrast, Muggleton regards the tendency of his punk- and goth-affiliated respondents to emphasize personal distinctiveness rather than collective belonging, as clear evidence of the emergence of fundamentally liminal and individualized patterns of youth identity. Such conflicting interpretations suggest the importance of a cross-verifying method in which respondents' self-descriptions are compared to the observable details of their everyday participation. We already have seen that goths' claims to individual difference were offset by their simultaneous discourse about group commitment and collective identification. In what follows I will demonstrate that collective pressure seems to exert greater influence on individual practices than is implied by the expressed emphasis on freedom. Yet though the goth rhetoric of individualism is certainly exaggerated, it is not entirely fictitious: for, to a limited degree, traces of individual difference permeate subcultural activities and interactions.

Stylistic Practices: Individual Versions of Collective Style

First and foremost, my analysis of the stylistic practices of goths revealed that there were significant limits to freedom of expression and individual diversity. While I have discussed the somewhat complex details of goth style in depth elsewhere (Hodkinson 2002, 41–59), it is sufficient here to say that the vast majority of goths in my study conformed to the stylistic norms of the subculture. Such conformity was both general (e.g., an overall emphasis on darkness) and particular (e.g., the recurrence of similar and sometimes identical articles of clothing, jewelry, or hairstyles). Moreover, even as they offered sporadic celebratory comments about their individuality, many goths I interviewed also acknowledged that adherence to established stylistic regimes was of paramount importance to their stylistic choices. For example, many described the ways in which they scrutinized the practices of other goths as a means to ensuring the subcultural appropriateness of their own clothing, hair, makeup, or jewelry. Thus, the following female respondent relied upon the style and clothes of a particular friend as a means to ensure suitability: "Clothing—I think to be honest I used to copy Fiona—I used to nick her clothes—you just found a style that was good enough to think, 'Well, that's acceptable in goth society,' and that was that. . . . It's more

important to fit in in goth society than anywhere else really. You have to actually think about what you're wearing and whether it would be suitable."

That goths fit in with one another on the basis of collective standards of acceptability was also demonstrated strikingly by the speed at which they tended to react to the presence of apparent outsiders in goth pubs or night-clubs. On more than one occasion during my research within such spaces, individuals or groups of people deemed conventional or mainstream in terms of their appearance (usually as a result of blue jeans, sportswear, or some combination thereof) were quietly derided by groups of goths sitting nearby. The importance of shared standards about goth identity was also illustrated by the frequency with which questions about such standards became the subject of conversation. Internet discussions, for example, would continually focus upon the classification of individuals, bands, DJs, items of clothing, or venues on the basis of their consistency with subcultural norms. For example, the subcultural legitimacy of the music and appearance of chart-topping artists such as Marilyn Manson and Evanescence was frequently the subject of intense debate. While the presence of open disagreements within some such conversations demonstrates that norms were negotiable rather than fixed, the regular occurrence of such exchanges is testament to the underlying importance of communal regimes of taste to the discussants involved.

Yet, in spite of various tendencies toward conformity, elements of individual difference were borne out in some of the finer details of goths' stylistic practices. Goths often sought to develop their own individual look within the accepted parameters of the subcultural style. In most cases, those who directly copied the appearance of others or adopted an overpredictable "textbook" goth appearance did not gain a great deal of status or self-respect. Rather, the way to maximize one's subcultural capital was to achieve an appropriate balance between fitting in with collective norms and introducing one's own subtle variations and additions. One interviewee provides a useful illustration: he explains how he used the makeup style of another individual, not as a model directly to copy, but as a resource to help him gradually develop his own variations on the goth style: "I seen all his makeup and I was well impressed—I thought, 'Wow, that looks so stylish, I'd love to be able to do that. What I'll do is I'll buy some makeup and start wearing it and hopefully with practice I'll get the skill and I'll be able to do my own designs.'" Such elements of individual difference and creativity ranged from distinctive use of cosmetics, jewelry, or other accessories to the incorporation of garments associated with other music scenes or with mainstream culture. In all cases, the crucial point was successfully to place such individu-

ally transgressive elements within an overall look that retained significant familiarity with collective conventions.

The manifestation of subtle individual transgressions within a largely collective style can be further illustrated through the shopping practices of goths. Such practices often consisted of the purchase of somewhat standard-issue subcultural clothes, marketed and sold as such in specialty stores. There were many examples of such clothing, but, during the late 1990s, particularly common examples included black shiny PVC pants, black T-shirts with band logos and "new rock" biker-style boots. However, in addition to such standardized subcultural goods, most goths also scoured markets, charity shops, and even main-street stores for rather more miscellaneous items (Hodkinson 2002). Although compatibility with the goth style as a whole was always a key consideration, the less conventional garments enabled individuals to develop the more unique elements of their appearance. The successful incorporation of such foreign elements into an individualized version of the goth look was a subtle art. While minor additions to the established style were visible among many participants, significant transgressions tended to appear among those with greater experience and confidence. Nevertheless, that the ultimate goal was to convey a somewhat individualized version of the collective style emphasizes that although they were exaggerated, rhetorical statements about stylistic individuality were not entirely at odds with subcultural practice. Furthermore, far from constituting a threat to the overall cohesion of the subculture, such individual transgressions created an element of diversity and stylistic dynamism important to the enduring appeal of the goth scene to its participants.

Online Interaction: From Public to Private Space?

Just as it was evident in their stylistic practices, so the existence of subtle forms of individualism in a collective environment can be illustrated via recent developments in the online interactions of goths. In previous writings, I have alluded to the overall dominance of goth Internet communications by a network of clearly defined and relatively exclusive collective subcultural spaces, most notably in the form of a network of goth-oriented discussion groups (Hodkinson 2002 and 2003). Including national Usenet newsgroups such as *uk.people.gothic* and local e-mail lists such as *brumgoth*, *sogoth*, and *lexgoth*, these online forums were explicitly centered on the goth scene as a collective point of reference. This subcultural orientation produced a distinctively communal feel to the interactions that took place within such virtual spaces. In the same way that group standards influenced decisions about clothing, hair, and makeup, the manner in which goths communicated on discussion forums centered on their awareness of the

need to comply with shared interests. Meanwhile, gray areas over the standards of acceptability—with respect to online behavior and general subcultural norms—were the subject of vigorous discussion and argument. In this sense, the goth scene's network of collective online spaces acted as something of a group-specific public sphere—or, as Todd Gitlin might prefer, a "public sphericule" (1998, 170).

During the years that followed the completion of my original research on the goth scene, however, a significant shift took place in the organization of online communications among British goths. Over an approximately two-year period, increasing numbers of goths stopped using communal discussion forums and instead began to communicate via individually controlled personal Web logs on an interface called Live Journal. A Web log, or "blog," is an interactive Web-based journal, which is updated regularly by an individual owner and usually offers the facilities for reader comments and for the use of hyperlinks from one blog to another (see Blood 2002). The speed with which most British goths had transferred their online communications to blogs prompted me to begin a new phase of research, utilizing both direct observations of Live Journal interactions and face-to-face interviews with users. While this research is ongoing, I can present some preliminary observations.

Although each blog was centered upon an individual author, it rapidly became apparent that goths were employing the Live Journal platform to reproduce a relatively insular pattern of interactions centered on their subculture. Notably, the opportunity for threads of reader comments to emerge in response to each blog entry functioned to recreate elements of community (Kahn and Kellner 2003, 311; Shirky 2003). In the goth blogs I observed, the effect was not only that individual entries tended to be followed by interactive conversations, but also that entries often were created with the express intention of generating such interactions. Of equal importance was the ability on Live Journal to use hyperlinks to connect together individual blogs, something which meant that, rather than being isolated, individuals usually were connected to relatively stable clusters or networks of people, all of whom read and commented on one another's writings. The ease of interacting with others was intensified by a "friends page" facility that enabled users to view, on a single and regularly updated Web page, all the most recent content posted by a designated list of friends.

As a consequence, rather than being random and sporadic, the threads of comments that followed each of the entries on an individual blog tended to involve a consistent group of individuals who regularly kept up to date with each other's entries. Crucially, in the case of goths, these clusters tended overwhelmingly to be dominated by fellow subcultural participants. Since

goths had migrated to the Live Journal platform en masse, they had, to a significant degree, used its comments and friends page facilities to reproduce existing social networks that previously had been supported by on-line discussion groups or face-to-face interactions. The result was that the personal blogs of goths overwhelmingly were linked to, read by, and commented upon by other goths. Furthermore, the chains of links between goth blogs meant that, collectively, they formed an identifiable subnetwork on Live Journal that was somewhat detached from other users of the platform. As Jill put it: "It tends to stay within the subculture—you don't tend to go outside [the subculture] more. It is cliquy in the sense that goths stick with goths . . . so they're going to be more related [on Live Journal] to other goths than they are just to anybody else that has a Live Journal. It does get very closed in that respect."

In spite of the clustering together of goths on Live Journal, it remains significant that the vast majority of communication on the platform took place on the personal blogs of individuals rather than in the public or communal spaces assigned to the goth subculture in a collective sense.² Although they tended to be read overwhelmingly by members of the goth subculture, individual blogs were regarded as the sovereign territory of their owners. This meant that, in comparison with the collective discussion forums which previously dominated their online communication, users tended to feel at liberty to post a wide range of content of importance to them as an individual, rather than to confine themselves to collective subcultural concerns. Kate explained the difference to me: "When you're posting on a mailing list you try to make sure that people who are on that mailing list will want to read it, that they're going to like it, that they're going to enjoy it. When you post to your journal, you don't care. You know it's your space."

The relative freedom afforded to individuals to go beyond the collective agenda of their subculture in the content of their blog posts was reinforced by an understanding that, consistent with the conceptualization of blogs as individual territory, readers must respect the agenda of their host. As a result, content often tended to include various facets of the personal life, interests, and activities of individual authors, only some of which was directly relevant to the goth scene as a collective entity. While the desire to interest readers and generate comments no doubt acted as an incentive to focus on matters relevant to the goth community from time to time, there was little to dissuade individuals from posting personally distinctive reflections. Jill told me, "It's more personal—people just blabber on about themselves and most of the time they don't restrict it in any way. . . . When you post to a newsgroup or a mailing list, if you start warbling on . . . people

don't want to read that. So [on Live Journal] they don't have to worry about keeping on topic or keeping something that will appeal to the masses, they'll find something to write about themselves."

As with their individualizing variations on stylistic norms, the use of personal blogs as a means of online communication enabled goths to express a degree of difference without significantly undermining the cohesiveness of subcultural community. Interestingly, the speed with which goths had transferred most of their online communications to a more personal format demonstrates both enduring individualism and subcultural cohesiveness. While it is clear that greater levels of individual control enhanced the appeal of personal blogs, the mass movement to and collective patterns of use within the Live Journal interface reinforced the close-knit stability of communicative networks within the subculture.

Conclusion

There is a clear link between the intermittent desire to "talk up" the importance of individuality in the goth scene, the creation of subtle individual variations on the goth style, and the apparent preference for a somewhat individualized mode of online communication. All of these examples demonstrate that, even within a subculture dominated by shared values, identity, and group commitment, participants keenly sought to assert limited elements of individual difference. By combining a degree of individual autonomy with the close-knit sense of belonging and collective passion of a substantive community, goths were, to a degree, able to enjoy "the best of both worlds"—something that made subcultural participation particularly fulfilling. Crucially, the elements of individual difference identified in this study seem to have enhanced rather than jeopardized participants' collective commitment to and enthusiasm for the subculture.

Notes

The quotation that I use in this title is drawn from an interview cited in Hodkinson 2002, 67.

1. The notion of subcultural capital was first coined by Sarah Thornton (1995), in a study of club cultures in Britain. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) more generalized notion of "cultural capital," Thornton's use of "subcultural capital" refers to the extent to which an individual possesses status-inducing qualities or characteristics, within the value system of a particular grouping.
2. There were also collective blog spaces on the Live Journal platform. These were known as Live Journal "communities" but were rarely used by those involved in my study.

Part VI



PRACTICES





THAT OBSCURE OBJECT OF DESIRE REVISITED

Poppy Z. Brite and the Goth Hero as Masochist



Poppy Z. Brite's importance to the goth subculture was best expressed for me through this anonymous response I received to a 2001 online questionnaire: "Do I read Poppy Z? I ALREADY TOLD YOU I WAS A GOTH!"¹ Anyone with more than a passing acquaintance with goths should recognize as warranted my respondent's astonishment that I would need to ask. Although Brite has been and remains enormously popular with goths of all sexual and gender identifications, my focus here will be on the appeal of her fiction to young women, both inside and outside that culture. I will look at some of the major (sub)cultural contexts that determine the reception of Brite's novels within a reading community of young women, especially, but not limited to, those who identify themselves as goths. Interpretation of the novels is enhanced by reading their representations of sexuality and gender without imposing some of the most common interpretive frames used by critics working on youth cultures now, because assumptions about sexuality fundamental to these approaches do not always match concepts of sexual/gender identity in the goth subculture from which the texts arise. Reading the sexual dynamics of the novels in ways suggested by the subculture that contains them can reveal much about the attraction of sadomasochism for postmillennial youth and the meanings assigned to gender in the contemporary goth(ic) aesthetic, both crucial aspects of the formation of a large number of young women's gender and sexual identities because the late 1980s popularization of goth has given it tremendous influence on youth cultures.

Brite's novels might initially seem a strange place for an examination of the display of the masochistic male body as erotic object for women, since passionate attractions and affairs between males are central while females are peripheral—at best—in her work. But consideration of some aspects of the goth subculture that contextualize Brite's fiction helps explain the importance of the female spectators who sometimes figure as characters within the texts and whom we can assume, for reasons I will discuss, make up a significant part of each novel's audience.

Goth scenes are increasingly filled with male masochistic spectacles explicitly staged for females' as well as males' enjoyment. If I wanted to comment on my local goth scene in Portland, Oregon, I might discuss the 1997 Impulsive Theater production of *Titus Andronicus* reimagined as the story of Tamara, queen of the Goths, dressed as the ruler of Fetish Night and topping a collection of eager male goth club kids. Or if I wanted to cover the national scene I might comment on Marilyn Manson, who continues to publicly identify himself with goth, discussing the implications of his "confession," in a *Rolling Stone* interview, that he fell in love with Rose McGowan after seeing her play the aggressive and adored girlfriend of a weak, vulnerable boy who is beaten to death in the Gregg Araki film *The Doom Generation* (Heath 1998, 38). However, the enthusiasm my young informants on goth subcultural scenes showed for such developments was negligible beside their passion for Brite, whom they dubbed the true queen of the goths.

If Brite is considered essential to their goth identities by many of the young, she returns the favor in her first two novels, *Lost Souls* (1992) and *Drawing Blood* (1993), which are set partly in a New Orleans populated almost entirely by goth club kids, with a few disagreeable parental figures thrown in for dramatic effect, and mainly in Missing Mile, North Carolina, a small town in which the only major business seems to be a club called the Sacred Yew, refuge for "the forlorn, bewildered teenagers who had never asked to be born and now wished they were dead, the misfits, the rejects" (1993, 27). "Crowds of thin children in black," "omnipresent children in black," recognizable to readers as goths, appear throughout Brite's work (1992, 310, 102). *Lost Souls* shows us "kids with long dark hair and eyeliner, kids with razor scars on their wrists, kids already sick of life" in Missing Mile (193), and thronging the streets of New Orleans, "kids wearing black clothes, black lipstick and eyeliner. Silver crosses, daggers, razor blades dangled from their wrists and earlobes. . . . Deathers: kids who loved the night, loved the bands whose music spoke of dark beauty and fragile mortality" (302). In *Exquisite Corpse* (1996), a prowling serial killer finds his favorite café "packed with a young Gothic crowd tonight, resplendent in their monochromatic

regalia, the myriad textures of teased hair, torn lace, fishnet, and crushed velvet more fascinating to the eye than colour” (175). And in *The Crow: The Lazarus Heart* (1998), businesses like the coffeehouse Pained Expression and the PaperCut gallery are filled with goth patrons, “androgynous bodies in latex and leather and fishnet stockings. Faces painted white as skulls, eyes as dark as empty sockets, bits of metal and bone protruding from lips and eyebrows, jewelry like the debris of an industrial accident” (79).

Brite’s novels are also always arranged around a central figure who is above all else a goth, whom we may see, at some point in the narrative, singing in front of a goth band. He always has black hair, natural or dyed, a pale white face with heavily blackened eyes and a body marked with scars of his own and/or others’ making. The physical characteristics of these boys are described in lush detail, with great emphasis on their delicacy and vulnerability. True to classic gothic convention for heroines, they are always at risk, under threat of death from the forces of evil. And this evil is consistently connected to patriarchal figures who represent a masculine identification synonymous with real or spiritual death. In *Lost Souls* Nothing is seduced by a band of vampires and in danger of being destroyed by their coldly vicious leader, Zillah, who happens to be the father who abandoned him before his birth. In *Drawing Blood* Zach, an abused child turned computer hacker, joins Trevor in his struggle against his father’s murderous ghost. In *Exquisite Corpse*, Tran, a boy cast out on the streets by his homophobic father, is targeted as the ideal victim by a pair of psychotic killers, one of whom he hopes to bond with as a substitute for Luke, the older lover whom he lost to AIDS-induced problems. In *The Crow*, Benny is killed by Stanley Hudson/Joseph Lethe/Jordan, a maniac who believes he has a mission to eliminate boys who commit “gender transgression” (1998, 198), and Benny’s transsexual twin, Lucrece, is under attack from the same man. While the policing of boys and young men’s gender identity is equated with deathly danger from bad and powerful adult males in all four novels, the connection is made most explicitly in *The Crow*, where “the man named for rivers” tirelessly seeks to find and eradicate each “sexless creature that would hide itself in the world of men and women, the black and white world of opposites and opposition” (10). To him androgyny is “alien, viral,” and he is “the foil who stands for order against their chaos,” a perspective that marks him as himself the sort of “monstrosity” he believes gay and transgendered males to be (10, 182; emphasis Brite’s). In these horror novels, forced gender conformity seems to be the ultimate horror. And the most powerful form of resistance is a male masochism that requires refusal of conventional masculine identification.

Because Brite's work consistently valorizes gender fluidity, an optimistic reader could easily take her novels' popularity as a sign that gender is being radically revised by the young. Yet such optimism is not often found among prominent gender theorists discussing youth cultures, especially when male masochism features as a major technology of change in gender identity construction, as I will argue it does in Brite's novels.² To discuss male masochism as useful and important to women's sexual liberation is a vexed project, because as Linda S. Kaufman points out, "male heterosexual submissives . . . constitute a substantial subculture, unacknowledged, because their existence defies too many taboos" (1998, 21). She identifies among these taboos the exposure that not only is binary gender difference "neither innate nor natural," but also that feminist theories founded on a concept of heterosexuality in which "man is [inevitably] the oppressor, woman the victim" still influences both academic and mainstream discourses (26). Male masochistic performance, whether heterosexual or gay, Kaufman claims, expresses an "antiaesthetic" that threatens the very "ideology of romantic love" that has been traditionally so disabling to women but still, as she demonstrates, ironically underlies the feminist critiques of pornographic representations of sexuality as a violation of women's putatively different, less aggressive sense of the erotic (60). Within a schema that defines male sexuality as essentially objectifying and invasive and female sexuality as essentially nonviolent and antiobjectifying, women cannot be seen as benefiting from observing the enactment of men's masochism.

If we understand the code of mainstream romance, as Angela McRobbie (2000) does, as "the girl's reply to male sexuality" in which aggression and penetration of the body are devalued in favor of warm emotional connection and gentle nurturing (86), then it is apparent that, because of their conflation of sadomasochism with romance, Brite's novels offer young female readers a radical departure from what the dominant cultural ideology persistently identifies as their pleasure. The novels' consistent concern with the masochism of boys and men makes young women seem even more unlikely as fans, if we follow tradition and understand girls as sweeter and gentler than males. In short, Kaufman's view of female dominant/male submissive erotics as subversive of gender norms importantly foregrounds the ways texts like Brite's challenge what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988) call majoritarian language, the language through which binary gender identities are conferred.

According to Deleuze and Guattari's theory of majoritarian languages and literatures, these forms express the identities that result from the coding of experience by cultural and societal power structures.³ In its engagement

with male masochism, Brite's fiction fits Deleuze and Guattari's definition of a minoritarian literature. Instead of affirming the universalized identities that best serve existent power structures, of which the binary gender system is the most familiar, minoritarian literatures create identities that resist conformity to bourgeois norms through their insistence on the particularity of sexual experience (1988, 105–6). As Claire Colebrook explains, "A minoritarian politics does not have a pre-given (or transcendent) measure or norm for inclusion or identity" (2002, 117). The full potential of female dominant/male submissive S-M to subvert gender binarism is unintelligible within majoritarian language, where masculinity invariably signifies the power to dominate and femininity denotes inescapable vulnerability. Its practices confound majoritarian codes not by reversing or inverting them, but by suggesting the basic performativity of gender identity. Thus S-M is, as Deleuze and Guattari frequently assert, revolutionary in its opposition to the deployments of sexuality dictated by the dominant culture, for "no society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised" (1983, 116).

Interestingly, Deleuze himself, so brilliant on the subversive power of male masochism, could be seen as a bit under the sway of dominant discourses in his reading of the dominatrix figure as a sort of ventriloquist's dummy in *Masochism: An Interpretation of Coldness and Cruelty* (1971), his study of Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, the novel on which the definition of masochism was based. If we view heterosexual interaction conventionally, that is, as inevitably determined by the male partner's desire, then it would necessarily follow that the woman's place in the sadomasochistic scenario would be that of duped tool, or puppet. Describing the appearance of such figures in literary texts, Deleuze writes: "The masochistic hero . . . dresses her for the part and prompts the harsh words she addresses to him. It is the victim who speaks through the mouth of his torturer" (22).

The irrepressibly playful Angela Carter picks up this image and spins a feminist fable out of it in her short story "The Loves of Lady Purple" (1974), in which a masochistic puppeteer "reveal[s] his passions through a medium other than himself and this [is] his didactic vedette, the puppet, Lady Purple" (27). His possession of the demonic marionette allows him to stage scenes of female sadism and male submission onto death. But one day she magically comes to life, tears out "the strings that moored her," and begins to enact "her own desire" (38). In Carter's tale, as in her study, *The Sadeian Woman* (1978), while male desire is seen as the initial occasion for female sadism, that sadism is recognized as a force in its own right, not merely a complementary response. Goth fiction takes recognition of female

sadism further, as is evident in the writings of Thomas Ligotti, heralded by many goths as the successor to H. P. Lovecraft.⁴

In "Eye of the Lynx" (1996), Ligotti's surreal tale of a confrontation in "The House of Chains" between "an enchanted puppet" and the dominatrix who manipulates him, the reversal of the puppet imagery culminates with the protagonist's plea that she recognize his importance to her own fantasy life so that together they can leave the brothel's "tinsellated side-show" (77). Ligotti's vision of sadomasochism centers on the romantic, if also disquieting, union of those who quite simply "want the same things" (78). His masochist, unlike Carter's self-defeating puppeteer, is an artist and hero "doing away with gratuitous barriers" between, among other things, the two genders (78). This view of the dynamics between masochist and sadist is supported by Karmen MacKendrick's (1999) detailed description of the absence of fixed gender in contemporary S-M practice. While she cautions us that gender has not become "an irrelevant, socially discardable category," she maintains that within communities of S-M practitioners one sees "not only gender-bending but what Bob Flanagan gleefully labeled 'gender demolition'" (100).

Images of sadomasochistic pleasure that escape traditional gender binarism are ubiquitous in goth subculture. And as the goth embrace of Ligotti's work shows, within goth cultures one is likely to find a dismantling of masculinity. Androgyny and playful confounding of expectations about gender identity are consistent features of goth fashion and personal style, as any visit to the photo gallery of a goth Web site will show. Goth nights at most clubs include S-M and fetish performances, many of which involve some aspect of refusal of conventional sex/gender roles. Unlike such performances in exclusively gay clubs, they are always viewed by audiences that include appreciative women. Brite identifies herself with such audiences to the spectacle of male masochism, when, in her foreword to his collected stories, she explains that Ligotti's fiction affects her "as if the images have already appeared somewhere in the murk of my subconscious" (Ligotti 1996, x).

Ligotti depicts S-M as both a collaboration between male masochist and female sadist and as a spectacle staged for the pleasure of an audience whose fluid identifications call into question an automatic equation of biological bodies and genders. This gives us one useful framework for reading the complexities of the appeal of Brite's fiction to young women. Nine Inch Nails, a music project controlled by front man Trent Reznor, which is often referenced in Brite's novels, provides another. It is helpful to view Brite's work in relation to both Ligotti's and Nine Inch Nails' representations of sadomasochism because of the differences in their emphases. Ligotti, like

many goth artists, helps us get away from the idea that sexual identity is about the difference between male and female, while Nine Inch Nails helps us imagine male masochism as pleasure rather than defeat, a concept crucial to understanding how it is possible for some young women to receive these novels as romantic rather than as fantasies of revenge against the sex that oppresses them.

The musical tastes of Brite's characters tend toward what was popular at the time of each book's composition, and what was readily available. So it is not surprising that Nine Inch Nails, a band whose status as goth has been highly debated but that defines goth for many young people trapped within the suburban mainstream, would be a strong presence in Brite's novels. Although several bands generally associated with goth get an occasional mention, especially Bauhaus and the Cure, which are referred to repeatedly in *Lost Souls*, Nine Inch Nails gets pride of place when Terry Bucket, the record store owner in *Drawing Blood*, tells the new boy in town that his store carries "Everything from Nine Inch Nails to Hank Williams" (62). And as the immediate clarification, "Hank Williams, *Senior*," lets us know, the stock consists of what the hippest townspeople consider important music (emphasis Brite's).

In *Exquisite Corpse*, the heroic DJ Luke plays Nine Inch Nails' "Something I Can Never Have," thinking, "It might as well be the theme song of this show, this radio station, everything he had ever written, his desperate love for Tran, his whole miserable life" (1996, 91). Part of Tran's seduction of Jay is his question "You like Nine Inch Nails?" and that Jay "hadn't a clue who Nine Inch Nails were" tells us that this psychotic murderer has "no discernment, no individual taste" (109). It is tempting to imagine that the name of *Lost Souls*' Nothing was inspired by the emergence of Trent Reznor's Nothing record label in 1992, the same year as the book's publication. The talismanic power of the phrase he likes to repeat to himself, "*I am Nothing*," seems to echo the words emblazoned on the back of that year's Nine Inch Nails promotional T-shirts, "Now I'm Nothing" (73). A song functions as a parallel sort of emblem in *Drawing Blood*, where Janis Joplin's rendition of "Bobby McGee" is repeatedly invoked as one of the two central figures, Trevor McGee, attempts to understand why his subculture cartoonist father Robert (Bobby) killed himself and Trevor's mother and brother but spared him. Boggled down by the responsibilities of family life, Robert McGee loses his art and subsequently his sanity. One can hardly avoid seeing a comment here on the song lyric's opposition between a freedom predicated on

having “nothing left to lose” and the “home” Bobby leaves the singer to find. Similarly Nine Inch Nails seems to symbolize for Brite the choice to resist bourgeois constructions of gender, sexuality, and love.

This reading of Nine Inch Nails makes sense because the most amazing aspect of the band’s incredible rise to crossover success is Reznor’s self-presentation as a heterosexual male masochist. Masochism is heavily represented in goth and also in industrial music, two forms that the Nine Inch Nails sound brought together. However, Reznor’s music differs from most well-known and readily available goth rock in that the lyrics typically describe a craving for pain that seems to turn to anger only when the pain is withheld. One might contrast Reznor to Robert Smith, creator of the Cure, or to Ian Curtis of Joy Division, both of whom sing about eroticized suffering.⁵ Reznor gave homage to Curtis’s album title *Closer* with his most famous song’s title. But whereas Reznor’s song, and the widely aired video that promoted it, stress the pleasure to be had in pain, the “honey” he finds on his knees, the desire that overwhelms him in bondage, Curtis’s choice for his band name of the Nazi term for female death camp prisoners forced into sexual service suggests his mission to expose the horror that he perceived sexuality to have become, as does the title of Joy Division’s song “Atrocity Exhibit.” Similarly both Robert Smith and Morrissey, the singer-songwriter for the Smiths, whose influence on goth is frequently acknowledged, are often labeled masochists, but their masochism is hardly expressed in the defiantly exuberant manner of a Bob Flanagan or Trent Reznor. (It seems worth noting that Reznor and “Supermasochist” performance artist Flanagan collaborated on the production of the video “Happiness in Slavery.”) While in “Is It Really So Strange?” (1987) Morrissey sings, “Oh, yes, you can kick me, and you can punch me, and you can break my face, but you won’t change the way I feel / ‘Cause I love you,” there is no “but” about it in Reznor’s songs. Instead he begs for “your kiss, your fist” (“Sin,” 1989). He is “sanctified,” “purified” and ecstatic as the dominatrix of his dreams “walks [him] through the nicest parts of hell” (“Sanctified,” 1989).

The first wave of goth rock (often seen as beginning with the release of Bauhaus’s “Bela Lugosi’s Dead” in 1979) used sadomasochistic imagery and references to mourn a tainted and evil world where the only pleasure left to the miserable subject was the eroticization of pain. Nine Inch Nails shockingly demands that we recognize that some men unambivalently enjoy suffering erotically and would not choose to have it any other way. Nine Inch Nails’ debut album, *Pretty Hate Machine* (1989) was “the first rock & roll indie album to sell a million copies” (Gold 1994, 54). Brite’s characters, primarily uneducated rural or suburban youths who are disgusted

by the American Dream but lack the exposure to sophisticated alternatives to mainstream culture, are like the teenagers to whom Reznor's success brought not only an awareness of independent music but an introduction to sexual and gender diversity as an escape from the straight world and its strictures. If it seems a bit odd to turn to Trent Reznor rather than to feminist theorists for a strategy for reading the resistance to gender binarism in Brite's novels, one has only to consider the history of feminist work on the gothic genre informing contemporary goth subcultures.

Feminist critics have shown interest in the gothic since Ellen Moers's groundbreaking *Literary Women* (1977), a section of which deals with what she names "The Female Gothic." Demonstrating the ways women writers' gothic fiction works to undermine patriarchal ideology is central to Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), and the list of feminist theorists who have devoted entire studies to this genre includes luminaries Eve Sedgwick and Julia Kristeva. However, as Anne Williams points out, the prevailing view has been that "the Gothic inculcated patriarchal standards in its readers while at the same time offering a kind of vicarious contemplation of patriarchal horrors" (1997, 123).⁶

One comparable study is Michelle Massé's *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (1992). Massé's politically invested approach, coupled with her apparent assumption that the masochism presented in gothic texts is nearly exclusively female, predetermine her study's culmination in a chapter called "Resisting the Gothic," which she concludes with the wish that all impulses toward sadomasochism be eradicated from our psyches so that women will no longer eroticize their own pain or that of other women, a time "when the spectator need not endlessly watch a woman being beaten" (274). Perhaps such a theory of the gothic misses its potential to unsettle gender binarism because the work is not concerned with the stagings of the gothic most popular in youth culture at the last century's end. Although I agree with Massé on several points, I could not read her reference to "the spectator" without thinking of a goth student I interviewed for an article I was writing on the reception of Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson (both on the Nothing label).

I imagined this student saying indignantly that she loved the gothic and had no interest in watching women being beaten. This twenty-eight-year-old feminist found her goth identity when she first saw Marilyn Manson on MTV in his video cover of the Eurythmics' 1983 hit "Sweet Dreams," staggering around looking blissfully bloody in a pink tutu and what she saw as goth makeup, to the tune of his own voice enthusiastically growling, "Some of them want to use you / Some of them want to abuse you" (fig. 1). While



Fig. 1: Marilyn Manson

a number of goths, especially those who belonged to this subculture before the late 1980s, reject Manson as a poseur who undermines the true meaning of goth, for women like my student he embodies an attitude about sexuality that gives them hope. As she remarked to me about the battered character that Manson here portrays, "If there are men like that, then there's something to live for."

She, like most of my informants on pop culture, finds images of such men, who willingly and enthusiastically embrace the role of sacrificial victim, everywhere in goth music and performances and in the writers favored by goths, especially Brite. She described Brite as the heir of other pop vampire and supernatural story writers like Anne Rice, but also, without any prompting from me, connected Brite's work to *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, and a bit more surprisingly to *Wuthering Heights*. All of these texts were to her about the excitement, romance, and eroticism of male pain and suffering, a suffering that she felt free to enjoy fully because of her assumption that men have choices women do not, and thus when they engage in eroticized suffering it is because they enjoy doing so. Such accounts of volition in S-M were the occasion for many of my informants, female and male, to solemnly quote MTV: "It's all good." A comparison of this vision of the gothic to Masse's ("It's all bad"?) suggests that one fruitful way to understand the appeal of Brite's work to her young female readers is through the masochistic male's body, or rather its discursive translations and the symbolic systems in which it can signify.

In *Exquisite Corpse*, the serial killer Andrew Compton contemplating Tran thinks, "He was pretty—very pretty—but so were loads of other boys. This one had something extra. How could a single person fulfill all the mannerisms, distill that vital blend of insecurity and insouciance, exude pheromones that so clearly begged *cut me, fuck me, lay me out cold and have your way with me?*" (1996, 210; emphasis original). Such moments in which desire takes shape in relation to the all-too-vulnerable body and emotions of a beautiful boy abound in Brite's fiction and could even be considered its defining feature. Yet many details in the work suggest that it is aimed not only at adult men who might enjoy fantasizing about taking such victims and the beautiful youths who feel a thrill of terror at imagining themselves as such victims, but also at women and girls who, superficially at least, seem to have no role to play in such dramas.

The most immediately apparent of these details is that, unlike the growing number of women who write sadomasochistic erotica for a gay male audience, Brite has not adopted a male or androgynous pseudonym. Even more striking is the pervasive and perverse romanticism of Brite's fiction, which is filled with depictions of lovelorn yearning—"again he wished that their hearts could be joined" (1992, 346)—and constructed around long withheld scenes of deliriously passionate consummation, strongly reminiscent of the dramatic climaxes in women's genre romance. Crucially, unlike the relatively small amount of genre romance now being produced for gay men, the stories often seem preoccupied with those conflicts over control of the female body traditionally called "women's issues."

Not only was Brite's first collection of short stories originally titled *Swamp Foetus*, a name that, together with the Louisiana settings, inevitably suggests illegal abortion and its aftermath, the stories frequently refer to unwanted pregnancies and the conflicts surrounding them, as in the reference in "Angels" (1994) to a "crackpot doctor, the kind that uses coathangers to tear babies out of women's wombs in back alleys" (20).⁷ *Lost Souls* opens with a description of Nothing's vampire conception and subsequent unnatural birth that kills his mother. The mourning done by Christian, the vampire who had previously reluctantly accepted the impregnated and abandoned girl as his lover, is described in these gynecological terms: "Then he knelt between Jessy's limp legs and looked at the poor torn passage that had given him so many nights of idle pleasure. Ruined now, bloody" (1992, 10). The plot is driven by the unsuccessful attempts of two friends and bandmates, Steve and Ghost, to rescue Steve's ex-girlfriend Ann from a similar fate,

"swell[ing] with a malignant child, a child that would eventually rip her open and bleed her dry" (241). Another character, Richelle, although herself a vampire, also dies horribly as the result of a first pregnancy that she knows "would mean the end of her" (272). Pregnancy's representation in the novel through the vampire experience codes it as alien invasion, absolutely incompatible with female survival. The book obsessively focuses on the darkest fears of heterosexual girls still young and inexperienced enough to view pregnancy exclusively as a terrifying threat. The theme of pregnancy as threat to survival returns in *Drawing Blood*, where early on we are introduced to the kindly club owner, Kinsey Hummingbird, whose sympathetic personality is established when a dishonest employee asks him for money for an abortion and he "trie[s] to imagine that childish body swollen with pregnancy, could not. The very idea was painful" (1993, 31).

Female sexuality is represented as connected to both a reproductive process that is always either fatal or tragic and to continual exploitation by sexist men. Zach, one of the two protagonists, is the result of a tragically unwanted pregnancy, as his cruel parents often remind him. Brite describes the repercussions for his mother, whose selfish husband batters her ceaselessly. Another major character in the novel is Eddy, a (female) stripper, through whose disaffected perspective Brite lingeringly explores how it feels to a young girl to be exploited by "crude and gross" misogynists (79). Because she is also a rape victim, Ann's introduction into *Lost Souls* brings with it detailed description of postrape trauma and depression. Although men, both gay and straight, can certainly find such topics interesting, texts aimed exclusively at a male audience do not generally foreground women's reproductive problems, nor do gay male genre romances treat pregnancy as the most important possible consequence of unprotected sexual encounters. (AIDS is never mentioned in *Lost Souls*, despite its vampire/tainted blood theme, and in *Drawing Blood*, although Zach's refusal to use condoms is mentioned in connection with the possibility of HIV infection, pregnancy remains the only dramatized consequence of unprotected sex.) Because of the space these concerns occupy in each novel, it seems fairly obvious that Brite presents her lush spectacles of male masochism and suffering for the delectation of a readership meant to include women.

However, despite this ample dramatization of gender-based oppression, Brite never shows us female bodies at the center of her goth(ic) horror shows. To do so would faithfully follow gothic tradition, in a way familiar to her readers from many popular cultural forms. As Chris Gallant (2000) argues, in a chapter section called "Exquisite Corpses," contemporary horror genres often recall "the nineteenth century obsession with idyllic de-

pictions of death in the form of graceful, beautiful female corpses" (81). Outside the goth subculture, contemporary horror generally adheres to the aesthetic that defines the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. Gallant describes how both Poe's work and twentieth-century horror films present the torture deaths of women as art, allowing males threatened by "aggressive female sexuality" not only to contain the horrors of potential female dominance but also to displace onto women, who become figures for death, their own inevitable relationship with death (81–83). In contrast, Brite names one of the protagonists of *The Crow: The Lazarus Heart* Poe and structures the story around "The Raven," the poem about which Poe wrote the famous explication of his aesthetic on which Gallant's discussion is based. But Brite's Poe is a Mapplethorpe-inspired photographer whose lover and favorite subject, Benny, is a goth masochist featured in an exhibition described as effecting "the complete deconstruction of gender and gender roles" (1998, 79). Lucece, Benny's transgendered, formerly identical, twin takes her place as the observer in their s-m play, saying, "Fortunately I like to watch" (62). By the conclusion of the novel she, and the readers, have watched some dauntingly terrible games.

In Brite's fiction, as in much of goth, the gendering of classic gothic iconography seems reversed, for she presents her female readers with breaking and broken male bodies that fill the spaces of her prose as if it were the last act of *Hamlet*. What are we to make of this phenomenon? Should we take Brite's popularity with this segment of her audience to mean that her "pretty," and in conventional terms effeminate, male victims, often voluptuously giving in to their tormentors, symbolize girls' images of their own role in culture? The current majoritarian feminist position on the gender identifications of girls certainly involves a lot of hand wringing over their victimization. Popular psychology texts, like *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher 1994), whose title indicates the role adult feminists are called upon to play, tell us that girls' lives are in crisis because of a culture that poisons every aspect of their experience. In *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (1997), Joan Jacobs Brumberg cautions us that we should not take it as cause for celebration that "teenagers today grow up in a world where rigid dichotomies between gay (homosexual) and straight (heterosexual) behavior are disappearing," since that change can result in girls' adoption of a sadomasochistic aesthetic, and, in Brumberg's view, interest in s-m can only increase girls' vulnerability to exploitation (132–33). If the question raised by Brite's implied audience address is whether or not the male masochists in the stories should be read as figures who stand in for girls, rather than the objects of girls' desire, then the answer most in accord with majoritarian concepts of gender difference

would be that yes, they must be so understood and furthermore, we should be very worried about what this says about girls' self-perception. Such a reading would result in a view of Brite's work as expressive of a new gender binarism consisting of feminized victims (biologically male and female) on one side and conventionally masculine-identified predators (biologically male) on the other, with the only sexual subjectivity open to girls appearing to be a tragic embracing of their own painful destruction.

But even the briefest look at slash fiction, a very transgressive pop cultural form that has become quite popular among young people, disrupts this sort of gender symmetry. Initially an outgrowth of activities through which fans of *Star Trek* expressed their fantasies about the television show, slash fiction is a form of pornography produced by and for women that features male celebrity heroes engaged in homosexual and often sadomasochistic activities. *Star Trek* slash first started appearing in self-published fanzines around 1976 (Penley 1991, 137).⁸ Following Sarah Lefanu's analysis of feminist science fiction, Constance Penley argues that slash writing's "roots in the female gothic novel" allow it to address women's "political concerns" while still leaving room for imaginative play and, of course, eroticism (138). Here, as in Brite's fiction, eroticism entails a breaking down of conventional male inhibition against intense feeling, often through the man's pain and suffering. The focus on male-male sexuality is essential to the eroticism because through it writers (and their readers) escape "the built-in inequality of the romance formula, in which dominance and submission are invariably the respective roles of male and female" (154). Penley recognizes that heterosexual women may identify with gay men because "gay men too inhabit bodies that are still a legal, moral, and religious battleground," but she attributes the primary pleasure fans take in the stories to "aggressive identification with the men and the taking of them as sexual objects" (157, 155). Perhaps most relevant to Brite's work is Penley's observation that the success of slash with its target audience depends on "the tightest possible focus on . . . men undergoing [a] painful yet liberatory process of self-discovery and learning to communicate their feelings" (156).

Brite's interest in slash genre was made evident by her chapbook *Plastic Jesus*, a fantasy about John and Paul of the Beatles being lovers. However, her goth horror novels more clearly illustrate how goth fiction now draws on the slash form. These books have clear affinities with slash like the stories posted on E. L. Shawcross's Nine Inch Nails fan Web site, *Devils Speak of Bloody Angels*, on March 4. In the first one, the narrator-protagonist approaches Trent Reznor in a record store shopping for a Cure CD. The rock star agrees to go to a hotel for sex because, "You're a man. That's all I need to know."

But the protagonist is not a man, but a transman (a female-to-male transsexual, with female genitalia). Moreover, in the course of forceful sexual domination, it turns out that Reznor is also a person of indeterminate biological sexual identity. What stands out in the story is not this unveiling, so much as the loving depiction of the idol's submission to the fan, his literal opening (the transman takes his virginity), and his extreme vulnerability. Another slash on the site imagines Reznor as biologically male, but maintains the motif of the male (or "male") being forced open to the biological female's passionate gaze: "This wet dream of a perfect slave who asks me to break him, hurt him, cut him, and hangs, masked and naked, from chains bound tightly round his leather-gloved wrists."

Like the slash protagonists, Brite's main characters have bodies whose biological sex is at odds with their sexuality, or at least with the ways they might be gendered by conventional observers. Their bodies matter in every possible sense, but they resist traditional coding. Inside tales that are as gothic as they are goth, most of them inhabit spaces formerly reserved for women, the place of the vulnerable victim. But they are not feminized male heroines; they are heroes, not simply because their male sexuality is underlined by near pornographic descriptions of erections and sex acts, but because they act heroically, although almost never in traditionally masculine ways. Instead, they heroically submit and bravely allow themselves to be opened.

Brite's male protagonists almost always begin as closed-off people who fear emotional connection. A darkly comic element of *Lost Souls* is that the only lover whose affection the severely emotionally repressed Steve is able to return is Ghost, the psychic. Ghost gets inside because he is literally able to read Steve's mind. In *Drawing Blood*, Zach is so afraid of love that he refuses to have sex with anyone with whom he can imagine becoming friends. The ideal sex partner for him is one with whom coupling and parting take place "by some silent mutual consent" (1993, 97). His liaison with Trevor is the first love affair he has had, but Trevor's own emotional remoteness surpasses Zach's in that at age twenty-four he is still a virgin out of fear of letting another person get close. The affair of *Exquisite Corpse*'s central lovers, Luke and Tran, turns tragic because they cannot trust each other, and Tran is left so hurt by the way AIDS makes Luke retreat emotionally that he ends up giving himself to the psychotic Jay, who "had never had a live friend before, and he wasn't sure what to do with one" (1996, 115). Jared Poe, in *The Crow*, is so chronically angry and disaffected that he is initially pro-

foundly disconcerted to find himself attracted to Benny, whom he thinks of contemptuously as “this pretty, taunting goth boy dressed up like some William Gibson version of 1890s London,” while for his part, the coolly enigmatic Benny holds himself back from this man he suspects might be “just another poseur” (1998, 56, 61). Steve and Ghost have telepathy working for them, but in all the other cases only the violence of S-M sex can break through and allow connection to be made. Brite always depicts the young men’s surrender to sexual invasion and pain as heroic. Thus, just as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gothic literary depictions of female heroes called the eras’ gender convention into question, these male, but not masculine, heroes call into question current concepts of the relation between S-M roles and gender identity.

They sacrifice themselves to protect others, they confront the evil creatures who embody their worst fears, and they fight back, although usually only by forcing their tormentors to recognize the damage they do others. But they are most effective when they gain the courage to distinguish between and call by their right names desired and undesired pains, despite their entrapment within a culture that Brite repeatedly shows fails to distinguish between consensual S-M and abuse. These are not, however, novels about adolescents attaining manhood by triumphing over their fears, coded stories offering young female readers a way to identify with boys and thus to imagine eventually taking on the power culturally reserved for men. Brite’s heroes, despite their heroism, remain sexual objects of an exterior gaze, the focal points of erotic drama.

For instance, Brite leads into a scene in which Zach will save his lover Trevor from demonic possession through description of a masochistic abandon so extreme that it shocks Trevor into feeling responsibility and protectiveness:

He looked down at Zach. Blood had run down over Zach’s face in thick rivulets from a wound in his scalp. Blood leaked from his nostrils and from his torn mouth. He had a lurid purple knot on one shoulder, an encrusted bite mark on the other. His chest was crisscrossed with furious scratches. Where it wasn’t cut or bruised, his skin was absolutely white. His eyes held Trevor’s. His expression hovered somewhere between terrified and serene.

“Whatever you want,” said Zach, “It’s up to you.” (*Drawing Blood*, 359)

Just as Trevor realizes that, as horribly wounded as Zach is, he still maintains the power to surrender, or not, and chooses to give in out of love, the reader is shown how a man can define himself as heroic through the

achievement of masochistic equilibrium between terror and serenity. One may be reminded of Foucault's claim, in his introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, that expression of outlawed and despised desire can be the strongest force against fascism (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, xxii–iii). For this, too, is a triumph of the will, but decidedly not in the sense of seizing power over others. Zach's self-possession teaches Trevor how to control himself, and his volitional opening up teaches Trevor how to love.

Brite's books are not about performing conventional masculinity heroically, but about the heroism of performing male masochism for a truly appreciative audience. Often Brite's accounts focus on the redemptive aspect of masochism, but the loving detail with which the valorized bodily injuries are chronicled can be troubling to anyone concerned about young people's physical well-being. She sometimes seems to be suggesting that only submission to nearly deadly beatings can make loving connection possible.

In this way, *Exquisite Corpse*, more than the earlier, softer, and more romantic novels, raises difficult questions. It is a grossly transgressive, heavily eroticized account of men deliberately infecting with HIV, torturing, killing, and eating young boys. And to add to the shock effect, Tran, the ultimate victim, is Vietnamese American, and thus an obvious figure for the damage American racism and particularly Orientalism have wrought.⁹ How can we read Brite's romantic and sexy descriptions of Tran's submission to Jay, his tormentor, as anything but an invitation to the reader to be turned on sexually by what is most deathly, most ugly in our culture? Is the book's appeal to its female readers an indication that women now hatefully enjoy imagining the most extreme manifestations of male violence reversed from their usual female targets and turned against young men?

To read this novel otherwise, as many of its female fans seem to do, it helps to look at its references to goth as a subculture in which horror can point to transcendence of the gender roles that Brite's characters, and perhaps many of her readers as well, deem foundational to all in mainstream culture that alienates them. One such pointer comes in the form of repeated references throughout Brite's books to music that describes masochistic bliss through which bodily limitations are surpassed, including the cultural codings that link biological sex to binary gender identity. Brite's reference to Trent Reznor as a major influence on Luke's life strongly suggests that Nine Inch Nails provides an interpretive frame for the novel's troubling depictions of desire and its expression. The "Happiness in Slavery" video, which features the simulated torture death of Bob Flanagan; the infamous video collection *Broken*, in which the abduction, torture, and evisceration of a young man serves as a frame story for the musical numbers; and the images



Fig. 2: Trent Reznor

in the “Closer” video of Reznor dancing in an apparent ecstasy of agony in front of an open carcass on a meat hook all furnish ways to see Tran’s fate as pleasure to which he consents in an astoundingly strange gesture of self-assertion (fig. 2). Like the videos, the novel presents the spectacle of male masochism as symbolic. The disturbing content of these videos is frequently explained by Reznor in interviews as an expression of the pleasure to be found in giving in to vulnerability and letting go of control (Dunn 1994, 29; Berger and Lengvenis 1994, 51; Gold 1994, 53). Likewise we might speculate that Brite’s young female readers interpret the ultimate submission of masochist heroes like Tran as symbolic of the self-transformation that can occur in much less extreme S-M practice.

As Foucault explained, the practitioners of S-M engage in “inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their bodies,” and by doing so actively resist sexual normalization (1984b, 27). Ladelle McWhorter, who comments illuminatingly on this passage in Foucault’s work (1999, 185–86), calls sadomasochistic sex one of the bodily “practices that transform who we are and who we take ourselves to be” (226). Goth culture’s constant drawing upon S-M subcultural symbols and practices, referred to by Brite in all of her novels, can therefore be understood to prepare her readers to

understand such theatrical set-piece torture scenes as Tran's death so that it is read not as a dramatization of brutal sex murder so much as a dramatization of the sometimes frightening erotic technologies of rebirth into a realm beyond gender binarism.

But while we may read the masochist as self-transformative hero, his observer remains problematic. Why, we may ask, does Brite include in her novels material that invites young women to consume these spectacles? Anne Williams says that women's productions of the gothic are typically addressed to a female audience that "may contemplate both the horrors of the ways in which the culture at large regards the female, but also some alternative possibilities in imagining the world as it appears to a female I/eye" (1997, 122). Should we conclude that females are now pleased to regard males as potential torture objects? Perhaps, but we might also think of the torture as symbolic of a sort of consensual "play," as S-M practitioners often call their interactions.

Spectacles of male masochism offer girls options other than to struggle for an absolute sexual equality in which all power relations will disappear (the program recommended by many second-wave feminists) or to acquiesce to the traditional domesticity and family values that Brite's novels parody and ultimately dismiss as normalizing facades over systems of exploitation of women and the young. One of Brite's harshest condemnations of contemporary suburban family life comes through her depiction in *The Crow* of Michael, a teenage runaway, who finds even the harrowing life of a street prostitute superior to "the gray shroud of suburban despair he escaped," as emblemized by his mother's closely related denial of the repeated rapes to which his stepfather subjects him and of her own aging and loss of beauty (1998, 68).¹⁰ In *Lost Souls* Nothing thinks of his adoptive parents as "out somewhere—a consciousness-raising group, a holistic health class, an expensive dinner with other people like themselves" (1992, 74–75). To feel as if he belonged to them, he would have to transform himself into "a normal son who would . . . bring home little fresh-faced girlfriends in clean skirts and pink blouses" (70). The idea nauseates him as a betrayal of everything he is. In *Drawing Blood*, Zach feels betrayed by a similar transformation in the film *Beetlejuice*: "The sight of Winona Ryder's character, formerly strange and beautiful in her ratted hairdo and smudged eyeliner, now combed out and squeaky clean, clad in a preppy skirt and kneesocks and a big shit-eating sickeningly normal grin" (1993, 39; emphasis original). Instead of a male who will domesticate them, Brite's fiction offers young women images of males who recoil from the horror of proper femininity and the reproductive imperative at the heart of family values. *Exquisite Corpse*'s Luke, in his

radio talk show host persona, Lush Rimbaud, says of other, locally despised gay men, "At least the biological reproduction of our own DNA in the form of a slimy, squalling lump of meat isn't the greatest satisfaction most of us will ever know in life" (1996, 91).

The novels do show the all-too-true-to-life deadlocked battle of boys against girls, as when we are told of *Lost Souls*' Ann and Steve, "They both pretended to be so tough and cynical that there was no room left to give each other the gentleness they both really needed" (1992, 112). But, in addition, the novels offer a vision of boys giving in, giving, even if not to girls. In their swooning surrender, these boys who are always giving wild, impractical, and undomesticated love, figure the object if not the consummation of young women's least conventional desires. Simon Reynolds (1990) remarks about what he calls "the return of romanticism" in rock and roll that it valorizes passion rather than a politics whose "'radicalism' [is] barely distinguishable from the pragmatism and 'common sense' of therapists' and counsellors' discourse." He says the dream of a love in which nothing is held back may be "our last reservoir of spirituality in the face of those 'specialists of the soul' who would seek to reform relationships in accordance with their ghastly notions of 'negotiation,' 'support,' 'partnership'" (28). Certainly the dream of love—or in Brite's fiction, the beautiful nightmare of love—serves as such for Brite's readership, albeit their romanticism is hardly the sort to which Reynolds refers. The romanticism he sees young people seeking reinscribes conventional roles; Brite's dark, perverse romanticism tears them to pieces.

In *Exquisite Corpse*, just before Tran is vivisected by the serial killer, he "imagine[s] how his father would feel when he found out about this: guilty and grief-stricken, yes, but also vindicated in his beliefs," maybe even seeing the murder as "a stroke of divine mercy" (1996, 225). At last Tran is freed from both the burden of adopting the model minority behavior of his father and the imperative to prove white racists wrong by exemplifying conventional masculinity.¹¹ He can finally be seen as he is, without shame, and be desired, no matter how terribly. After this recognition of his own absolute incompatibility with the world of suburban normalcy, he feels an odd, twisted love for his destroyer who wants him as no one else ever has. In his voluptuous giving up we might see a goth shadow of the scene from Kleist that Hélène Cixous claims, in *The Newly Born Woman* (1986), saved her life by providing her with a "dream" of passions "unimaginable in conventional society": Achilles "gives himself" to Penthesilea so completely that "this is no longer the space of mastery. It is the ascent toward a new beauty, where, having exhausted all anguish . . . nothing will remain at stake

between king and queen except knowing beauty over and over, no other law than body's insatiable desire" (119). In this intensely transgressive romanticism, not just the male body but also the worlds of meaning it anchors are deconstructed.

These are stories for boys and girls who know the darkness too well to be able to go back to playing house as if they did not know what was outside, who cannot and do not even want to find love within the domestic enclosure, the survivors of the toppling of the patriarchal order. Brite's stories provide a moment in which love appears like a white light in the darkness of a gothic world in which, to see it another way, love appears like a white light *because* of the darkness of the gothic world, and the one who wants so desperately to touch the other's sores, to lick his blood, appears not as villain(ess), but, as in *The Crow*, as a dark avenging angel.

Consequently, the novels provide a way to conceptualize the desire to see masculinity not as triumphantly invulnerable but as, in the lyrics of Trent Reznor, most fulfilled by being "broken," "defaced," "disgraced," and so, at last to be able to feel love for the one it still, despite all, defines. The bodies of young men broken open in Brite's work literalize what her readers yearn to experience symbolically, the opening up of maleness to the ravages of passion. In *Exquisite Corpse*'s final image of the bones of the victim and his slayer merging as "an ivory sculpture-puzzle shining in the dark, waiting to tell their mute love story," Brite reimagines the male body as a site of forgiveness of that terrible, lawlessly cruel hunger (previously attributed in her novels to vampires and ghosts and here figured as a serial killer's need to possess) that heterosexual women often feel as the result of men's emotional remoteness. The male body opens willingly at last, and, surrounded by the corpses of those mystically defeated by this unexpected surrender, the cannibalistic reader feasts on what has always before been denied.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that Brite's appeal is far from being limited to goths. For example, Jason Walton, a musician so enamored of Brite's fiction that he chose to perform under the name of one of her characters (Nothing), writes me that, "although I love Brite's work, the 'mainstream gothic' characters and their affinity for pop culture somewhat puts me off" (e-mail, January 8, 2001).
2. My essay title derives in part from a rejection letter I received for the manuscript of my book *Male Masochism* (published by Indiana University Press in 1995). Among other indignant complaints in the reader's report was this comment on my chapter on Joyce: "This is nothing but a portrait of the artist as masoch-

ist!" Heroic revision of gender norms and masochism were incompatible to this reader.

3. See Deleuze and Guattari 1986, esp. chap. 3, "What Is a Minor Literature" (16–27), and Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 100–110, for further discussion of this concept.
4. Ligotti's collaboration with the band Current 93 on the CD *I Have a Special Plan for this World* brought him to the attention of many in the goth music scene.
5. Some of the lyrical content of Nine Inch Nails songs, as well as those of the Cure, can be read as sadistic, rather than masochistic. But, as I discuss at some length in *New Millennial Sexstyles* (2000), most music critics describe Trent Reznor's persona on stage and in his songs as masochistic.
6. The most extreme version of this may be Anne Mellor's reading of Victor Frankenstein's passionate attachment to his monster as a cover for his misogynous desire to rid the world of women, which, as Judith Halberstam observes, "runs the risk of sounding homophobic and misunderstands the relation between homosexuality, textuality, and patriarchy" (1995, 42).
7. I thank Michael Bibby for bringing to my attention the likelihood that Brite's choice of title was also influenced by the popularity, in goth circles, of the Australian industrial rock project Scraping Foetus off the Wheel, in which "angry woman in rock" and punk icon Lydia Lunch was involved.
8. The name "slash" derives from "the slash between K(irk) and S(pock) [which] serves as code to those purchasing by mail amateur fanzines (or "zines") that the stories, poems, and artwork published there concern a same sex relationship between the two men" (Penley 1991, 137).
9. Halberstam claims that "Gothic fiction is a technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known" (1998, 2). She observes that minoritized racial status is one of the primary attributes assigned to the deviant/monster. However, the application of her theory to Brite's novel is problematized by Tran's role as victim rather than monster.
10. The difference between Brite's depiction of male and female experiences of sexuality is perhaps best illustrated by the contrast between Michael's harrowing initiation into sex via violent incest and the incestuous experiences of Jessy, who demands sex with her father. The intimidated man puts up a little resistance and then "let[s] her lay him out and undo his trousers and straddle him" (*Lost Souls* 1992, 79). Almost all heterosexual encounters in Brite's fiction are woman-superior in more ways than one.
11. Many Asian American writers have described the damage done to males within their racial group by the concept of the model minority and by the perception of them as effeminate by those outside the group. Probably the most outraged voices are those of Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inanda, and Shawn Wong in their preface to *AIIEEEEE!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*.



GOD'S OWN MEDICINE

Religion and Parareligion in U.K. Goth Culture



Religion seems destined to transform itself rather than disappear.

—Emile Durkheim

Religion is unlikely to tumble any time soon, or possibly at all.

—Web discussion on goth culture and religion

This is my church.

This is my church. . . .

For tonight, God is a DJ.

—Faithless, "God Is a DJ"

Gothic subculture's outwardly religious image is strikingly diverse. Discernibly religious elements are found everywhere in goth iconography, decor, clothing, music, and lyrics. Goths develop spiritual perspectives to fit personal needs through a variety of practices. Critics of the subculture sometimes present it as evil and satanic, while goths themselves often adopt deliberately ironic shock-value postures. Although some goths enjoy their status as folk devils, others may feel defensive in the face of persecution by Christian fundamentalist groups and the media. What is clear in either case is that goth identity carries over into private life. Like religion, the subculture offers what many participants perceive as a way of life. Although aspects of goth arguably play a spiritual role comparable to religious belief, the subculture is also quite secular in various ways. In this essay I build on ethnographic research to characterize goth as a "parareligious" subculture. In addition, I describe the religious beliefs and practices of particular goths.

Laurence Coupe's work on the postmodern use of myth (1997) is pertinent to this analysis since it refutes the alleged polarity of sacred and profane. What Coupe discerns is not "the abandonment of the sacred," but "its absorption into the profane or 'secularized' imagination" (195). The postmodern recreates the sacred in secular, aesthetic terms through a kind of creative play that Coupe calls "a new spirit of 'ludic imagining'" (196). As we shall see, goth subculture exemplifies such a ludic postmodern approach to the sacred.

In researching and analyzing goth practices, I have adopted Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the *habitus* to denote the broad and complex systems of dispositions, behaviors, and uses of social space that designate goth subcultural participation as such. In mapping the religious aspects of the goth subcultural *habitus*, I have combined fieldwork and theory. In what follows, I pay special attention to the views of goths themselves. Such views were collected through interviews (both face-to-face and electronic), Web site discussions, goth fanzines, and personal experiences of the subculture.¹ My research was partly conducted in 2001 at the yearly weekend gathering in Whitby, North Yorkshire, which draws goths from all over Britain and various other countries.² My respondents live in various parts of the United Kingdom, and their age range is from late teens to late forties. They have been chosen to reflect the spiritual and cultural diversity of the subculture as it has developed over the last two decades. Although the majority of my respondents considered themselves to be secular and skeptical about religion, some, as we shall see, are practicing Christians or devotees of alternative religions.

Terminology

According to Emile Durkheim's still influential account, religion involves the supernatural and "the world of mystery, the unknowable, or the incomprehensible" and includes "spiritual beings" such as demons and deities (Durkheim 1995, 22). Although Durkheim's foundational definitions for the sociology of religion remain helpful, they do not account for the complexity of goth beliefs and practices. Significantly, unease with the term *religion* was common among our research subjects. One respondent, Jan, wrote that the goth perspective is "eclectic and involves the idea that life should be a life of the spirit, free from narrow religious constraints."³ For goths, in other words, religion is often associated with restriction and repression so that broader and more free-floating terms such as *spirituality* are preferred.

I am retaining the term *religion*, however, to differentiate two types of goth attitude to the sacred. By *religion* in this discussion I mean the beliefs of par-

ticular goths in divine ruling powers and their observance of rites in ways that link them with other believers who may not be goths. I use *parareligion* to designate the use of religious-style practices, paradigms, or symbols that are inherent in various aspects of goth subculture. According to Christopher Smith, *parareligion* involves "phenomena which seem to share features with religious phenomena but which do not make explicit reference to a supernatural or superempirical realm" and often operate in the secular sphere (1998, 2). As we shall see, *parareligious* interests abound in diverse goth activities such as the enjoyment of vampire-themed fantasies, the visiting of old churches and graveyards, or the goth practice of nightclubbing.

In goth contexts, secular practices such as dancing have the potential to mobilize a sense of the numinous for their participants. According to the mythographer Rudolph Otto 1958 [1917], *numinous* connotes the non-rational mystery behind all religions, evoking awe and fascination. A related concept of the sacred also informs my study. In its conventional religious usage, the sacred is that which is consecrated, esteemed, or especially dear to a deity. But Durkheim defines the sacred as sometimes existing outside of formal religious structures. He argues that though a religious experience will necessarily be sacred, a sacred experience need not necessarily be religious. Whether religious or not, notions of the sacred are characterized by devotion to some special purpose that is not lightly intruded upon or handled. Thus for goths, sacred places and objects are those considered by members of the subculture to be set apart from the mainstream and exclusively appropriated to some special purpose. An example of the nonreligious sacred is the goth commitment to national festivals such as Whitby, which, by providing large (though short-term) goth communities, reinforce the subcultural identity of participants.

Sacred, Profane, and Parareligious

Goth nightclubs can also be viewed as sacred (and thus *parareligious*) spaces, for they too enable goths to claim a communal space, even if only temporarily. Though their meaning was partly ironic, goths have described the practice of dancing and drinking in clubs as "more of a religion nowadays."⁴ The nightclub experience is sacralized by shared rituals of entry, dance, and intoxicant consumption. The collective nightclub habitus strengthens group membership, offering an alternative if temporary "family."

As a sacred or *parareligious* space, the goth nightclub resembles conventionally religious practices in various ways. Like certain religious ceremonies, the goth club may feature the consumption of alcohol and psycho-

tropic drugs and include forms of dancing that may become ecstatic, as in trance dance. The goth DJ (like his or her counterpart in nongoth clubs) has a physically separate "pulpit" from which to deliver the musical "sermon." Goth clubbers in the United Kingdom often travel long distances on "pilgrimages" to see their favorite DJs play venues.

As in some religious practices, the space of the nightclub is forbidden to some; only those deemed worthy are allowed entrance. Nightclubs very often have a dress code of some kind. In the case of goth clubs, however, door staff focus on identifying the various styles associated with goth subculture. The exclusion of the improperly dressed functions partly to protect goth clubbers from the potential aggression of nongoth outsiders. Nonetheless, the fact that admission is selective also suggests that the space within is sacred and needs protection from the profane defilement of nongoths.

The interior space of goth nightclubs is typically designed to create a special ambience. Typical goth motifs such as spiders' webs, pointed arches, dungeon grilles, and sacred symbols are sometimes painted on backcloths. More permanent features, such as torches and plaster demons, may also appear. In traditional mythography, the *axis mundi* gives the temple its orientation in the world, placing it at the center. In at least one goth nightclub (Le Phonographique, in Leeds), the *axis mundi* is literally and concretely expressed in the form of a supporting pillar in the center of the dance floor, around which clubbers dance. The popular use of drapes has the effect of erasing walls. Such apparent erasure of conventional architectural features heightens the difference between the club interior and the outside world.

Goth nightclubs are generally quite dark. The available light comes from sophisticated lighting systems designed to give special effects. Background lighting is muted, while in contrast, lighting around the dance floor and bar are bright, in order to focus attention. The overhead lighting around the dance floor is often programmed to move with the rhythm and volume of the music being played. Strobos may also help to project an otherworldly quality, often described as hypnotic, over the dancers. Lasers, which scan across the ceiling or walls and project moving patterns and designs, are used in larger clubs. Smoke machines, which heat scented oil to create a cloud of mist, also enhance the drama. Such effects give the nightclub a magical aura as the ceiling seems to fade away to create the illusion of a gateway to another realm.

Parareligious and sacred features of goth subculture are not, however, limited to the space of the club. Rather, because goth subcultural practices regularly entail the play of privileged signifiers, including those drawn from traditional and nontraditional religions, there are various opportunities

for the production of intense emotional and spiritual experiences comparable to those associated with conventional religion. Within goth contexts, a sense of the numinous sometimes attaches to activities that might otherwise be perceived as secular. So, for example, goths who describe themselves as nonreligious may develop strong and emotionally intense interests in vampire fantasy, mysticism, or the paranormal.

In *A Companion to the Gothic* (2000), David Punter writes that in gothic style "archaism in some form . . . is everything" (xiv). The retro tastes of some goths can be seen as a contemporary form of gothic re-revival, filtered through nineteenth-century, eighteenth-century, and medieval gothic precedents. For Sandra, "goth culture can contain religious aspects as there is longing for the past when [goths] believe there was more belief." John and Natalie described their participation in historical reenactment battles and fight wearing medieval armor that they make themselves. Likewise, the Byronic rebel (characterized by long hair, frilly shirts, and androgynous sexuality) and Baudelairean dandy (with an aloof veneer and a satanic sneer) have become archetypal styles for male goths. It is difficult to say how many goths share Sandra's sense that the archaic is sought partly because of the perceived religiosity of bygone times. Certainly there is a sense of the numinous discernible in some goths' descriptions of their visits to graveyards and ruins. Jan described regular visits in which she and her friends dressed in suitably archaic goth garb and met to "soak up the vibes" in graveyards, castles, old halls, and ruined abbeys. "For me," she explained, "ruins and churchyards are places charged with special atmospheres where traces of the past and the dead linger. They fill me with a pleasurable melancholy and longing to escape from modern life to other times."

But parareligious activities within goth subculture may also assume more ironic forms, evoking the ludic blur of sacred and profane described by Coupe. Goths often display deliberately ironic and subversive attitudes toward conventional religion. They may, for example, enjoy deploying perverse sexuality in deliberate deviation from conventional religious sexual norms. Goth clubs, which often feature fetish-related themes, sometimes display films or other graphics featuring naughty nuns or aberrant priests. Likewise, the fetish clubwear favored by many goths sometimes features ecclesiastical markings. For many such goths, the added frisson of religious blasphemy enhances the enjoyment of perceived sexual deviance.

Goth style offers many opportunities for the mixture of sacred and profane signifiers. Goths often "profane" traditional religious iconography by using it for flagrantly stylistic rather than religious purposes. Christian (particularly Roman Catholic) references abound in goth culture.⁵

Among the band names cited in *The Hex Files: The Goth Bible* (Mercer 1996, the title of which itself illustrates a form of blasphemous play) are Maria Excommunicato, And Christ Wept, Cruciform, Christian Death, Whores of Babylon, Sisters of Mercy, Mater Noster, and Redemption. Although several bands have pagan or occult names such as Inkubus Sukkubus, Cries of Tammuz, and 13 Candles, Catholic references are more typical. One goth Web site featured a mock Catholic confessional box for mock confessions, most of which are erotic in nature. One confessor claimed to infiltrate Christian Web sites in the persona of a renegade nun.⁶ Goths tend to be conscious of the ways in which the subculture appropriates Christian iconography for profane or sacrilegious purposes. A Web discussion thread participant noted on a now defunct Web site that goths "hijack the imagery, and every second UK goth night/shop has a name with Biblical links (Barabbas, Judas, Heresy, Damnation, Pandemonium, Azrael's Apprentice, Sacrament). There's plenty of Biblical/Angel imagery present in the songs, tattoos and clothing, too."

Although goth parareligion often involves the decontextualization and reuse of religious material for secular purposes, such self-consciously secular practices may nonetheless have spiritual effects. Coupe writes of a "post-modernist mythopoeia" in which older myths are productively recycled for modern spiritual use (1997, 195). Such use is made easier for goths by the wide range of religious iconography commercially available in the thriving contemporary market for mystical paraphernalia. In my recent survey of Manchester goth shops in the Coliseum, an alternative shopping center, I found a wide range of religious items and iconography on sale. These included Communion goblets, Buddhist figurines, crystal balls, tarot cards, and voodoo dolls. The prominent Web and retail outlet, Alchemy Gothic, sells a complete gothic style replica of Catholic or High Anglican Communion items, Communion plate, wine flagon, candlesticks, decanters, wafer box, and goblet. The widespread availability of such diverse and decontextualized items enables forms of postmodern pastiche that suit individual goth inclinations and practices—some of which may retain elements of spirituality or a devotional intention.

Both female and male goths wear (often copious amounts of) silver jewelry, much of which recycles religious symbolism. Long-lived goth favorites for jewelry and T-shirts are the cross, the pentagram, and ancient Egyptian symbols such as the ankh and the eye of Horus. Crosses predate Christianity and goths avail themselves of diverse styles with varying symbolic attributes.⁷ Goths also like pagan symbols such as the "necromancer's sigil" and "witches' curse" ring, either of which might be worn for decoration, used for magical purposes, or both.

Although goth subculture is thus laden with religious iconography, there are no established norms for the interpretation of such signifiers. For some goths, religious icons such as ankhs and crucifixes may be worn for their perceived magical powers as well as their stylish cachet. By contrast, Lily, a Wiccan, asserted that other goths do not regard her pentagram as religious, because "as a goth, people just think it's a nice necklace rather than a way of life." Religious iconography is thus often perceived to function in purely aesthetic and stylistic ways.

In his classic study of punk subculture, Dick Hebdige notes the "double meaning" of everyday objects such as the safety pins and trash bags worn by punks as a medium of subcultural signification. Such appropriated objects have a symbolic dimension as tokens of resistance (Hebdige 2000, 2). The punk safety pin or garbage bag is thus partly a politically rebellious re-appropriation of everyday consumer objects in order to recycle rubbish as fashion. Goth practices tend instead to make use of the decontextualized quotation of traditional symbolism for either spiritual or ironic purposes. The targets of its irony are religious institutions, not consumer capitalism. The ludic play involves deliberate decontextualization of symbols that have already been used as devotional items by the pious at some point in history. Yet, in some cases, the ludic might also include the retention of a level of emotional or imaginative investment in the supposedly discarded beliefs operant through profane usage (perhaps that explains why the cross is still the best-selling goth icon).

One obvious stylistic feature of goth subculture is the preference for black, which persists as the predominant color for clothing, hair dye, nail polish, and sometimes lipstick. Black has many cultural associations that make it a congenial choice for religious contexts.⁸ Its opaque intensity is associated with melancholia, mourning, and death and with ecclesiastic associations of monastic renunciation. It also carries a promise of future resurrection and is the first stage in the alchemical process of transformation from lower to higher states of consciousness. Black is the color of bats, vampire garments, the dark of the moon, and awesome divinities such as the Hindu goddess Kali. As the negative of white, it has uncompromising and possibly anti-Christian tones as in the blasphemous profanation of the eucharistic elements in the black mass.

Goths sometimes use traditional religious materials to create alternative rituals of their own. A magician and former Catholic, Malaclypse, reported his burning of Frankincense to evoke a spiritual ambience because it is "evocative of early religious awe." For ritual purposes he also used "wands, stones, knives, models, fetishes, charms, talismans, the lot." By contrast, some spiritually oriented goths prefer not to use religious icons

at all. Jane told us she would not wear sacred emblems as jewelry because she regards sacred beliefs as “spiritual, not bodily” and prefers private, interior practices such as meditation and dreamwork. For still other goths, however, traditional symbols, or their modern variants, seem to function as catalysts to access levels of spiritual experience not amenable to language.

One popular goth interest, which may have spiritual as well as ludic overtones, is the focus on vampires. The potent combination of abjection, eroticism, and numinosity, among other features, makes the vampire a desirable figure for imaginative engagement. From its earliest days in the late-seventies punk era, goth subculture has developed a wide variety of vampiric styles.⁹ Vampires offer a fantasy of transgression, since they are figures who have rejected or transcended conventional notions of mortality and the afterlife. Vampires are often represented as seeking transgressive fulfillment through excess, pain, and danger: their eroticized consumption of blood seems to literalize the symbolic death of *le petit mort*, breaching physical boundaries through biting and blood drinking. Many goths view the vampire as a romantic outsider, tormented by existential angst. Like the vampire, some goths feel rejected by, and in turn reject, Christian religious norms and seek instead to embark on spiritual quests of their own. Thus, stylistic identification (and, much more rarely, more substantive forms of identification) with vampirism enables some goths to pursue spirituality in ways that may seem more socially subversive, erotic, and aesthetically appealing than mainstream religious conventions.

Goths’ imaginative identifications with vampires clearly operate at many different levels. Shops such as Manchester’s long-established Bats are goth-owned and sell vampire paraphernalia year-round. Beyond vampiric dressing, some goths are involved in dramatic role-playing games such as “Vampire: The Masquerade.” Such games demand lengthy commitment in terms of time and emotional engagement, as they may go on for days and involve a strong sense of group bonding. There is, however, a distinction to be drawn between the ludic vampiric identifications of vampiric style or role-playing games and the minority use of psychic vampirism in a context of magic, with the intention of manipulating others without their consent.

The fictional vampire’s blood drinking is a perverse eucharist that drains the life force of the human into the undead human. While blood drinking has symbolic value as fantasy and is the most notorious part of the supposed goth fixation with vampires, actual blood drinking occurs in only a small minority of cases and is frowned upon by most members of the subculture. One of my respondents, Frater C, described a phase of blood sharing in his teens, before he became aware of the danger of retrovirus transmis-

sion through such practice. He writes that none of his peers claimed to be “real” vampires, but they did discuss the pros and cons of a simulated vampiric existence. He “loved the vampire as an antihero and associated with it as an aesthetic rebel, a style icon rather than a conscious predator.” A lapsed Catholic, his practices were “consciously transgressive” and involved candles, Mozart’s Masonic funeral music, and phrases from the Mass. Ritual razors and chalices were used to share blood mixed with wine with his girlfriend and, occasionally, a close male friend. This practice was understood to be a vampiric, erotic, and ritual act of bonding. Blood drinking for Frater C thus entailed a blasphemously erotic perversion of the Catholic Mass. More typically, goths who identify with vampires do so in more imaginative ways. Indeed, the popularity of vampire-related activities attests to the pivotal role of fantasy for goths. Such fantasmatic identifications—with vampires as well as other nonhuman beings—often involve a level of emotional and psychic engagement that is parareligious in its intensity.

Goth Religious Affinities and Practices

As the previous section has demonstrated, many goths can be characterized as religious nonbelievers who, nonetheless, derive pleasure from inventive and often ironic play with religious signifiers—a practice that may sometimes involve spiritual effects. Moreover, overtly secular goth practices such as dancing, which do not necessarily involve religious icons or themes, may also partake of parareligious and/or spiritual qualities. But some goths, in addition to participating in such parareligious practices, experiment with nontraditional religions. The broadly pagan perspectives sought out by such goths include witchcraft/Wicca, Earth Mysteries, Chaos Magick, and “left-hand path” occultism. In tandem with these nontraditional religions, goths may also be interested in the paranormal, mysticism, or divination (e.g., the kabbalah, tarot, shamanism, UFOs, and the spirit world).¹⁰

The terms *pagan* and *neopagan* are amorphous rubrics that suggest some common ground between diverse nonmainstream religious practices. Pagans tend to be keen to differentiate themselves from New Age beliefs (Pearson, Roberts, and Samuel 1998, 54). According to the Religious Tolerance Organisation, neopaganism is “a modern faith which has been recently reconstructed from beliefs, deities, symbols, practices and other elements of an ancient religion” (Robinson 2002). As well as utilizing symbols, seasonal days of celebration, and beliefs and deities of ancient Celtic society (based in the United Kingdom on native traditions), neopaganism sometimes includes Masonic and ceremonial magic components.¹¹

There is a distinction between what more disparaging goths call “Bambi

Wicca," which focuses on wholesome, natural, life-affirming and "sunny" aspects of nature, and other more gloomy, angst-ridden, and nocturnal goth beliefs. Goth Pagans tend to favor polarized qualities, though these need not equate with good and evil. On a now defunct goth/pagan Web site, *my.en.com*, one writer highlighted the "dark" aspects he locates in goth spirituality: "Change, wildness, the unknown; sorrow, anger, and culturally unacceptable emotions; the setting of limits; the responsibility of the individual to speak the truth even if it is uncharitable." Such descriptions suggest that introspection and the channeling of intense emotions are key characteristics of goth paganism.

Although I did not encounter any practicing Christians at the Whitby gathering, I was able to contact goths of this description through Web sites and at Leeds University. My Christian goth respondents were from evangelical and charismatic sects and were eager to expound on beliefs and practices such as glossolalia, or "speaking in tongues." It is interesting that none of them was a member of mainstream branch of Christianity, such as Anglicanism or Roman Catholicism. Christian goths may thus regard themselves as a minority within Christianity. Indeed, in the context of a largely secular society, it is possible that younger Christians (perhaps those born after the mid-1960s) see even mainstream Christianity as a minority belief.

In comparison to the other goths I interviewed, few of the Christian respondents said much about their goth identity or showed an awareness of negative perceptions of the subculture. For them, goth identification seemed to take second place to religious concerns. One interviewee, Jennifer, asserted that the current portrayal of goths in the media is "not overly swayed in any direction." In doing so, she appeared to deliberately downplay or ignore the considerable animosity toward the subculture evident in the press and on television—possibly in order to conceal the Christian slant of some of these attacks. Several Christian goths used my questionnaire chiefly to assert their commitment to the Christian way of life and their belief that Jesus offers "life, trust, hope, peace, a relationship with God" (in the words of respondent Paul). Some of these self-identified goths appeared motivated by an evangelical desire to convert other goths, rather than by an interest in asserting their own goth identities. It is, of course, possible that such individuals affected goth style and created goth-oriented Web sites mainly to facilitate their proselytizing.¹²

I found evidence of tensions between non-Christian and Christian goths. This may be because many goths have rejected the Christian faith of their childhood. Jo, an atheist mathematician with an interest in religious matters, wrote, "I do have a prejudice against the Christian faith,

most goths do. I suppose what I dislike about Christianity is that the views and opinions which are indoctrinated upon you seems [sic] to restrict your freedom. In short you have to be good because god says you have to be good rather than being good because you have decided to.” Goths who have broken away from Christianity frequently stressed spiritual autonomy and self-determination. Some claimed to have difficulty understanding the agenda of Christian goths. For Chris, a goth magician, Christian goths “want martyrdom” by practicing “social masochism”—that is, they deliberately position themselves as outsiders in terms of both goth subculture and Christianity. Thus they are perceived as seeking a doubly anomalous status.

The relationship of goth and Christianity was read differently by Paul, who sent in two sets of answers to my questions. One was written from his current evangelical stance and the other from his former pagan perspective, in which “Mother Nature was God.” He perceived common ground between Christianity and the “religious yearning” of many goths: “I see my goth identity was an expression of my hurt with life, and disillusion with traditional religion as I had experienced it. I found that other goths also had this outlook and that it created a unifying bond between us, that allowed us to share bottled-up hurts.” For him, goths are ripe for conversion because of their disillusionment and their seeking for answers: “The goth culture that I was a part of was typified by a recognition of God, and a recognition of God to be part of my life, but a shocking realisation that the two did not correspond.” It appears, therefore, that a split was experienced by goth converts to Christianity between their secular goth identity and their present Christian one. Even though they might still espouse goth clothing styles and music, they have undergone a fundamental shift in their values and frames of reference.

Although Christian respondents tended, nonetheless, to see their outlook as harmonious with goth identity, non-Christian goths tended to see Christianity as incompatible with the subculture. Significantly, I found no evidence of any similar tension between atheist and pagan goths, who are both, in their own ways, in rebellion against religious orthodoxy. One reason for this might be what Runestone, a pagan goth, perceived as goths’ reticence about their private beliefs. When in the wider goth community, he wrote, “goths tend to discuss philosophical or moral topics [rather] than actual religion in any strict sense.” Evangelical Christianity’s conversion agenda transgresses this code of socially acceptable behavior.¹³

Some goths, such as Jo, regard themselves as having achieved moral awareness outside the structures of a religious faith. Others seeking a spiritual path create a personalized version of religion, crafting their own hybrid

blend of ancient or exotic systems. Lucrezia described herself as a Setite (the Temple of Set broke off from Anton le Vey's Church of Satan in 1975 under the leadership of Michael Aquino). A polytheist, she stressed self-determination because "morality is a liquid identity most of which was created in the UK by the [established] Church, so I generally guide my self on that one, deciding which is for the best." One feminist pagan, who discovered her chosen path via goth and feminist friends, is a polytheist but chooses the Egyptian goddess Isis and the Celtic Hurn the Hunter as her god and goddess. She cited the Law of Threefold Return, in which actions return back to the doer multiplied thrice, as a moral structure that molds pagan behavior.

Frater C, a theology graduate, said he rejects God with a capital G in favor of a more congenial, eclectic pantheon of his own. He asserted that "most of what people think of as 'God' is a jumped-up Bronze Age war demon which has been disastrously associated, by accident of History, with the Prime Source. It is schizophrenic, insane and vampiric in that it feeds upon the life force of its slaves, perpetuating its viral intelligence. Humanity needs to evolve beyond it." He described a preference for a personal pantheon of gods "who touch my soul with laughter, love, freedom or wisdom," and cited "Eris, Baphomet, Odin, Shakti, Ganeysha, Dionysus and some aspects of Horus or Christ." Such pastiche typifies the goth appropriation of existing concepts and iconography in order to customize a congenial system.

Although most of my respondents presented their beliefs as personal free choice, Tao emphasized the search for religion as a cultural and psychological requirement of modern life. A Taoist/Wiccan, she wrote, "I believe that there is a universal something, whether that is the essence of life or deity I don't know. I know we create individual deities and religions to help us get our heads round how huge life is; this is a cultural thing and gives us a focus for our prayers and rituals." For her, the sacred principle is both culturally mediated and a psychological projection providing a degree of stability in the face of existential uncertainty.

Within the ecumenical goth ethos, there are also those with religious perspectives of the "left-hand path," the "dark side" of magical and religious philosophy. Literally "hidden or secret," the occult involves esoteric practices. Three identifiable strands are divination, religious and spiritual practices, and magic, which deploys "ritual acts performed with the intent to cause change or transform the practitioner" (Emick 2002). This definition appears to echo Aleister Crowley's phrase "the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will" (1976, xii). Occultism is regarded

as diabolism by religious orthodoxy, and as romantic self-determination by its practitioners. Within occultism itself, there is also a clearly marked bifurcation between interests of the right- and left-hand paths.

Reverend X, a Satanist respondent, contended that "The All is One: all religion stems from one universal religion that is older than any bible." For him, satanism is a human-centered religion that mobilizes "a worship of ones self [*sic*]." Reverend X stressed hedonism as a life-asserting practice. He strongly refuted media portrayals of occultists as evil baby-killers who "kill in the name of a deity we do not even worship 'Satan.'" He also described receiving hate mail and verbal attacks from some Christians, whom he regards as passive and easily led "sheep." Yet he claimed to have an open mind about others' religious beliefs, "so long as they are strong in their faith and respect other religions," including his own, which may suggest that he finds any religion more congenial than none at all.

I invited feedback from all respondents on the religious aspects of goth subculture and the perceived relationship between goth and religious identity. Clothing styles and iconographic jewelry were cited as having spiritual significance from both religious and parareligious perspectives. Some responses, including one from Eris, made clear that goths often familiarize themselves with religious texts in order to use them for sacrilegious or ludic ends. For Jo, "Goths have a fascination with all the bad bits from the Bible (they are more fun!)." Eris explained his habit of attending evangelical gatherings to gleefully argue with fundamentalists, quoting the Bible in an attempt to deconvert them. His expenditure of time and energy in this apparently ludic pursuit may suggest a kind of reverse evangelism driven by a moral conviction of his own. Significantly, he disapproved of Christian evangelism in the context of goth company.

Goths identified various aspects of the subculture as having spiritual, religious, or parareligious qualities, including dancing, lyrics that foreground myth and folklore, and the visiting of graveyards. It is "a pretty spiritual scene" overall, to quote Lucrezia, and one that is sufficiently broad-minded to facilitate the congenial exchange of ideas about occult practices. One goth witch, Hecate, found her marginal position desirable: "As a witch and a Goth I sit between worlds, always on the edges." Such remarks suggest an explicit connection between goth as a deliberately chosen counter-cultural identity and the embrace of a marginalized religious practice. She cited an Inkubus Sukkubus concert where the band performed an invocation to Hecate that "blew the room away." For her, goth subculture feeds into witchcraft particularly through music and lyrics that can fulfill a religious function for those seeking them, whereas nonreligious goths might

enjoy the music in its own right. Her own spiritual practice deploys goth subculture as both a site of and stimulus for religious activity.

Some respondents sought to distinguish their (often private) religious identity from their (public) goth one. This distinction between goth identity and religious affiliation was manifest across the spectrum. Nonpracticing goths tended to describe media religious stereotypes as an affront to their secular perspective. All respondents disliked the idea of being stereotyped as members of an evil, satanic subculture. In the United Kingdom, there is a long tradition of antioccult tabloid journalism, most notoriously in the 1930s attacks on Aleister Crowley as "the wickedest man in the world" by the newspapers owned by press baron Lord Beaverbrook. So-called "Black Magic" is a staple of sensationalist Sunday newspapers such as *News of the World*. Deliberately controversial goth icons such as Marilyn Manson and Black Metal bands like Cradle of Filth make good tabloid copy. Reverend X highlighted such media exploitation and its engineering of prejudice when he wrote:

Others would assume that I am some kind of "Mansonite" which is a load. I am first and foremost myself and my Satanism is part of who I am. My being a "goth" I try to keep my religion separate from my club persona because I am aware that many goths have other views be it an occult or a Christian view so I show the respect I want to get in return. I am a Satanist not a Satanic evangelist.

This comment identifies goth pluralism and tolerance of other religions as well as the existence of a code of "good taste" and mutual respect between goths. With the exception of Christian goths noticed above, most goths do not proselytize in a social context.

Runestone also distinguished between his goth and religious identity. For him, in goth there is "an underlying sense of creativity and a need to stand out from the crowd which perhaps points to a more meaningful mode of expression than others. I think the religious identity works on the same basis but is quite distinct." Frater C thought that goth subcultural identity flirts with Christian and pagan imagery but is "more cultic than religious," which reflects the distinction between magic and religion cited earlier. He suggested a sense of irony in the subculture, in which a more aesthetic and less seriously devout stance operates in the use of religious imagery.

Those respondents who practiced a spiritual discipline generally gave a higher meaning to their religious identity than to their goth identity. This tendency was, as we have seen, especially overt in the case of Christian interviewees. One Christian, Peter, found the non-Christian goth scene pri-

marily hedonistic and has encountered only a few "serious pagans," but he admitted that this could be because he mixes chiefly with Christian goths. In fact, the self-identified pagan goths we encountered expressed a passionate adherence to their beliefs. Another Christian goth, Patrick, was quite perceptive about the parareligious aspects of the subculture, referencing a general ambience of spirituality, song lyrics and "a need to worship something."

The range of beliefs described as religious or spiritual by my respondents was diverse. Most goths claimed to have a respectful attitude toward the religious views of others. Despite their personal rejection of Christianity, pagan and atheist goths regarded goth subculture as tolerant toward religious diversity. It is perhaps because many goths have experienced judgmental attitudes from nongoths that they are less likely to be intolerant of those within their subculture who profess different faiths.

Conclusion

The goth parareligious habitus is semiotically constructed through a variety of social practices including style, group activities such as dancing, and social spaces such as the goth nightclub or festival. The construction of goth identities often involves both inventive play with religious iconography and participation in secular activities that may have parareligious dimensions. It may also involve experimentation with nontraditional religious practices. Apart from some animosity between Christians and non-Christians that may reflect patterns of prejudice outside the subculture, I found goths to be very tolerant of religious diversity. Overall the subculture appears to afford a respectful space for a range of spiritual perspectives. This tolerance crosses national, ethnic, and age group identities. Durkheim viewed religion as preeminently a social ritual with the function of binding society together. The goth oppositional stance on religious orthodoxy and other social norms may provide a basis for bonding against mainstream conventions. In addition, goths may be united by a common interest in spiritual matters broadly construed, including pious, impious, and playful uses of traditional and nontraditional religious icons, practices, and themes.

Despite such prevalent usage of religious material, goth is not a religious subculture per se. Rather, goth is a subculture that encourages a do-it-yourself and bricolage approach to spirituality and belief. According to Coupe, the postmodern usage of myth may have socially and spiritually liberatory effects. He asserts that "myth as a play of past paradigm and future possibility, gives expression to the 'other,' to those persons and causes excluded from the present hierarchy" (1997, 196). This positive perspective

supports the views of those goths who regard themselves as desirably transgressive and countercultural in their spiritual practices. Goth subculture's fostering of such rebellious attitudes over the last two decades may be sustained partly by the availability of richly eclectic and experimental spiritual practices.

In practice, goths are members of a frequently demonized, though generally innocuous subculture that deliberately cultivates an aesthetic steeped in religious references and stylization. From the vantage of Bourdieu's class-based analysis, goth might well be read as an aestheticized lifestyle that seeks to bracket off "the nature and function of the object represented and to exclude any 'naïve' reaction—horror at the horrible, desire for the desirable, pious reverence for the sacred—along with all purely ethical responses, in order to concentrate solely upon the mode of representation, the style, perceived and appreciated by comparison to other styles" (1989, 54). For Bourdieu, such deliberate "misrecognition" is part of the "playful seriousness" of the economically privileged "baby bourgeois" who refuse complicity with their parents' values yet acknowledge their centrality by transgression (55). He holds little truck with the ludic creativity of subcultures and reduces their spirituality to "childish" attempts at blasphemy.

For Bourdieu, such bohemian gestures of opposition "fulfil the traditional role of the avant-garde which, by its very existence, helps to keep the cultural game functioning" (251). One might argue that the relation between goth religion or parareligion and established religion is analogous to the relation between the avant-garde and the dominant culture in Bourdieu's analysis. In the United Kingdom, however, this picture is complicated by several factors. Contemporary religious culture is officially tolerant and heterodox, seeking to accommodate the several faiths of a multicultural society, while the Church of England is still the official established religion. In practice, white middle-class religious culture is marked by two tendencies that gravitate against the religious establishment. These are the rapidly declining attendance at orthodox Christian churches and the growth of alternative and New Age spiritual interests. Within this context, then, the two strands I have identified in goth—religion and parareligion—still sit, albeit uneasily, in the same pew as its parent culture.

I accept the validity of Bourdieu's identification of the class-based nature of taste. It is, however, regrettable that the formidable status and widespread influence of his critique, which includes the hegemonic position of bohemianism, may partly be responsible for the exclusion of goth studies from culturalist work until fairly recently. Owing to goth's perceived status as the affectation of decadence by middle-class youth, it has not been chosen for study in the way that working-class youth movements such as mods or dance

culture have, despite its longevity of over three decades. A further hidden agenda here might be the wish of culturalist researchers to repudiate their own middle-class status. It has, then, been passed over by a materialist perspective uninterested in the vibrant DIY spirituality outside the mainstream sociology of religion. Ironically, this reinforces the views of Christian fundamentalists who accuse goth culture of moral decadence because of its use of religious sign-systems.

Hopefully, this brief study will assist in redressing the balance by opening up the area of goth and religion to further exploration. Goth remains a parareligious subculture that fosters spiritual eclecticism and religious tolerance. As well as the religious variants that flourish in a tolerant atmosphere, what my informant Chris called the parareligious "sacred aesthetic" of goth subculture itself suggests a sacramental attitude to life.

Informants

Chris, face-to-face interview with Anna Powell, April 15–16, 2003.

Eris, face-to-face interview with Anna Powell, June 6, 2003.

Fratr C, personal correspondence with Anna Powell, May 13, 2002.

Fratr C, face-to-face interview with Anna Powell and Andrew Fereday, Whitby, U.K., November 3, 2001.

Hecate, e-mail interview with Andrew Fereday, April 5, 2002.

Jan, e-mail interview with Anna Powell, May 8, 2002.

Jane, face-to-face interview with Anna Powell and Andrew Fereday, Whitby, U.K., November 3, 2001.

Jennifer, e-mail interview with Anna Powell, April 23, 2002.

Jo, e-mail interview with Anna Powell, November 10 and December 6, 2002.

Lily, face-to-face interview with Anna Powell and Andrew Fereday, Whitby, U.K., November 3, 2001.

Lucrezia, e-mail interview with Andrew Fereday, December 1, 2001.

Malaclypse, face-to-face interview with Anna Powell and Andrew Fereday, Whitby, U.K. November 3, 2001.

Patrick, e-mail interview with Andrew Fereday, April 14, 2002.

Paul, e-mail interview with Andrew Fereday, February 12, 2002.

Peter, e-mail interview with Andrew Fereday, December 20, 2001.

Reverend X, e-mail interview with Andrew Fereday, November 29, 2001.

Runestone, e-mail interview with Andrew Fereday, January 17, 2002.

Sandra, e-mail interview with Anna Powell, May 7, 2002.

Tao, e-mail interview with Andrew Fereday, November 28, 2001.

Notes

1. As a researcher, the author of this chapter has what Sarah Thornton, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, would describe as "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995, 11). I am an old-style romantic gothic, familiar with

the subculture since its early days in the 1980s. I would like to acknowledge the research assistance of Andy Fereday whose experience as a manager of a successful goth/alternative nightclub was especially helpful in helping me to formulate my discussion of goth clubs.

2. In addition to goth music and commerce, the gathering offers open workshops on topics such as mythology, shamanism, and witchcraft.
3. Religious opinions are classified as "sensitive data" in the United Kingdom, so I have adopted pseudonyms for my respondents and omitted their e-mail addresses. My research was carried out under the terms of this understanding. The dates of the interviews are given in a section following these notes.
4. This description was offered on a now defunct Web site, slashgoth.org.
5. Significantly, although I did not meet any actively practicing Roman Catholics in my research, many of those I interviewed were lapsed or former Catholics.
6. This information was available on a now defunct Web site, www.oldcuriosityshop.co.uk.
7. Alchemy Gothic stocks the following variants: Brogan Papal cross, Hermetic cross, Doom cross, Fleury cross, Krakowa crucifix, Transfix (a vampire cross), and Cagliostro's cross. They also sell hybrid symbols, such as a pentagram entwined with Celtic knotwork and mythical beasts.
8. Black clearly has racial overtones, but the ethnic aspects in goth culture require a separate study outside the scope of this chapter.
9. As early as 1976, the Damned's bassist, Dave Vanian, wore whiteface, dark makeup, and formal men's garments, long associated with vampires. Bauhaus's song "Bela Lugosi's Dead" (1979), which became a veritable goth anthem, pushed this affinity for the vampiric even further. Female goth style includes many vampiric touches such as loose long hair, pallor, dark berry lipstick, long pointed fingernails, and cloaks. One finds many observable connections between goth styles and the costumes, hairstyles, and makeup of vampire films, from the Hammer movies of the 1960s to the present day.
10. Mick Mercer's goth sourcebooks *The Hex Files: The Goth Bible* (1996) and *Twenty-First Century Goth* (2002) are rich sources of information on goth spirituality.
11. The development of Wicca and witchcraft in Britain emerged in the late 1940s under the aegis of Gerald Gardner, Dion Fortune, Doreen Valiente and others.
12. One such example was a now defunct Web site urging Goths to convert to Christianity, www.fortheloveofagoth.
13. Over the last couple of years a Christian goth nightclub has been running in a High Anglican Church in Manchester. Many of the participants are not Christian (though the DJs are—but the music and style follows typical goth tastes) and the ambience is not overtly aiming to convert. I have attended this club and interviewed the DJs in some depth about their project. See <http://www.aranights.com/Powell.htm>.



GOTHIC FETISHISM



As you stand in the small foyer behind a black-cowled young woman in five-inch-platform boots and her spiky-haired male companion, the pulse of the music is already audible, though muted. The sweet smell of clove cigarettes fails to mask the sweeter smell of stale beer and the naked black-light lightbulb screwed into the ceiling fixture overhead illuminates cat hair covering the woman's robe, as well as her companion's black trench-coat.

The couple in front of you disappears inside and you move forward only to be confronted by a goateed man with a shaved head and prominent tattoos (fig. 1). He is dressed in a black leather corset and black skirt and wields an impressively large purple flashlight. He inspects your license and then your outfit—although you have not dressed for the “cybersex” theme, your black leather pants and Bella Morte concert T pass muster—and then takes your cover charge. In return, you receive a small black bat stamp on your right hand and are ushered into the dimly lit club.

The volume of the music increases as you enter, as does the pungency of the clove cigarettes. Confronting you almost immediately are two individuals, an attractive young man and woman, stretched out head to toe on a covered pool table, seemingly naked except for strategically arranged fruits and chocolates. A raven-tressed young woman in a black dress with black wings attached to the back plucks a strawberry from the table and feeds it to the male “human buffet” participant. To your right, the long bar stretching before you to the back of the small club is packed with men and women dressed almost exclusively in black, socializing, smoking, and drinking cocktails out of plastic cups. To your left, you spy the DJ booth through an entryway and catch a glimpse of swirling colored lights and bodies in motion.

You head in the direction of the DJ booth and, as you pass through the



Fig. 1: Seth

entryway, the music becomes so loud that attempts at conversation are rendered futile. You can feel the bass in your chest. Colored lights swirl and pulse in time with the music, and the dancers respond in a variety of fashions. Most are dancing without partners. A young woman in a black Morticia Addams dress holds the end of her gown extended in her gloved hand and tilts back and forth and twirls. A man with a blue mohawk and what appear to be claws on his fingers moves with a crouching motion along the wall. In the corner, a thin middle-aged man in a shiny PVC top and a tightly corseted woman grind to the rhythm.

What immediately attracts your attention, however, is the stage at the far end of the room, illuminated by colored stage lights. A young woman is standing with her back to the dance floor, legs spread apart, arms extended. There are shackles on her wrists attached to chains that descend from the ceiling. She has vividly red Raggedy Ann hair that has been pulled into a high pony-tail and is topless—just the tips of the black electrical tape covering her nipples are visible to the crowd. Behind her is a man with long brown hair, dressed in a black leather hat, leather pants, and a white pirate shirt. He holds a silver knife that he runs across the woman's back in arabesque patterns (fig. 2). He then puts the knife down and unclips a long leather



Fig. 2:
Knife play,
Master Jarrett

flogger from his belt. Twirling the leather straps expertly, he flicks them lightly across the woman's back and buttocks. The lashing then picks up in intensity and the woman's back reddens where struck. Subsequently, the dom varies the intensity and placement of the flogging, even gently swaying the flogger between the woman's legs so that it wraps upward in front. The woman arches her head toward the ceiling. Eventually, the flogging ends and after lightly massaging the woman's back, she is unshackled and steps down from the stage. As she does so, a young man removes his shirt, takes her place, and readies himself for "fetish play" at the monthly Hartford "gothic industrial fetish" event, BOUND.

This chapter focuses on the increasing visibility of fetishism and fetish play within the American goth subculture. At club events that feature goth music and cater to goth clienteles like BOUND in Hartford and Washington, D.C.; Sin in Miami; Bondage-a-Go-Go in San Francisco and Minneapolis; Club Fetish in St. Louis; the Fantasy Factory in Boston; and Bar Sinister in Hollywood, patrons have been or currently are permitted to engage in often highly visible consensual s-m "fetish play." Equipment such as racks and horses¹ is typically made available to restrain s-m participants, "toys" such as floggers and hot wax are provided, and a dominatrix is employed to instruct and administer sensations of varying intensities. While the music plays, some goths engage in s-m "scenes."

The basis for this discussion is my own experience as a participant observer within the American goth scene. I first developed an interest in

goth music in the mid-1980s and, since 1996, I have been an active goth and industrial DJ and event promoter. In addition to hosting and DJing at BOUND Hartford and BOUND D.C., I have served as resident DJ for ongoing events in D.C., New York City, and Michigan, and guest spots have taken me to goth events across the country, from Florida to California, and into Canada. My role as DJ and promoter has allowed me to develop close ties with goth record labels and other goth DJs and promoters and to interact, both in person and online, with members of the goth scene from around North America and, to a certain extent, the rest of the world. During the course of my over-fifteen-year relationship with goth music and participants, I have observed the increasing incorporation of S-M sexual practice and fetish culture into the goth scene. This convergence of goth and fetish cultures suggests that the goth subculture is engaged with the dominant culture in a complex negotiation, in which goth is attempting to retain its rebellious edge by adapting its practices to stay one step ahead of dominant trends. At the same time, goth's incorporation of aspects of fetish culture seems calculated to appeal to "adventurous" members of mainstream culture who share the goth subculture's resistant attitude to traditional sexual roles and practices. Goth's incorporation of fetish play therefore can be considered as a strategic extension of its historically subversive attitude toward dominant sexual mores designed to keep the scene from being absorbed by the mainstream while at the same time preventing it from stagnating by attracting new participants.

I should state up front that what I will elaborate upon below is what I perceive to be an important trend in the American goth subculture and, like any generalization about a large group of people, does not necessarily hold true across the board for all participants. There are certainly goth events that do not feature an explicit emphasis on fetish play or S-M sexual practices and there are goth participants who have no interest in fetish play. Indeed, some goth subcultural members resent the increasingly prominent association of goth and fetishism. However, marketing trends for goth bands and events, developing goth fashions, and attending goth events across the country has made it clear to me that this convergence of goth and fetish subcultures is occurring and that it is a significant development within the American goth scene.

Before examining this convergence of subcultural practices, I first need to address the terminological confusion surrounding goth deployment of the term *fetishism*. Briefly, the notion of fetishism, as Vicki Goldberg observes in her essay "The Fashionable Fetish" (1998), designates a complex constellation of ideas. The link between anthropological, Marxist, and psychoana-

lytic definitions of the fetish and fetishism is that, in each case, a particular material object is presumed to have inherent value or magical powers, when in fact the value or power of the object is ascribed to it from without.² In other words, the fetish object is endowed with meaning and power by an individual or culture, but this endowment is then forgotten or repressed and the importance of the object is presumed to be something intrinsic to the object itself.

Within the American goth scene, however (and, to a certain extent, American culture more broadly), the term *fetishism* has expanded into a sort of catch-all designation for erotic practices that emphasize not only particular objects (lingerie, shoes) and body parts (feet, breasts, hair), but also particular materials, such as rubber, latex, and leather, that highlight the form of the body. Thus, while I was associated with BOUND in D.C. and, later, Hartford, the event featured theme nights focusing on such typically fetishistic objects and practices as uniforms, tattoos, and cross-dressing. Patrons also generally dressed in "fetish wear," which included corsets, stiletto heels, fishnet stockings, dog collars, a great deal of leather and, to a lesser extent, rubber, latex, and PVC (all forms of fashion that remain in vogue at goth clubs around the country, whether or not these events explicitly advertise a fetish theme or promote fetish play). Piercings and tattoos were common, as was Axel jewelry—silver rings and articulated nail extensions resembling claws.

In addition to emphasis on particular objects, materials, and sartorial practices, *fetishism*, and, more frequently, *fetish play* in common goth parlance also tend to designate role-playing scenarios, particularly "S-M scenes" involving dominance and submission. From a psychoanalytic perspective, sadomasochistic practices do not necessarily involve fetishism and vice versa.³ However, goth events advertising or incorporating fetish play most often will be referring to the availability of a dominatrix (or "dom") and equipment such as restraints, racks, floggers, and candle wax. At such events, to participate in fetish play is to allow oneself to be placed in restraints and spanked, flogged, and manipulated in ways that can also include being shocked or cut. Alternatively, one can assume the role of the dom and, under supervision, can administer sensations to a partner.

Therefore, goth events and venues that emphasize fetishism and advertise fetish play typically are soliciting patrons who dress in what is considered to be fetish attire and who are interested either in observing or participating in S-M scenes. My use of the terms *fetishism* and *fetish play* in this chapter will reflect the ways in which these terms are used within the American goth scene itself and therefore will involve a conflation of the psychoanalytic defini-



Fig. 3: "Fetish play" at BOUND

tions of fetishism, sadism, and masochism. In particular, when I reference "fetish play," I will be referring to participation in S-M scenarios involving restraint and bodily manipulations of varying intensities.

It is also important to recognize that emphases on fetishism, S-M, and subversive sexual practices more generally are not new developments within goth subculture. Since its beginnings in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s, goth has articulated a clear refusal of traditional standards of sexual propriety and has sought to confound and undermine those standards in dress and attitude. It has thumbed its nose at conventional sexual decorum by adopting sartorial patterns that fail to reinscribe a discrete gender dichotomy and by appearing to accept, and in some cases even to celebrate, sexual practices considered unusual, bizarre, or deviant by the larger culture.

From its inception, part of goth subculture's cultural "refusal," its resistance to mainstream culture, has been its subversive approach to gender stereotypes and conventional sexual norms. Paul Hodgkinson (2002) observes in early Bauhaus and its following what he refers to as a "dark twisted form of androgyny" (36) that developed into what he terms "dark femininity" (36), and Gordon Melton (1994) notes goth's "self-conscious critique of the dominant sexual mores of late twentieth century society" (268). According to Melton, goth subculture historically has demanded sexual freedom (268), has been open to alternative sexualities (268), and has "argued for the destruction of the taboos that surround sado-masochism . . . , fetishism, bondage, and all sexual activities still considered perverted even by many who consider themselves otherwise sexually liberated" (269).

As part of its challenge to conventional sexual attitudes and practices, fetish attire was appropriated from punk by goth and incorporated into goth fashion early on. Valerie Steele notes in *Fetish: Fashion, Sex and Power* (1996) the prominence of fetish fashion among musical performers in the 1970s and observes and references goth icon Siouxsie of Siouxsie and the Banshees as an example: "The female singer Siouxsie Sioux wore black underpants in wet-look vinyl, a harness bra, one thigh-high black boot, and one high-heeled shoe with an ankle strap that said 'Bondage.' Also a Nazi armband" (37). Hodkinson comments along these lines that "a particularly important and lasting addition to the [goth] style was [the band] Specimen's use of ripped fishnet and other see-through fabrics in the form of tops as well as tights" (2002, 36). Gavin Baddeley (2002) observes that both Siouxsie Sioux and Lydia Lunch appropriated an emphasis on fetish from punk in order to develop their "powerful dominatrix personae" (227).

However, although emphasis on sexual provocation and transgression, including fetish and s-m themes and imagery, was a part of goth subculture from the start, this pattern of erotic rebelliousness increasingly has been elaborated upon via the explicit and highly visible incorporation of s-m and fetishistic sexual practices to the point that fetish attire and fetish play have now become almost *de rigueur* at many goth events. This development, which is connected to a wider interest in alternative sexual practices in twenty-first-century America, appears to be one means through which goth seeks to retain its transgressive edge and continue its historical opposition to traditional sexual attitudes that many goths regard as close-minded. In order to develop this position further, I will now examine manifestations of this goth/fetish convergence, focusing on goth/fetish bands, goth/fetish fashion, and what is termed *fetish play* at goth events.

Goth/Fetish Bands

Although fetishistic and s-m themes and images are now common in contemporary goth music, certain bands and artists are especially associated with unconventional sexual practices. Probably the most consistent—and consistently shocking—act in this respect is the band the Genitorturers. The band's 1993 debut, *120 Days of Genitorture*, not only alludes to the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom* in the title and references bondage, sadism, and masochism in just about every song but also includes a cover image of the band's lead singer, Gen, dressed in leather biker-gear and piercing her tongue with something akin to a barbecue skewer (fig. 4). The image on the back of the album is even more extreme and features a head-shot of an individual (sex indeterminate, but strands of long blonde hair suggest that it is Gen) in a studded-black leather bondage head mask with fake bulging



Fig. 4: Gen of Genitorturers, CD cover

eyes and protruding pierced tongue. The individual's mouth is being forced open with a pair of heavy-duty steel calipers. More recent releases by the band include 1998's *Sin City*, which features Gen on the cover brandishing a red yardstick, ready to administer a spanking; 1999's *Machine Love*, the cover of which is dominated by an imposing contraption somewhere between giant strap-on dildo and monstrous vibrator; and 2002's *Flesh Is the Law*, which features Gen on the cover with a flogger.

Clearly, the intent of the Genitorturers is to shock, titillate, and gratify listeners' desires to partake in the socially outré. Baddeley writes of the Genitorturers' live performances that "Gen, the band's statuesque, ice-blond singer and mistress of ceremonies, presides over a musical rite where 'slaves' are flogged, penises are nailed to ladders or sewn up inside the scrotum, and rowdy hecklers are sodomised with police batons" (2002, 231). Unsurprisingly, the band's performances have from time to time been banned or protested.

Equally committed to shocking the mainstream is Spanish act Gothic Sex, who on their Web site (n.d.) describe their sound as "Gothic Doom Metal" in the vein of goth groups Love Like Blood, Type O Negative, and Lacrimosa. The band's most recent release, the 1998 album *Laments*, is a rarity in the goth world, in that the cover image appears to feature two men engaged in S-M activity. Although the image is dimly lit, it appears to present a male dom—likely Gothic Sex's frontman, Lord Gothic—in full S-M leather regalia, standing behind another man and, with one hand on the man's throat, reaching down with the other hand to perform some manipula-

tion of the man's genitals. According to the band's Web site, on their 1994 "Death" tour, "a daring show shocked the audience, playing and performing with 3 of the most interesting elements of the band: sex, gore & sado-masochism. All kind[s] of scenes were performed: murders, mutilations, flagellation [sic], suicides, depravation and ultraviolence, using elements like pig heads, cow hearts, [and] entrails that could hurt the audience[']s sensibility since they just can't step aside like in a movie, getting hit by blood or meat anytime on [sic] the show." As with Genitorturers, Gothic Sex explicitly combines an emphasis on s-m and nonstandard sexual practices with gothic themes and music designed to appeal to members of the goth subculture.

French act Die Form (with an astounding thirty-six releases to its name), like the Genitorturers and Gothic Sex, has made a career out of dwelling on nonstandard sexual practices and the dark side of human desire. The somewhat delirious promotional text imprinted on the band's 1996 release *Die Form: Vicious Circles—The Best Of* describes the band as follows: "Perverse and subversive images, sado-masochistic fascination with sexuality and death . . . Die Form exhibits the esthetic outrage oscillation on the boundary of interdicts." The images selected to adorn the band's many recordings further this perception. The front cover for the *Vicious Circles* release features Die Form band member Elaine P. dressed as a corseted nun, surrounded by flames, and writhing in simultaneous ecstasy and agony as she holds her breasts (fig. 5). The cover to the band's 2000 release *Extremum* features a surrealistic and disturbing black-and-white image of Elaine P. naked and nose-to-nose with a copy of herself. The two mirror reflections are joined at the belly, like Siamese twins, with an ominous phallic device pointing upward between the legs of the conjoined figures (fig. 6). Although not nearly as graphic and extreme as the Genitorturers in its use of s-m imagery, Die Form just as clearly takes what has traditionally been considered perverse and taboo and puts it center stage.

Other notable bands incorporated into the goth scene that make use of fetishistic and s-m imagery and themes include the long-running Boston-based act Sleep Chamber, whose lead singer, John Zewizz, has argued that sexual practices generally considered threatening and perverse are "merely sexual foreplay and, alone, of harmless and pleasure-producing [sic]" (Melton 1994, 269). Sleep Chamber is accompanied on stage by the Barbitchuettes, "a coterie of lace and leather clad female dancers who bring the music's aesthetic to life with their improvised erotic gyrations" (Baddeley 2002, 231). Boston's More Machine Than Man emphasizes s-m imagery in its graphics and marketing. The cover to the band's 2001 release *Electrolust*



Fig. 5: Elaine P. of Die Form, CD cover



Fig. 6: Elaine P. of Die Form, CD cover

features band member Tasha in a leather bondage collar being threatened with a two-pronged electric cattle prod. San Francisco's Spanking Machine; New York's Nuns; Texas' Bozo Porno Circus; Germany's Call and Seelenkrank; the U.K.'s Midnight Configuration and Athamay; and the collaborative effort between goth diva Gitane Demone (most notable for her participation in the band Christian Death) and Marc Ichx, called Demonix, all make prominent use of fetishistic themes and images in their music and marketing.

It may be suggested that at least some musical groups and artists mar-



Fig. 7: Seelenkrank,
CD cover



Fig. 8: Citane Demone,
CD cover

keted to and consumed by goths make use of intentionally provocative sexual imagery and themes partially or wholly to attract attention and thereby to sell albums rather than sincerely to promote erotic practices generally considered deviant. Self-identified goth lead singer Jess X of the fetish-based band Athamay, for instance, wrote me that, "When we first started the band, I wanted to write lyrics other than I'm sad and sit in a graveyard type thing! So sex and pain seemed a good way to grab peoples [*sic*] attention!" (e-mail, June 2001). While this is not to say that Athamay does not support diversification of sexual practice, it does indicate that the band, at least in part, gravitated toward the fetish scene as a way to distinguish and market itself.

It is also notable that musical artists and, as we shall see, event promoters

that deploy fetish imagery as marketing strategy privilege the female body almost exclusively (with the notable exception of Gothic Sex). The most frequently repeated image is that of an attractive woman dressed provocatively in fetish attire. The woman is often identifiable as a dominatrix (e.g., *Gen of the Genitorturers*) or, less often, as a slave (e.g., *Tasha of More Machine Than Man*). Women are sometimes presented together in S-M scenes, as are men and women. In the latter, women are almost always presented as doms, while the men are submissives ("subs"). In fetish imagery marketed to the goth subculture, men seldom appear alone and almost never appear with each other.

This emphasis on the provocatively posed female body and general avoidance of the male body suggests that goth bands and promoters are "picking their kink" in order to titillate and appear transgressive without alienating potential mainstream crossovers. Steele comments that "'perversity' sells" (1996, 9). However, not all perversities sell equally well or are equally fashionable. The assumption for goth marketing seems to be that male homoeroticism does not sell—or does not sell to the right target audience. Goth artists and promoters defend the exclusion of solitary and group male images on the basis of profit motive: the logic is that such images would alienate their primary heterosexual goth clientele and few members of homosexual subcultures (i.e., gay males, who are presumed to be the only viewers enticed by images of single men and groups of men in fetish attire) are likely to attend goth events. Such representations of women—and nonrepresentations of men—suggest that contemporary goth marketing is in dialogue with mainstream marketing (to a certain extent having helped shape contemporary fashion trends incorporating elements of fetish fashion) and, despite claims to the contrary, shares the underlying homophobia pervasive in the broader sphere. Provocative sexual imagery is fashionable in goth advertising and promotion as long as it remains embedded firmly within a heterosexual matrix. Images of lesbianism are permissible as long as the models conform to traditional standards of feminine beauty and can be fantasized as receptive to male sexual advances (fig. 9).

Goth/Fetish Event Marketing

Many American goth events now incorporate both fetish performances and opportunities for patrons to engage in consensual fetish play into their structures, and this has become a focus of event promotion. For example, the event known as *BOUND*, which currently runs in Washington, D.C., and Hartford and has at various times operated in other cities, including New York, Philadelphia, and Reykjavik, bills itself as a "Gothic Industrial Fetish"



Fig. 9: BOUND 2 flier, postcard

event.⁴ The advertisements for BOUND, in keeping with trends in marketing of goth/fetish musical releases, incorporate fetish and s-m imagery emphasizing provocatively posed young women presented individually or together with whips or ball gags, dressed in leather, rubber, or PVC, and perched precariously upon six-inch heels. BOUND features revolving fetish themes that change for each event, and patrons are encouraged to dress to suit the themes. Themes have included “fetish prom night,” “uniform discipline night,” “religious sects night,” “gender fuck night,” “cyber sex night,” and the ever-popular “human buffet night,” during which near-nude individuals are laid out upon a table and artfully decorated as the centerpieces to a buffet including fruit, cheese, and other snacks. The BOUND 2000 “Winter Ball” flier attempts to appeal to several markets simultaneously (fig. 10). Making use of anachronistic bright colors, the central image is that of the profile of a young woman with a ball gag in her mouth. Around her eye is painted a characteristic goth icon, an eye of Horus.⁵ Sharing stage with the woman’s profile are the names of three bands performing at the event popular with goth and industrial club patrons. The event itself, which was sponsored by Hartford’s alternative weekly and a local radio station, featured gothic/industrial bands and DJs, scheduled fetish performances—including a “mummification” demonstration by members of a Boston-based lesbian s-m organization, opportunities for patrons to engage in fetish play, and a vendors’ room, which included sellers of fetish apparel and accessories.



Fig. 10: BOUND I, Winter Ball, postcard



Fig. 11: Alter Ego, flier



Fig. 12: Ghoul School, flier

BOUND is joined in its self-marketing as a gothic/fetish event by many other goth events across the country, including Alter Ego in Fort Lauderdale (hosted by fetish clothing and products retailer the Fetish Factory), Bar Sinister in Hollywood, Shock Therapy in Philadelphia, and Club Fetish in St. Louis (fig. 11). The consistency of representation, as well as the high-budget aesthetic, of the advertisements for these events are noteworthy and echo the use of fetish imagery employed by bands and artists on records and marketing materials. As with the BOUND fliers, advertisements for goth/fetish events in general typically feature provocatively posed young women scantily clad in fetish attire. These advertisements therefore promote the events as titillating but very much in conformity with mainstream heterosexual marketing trends. The intention is to appeal to the existing goth subculture market, while enticing curious members of the dominant culture.

These trends in marketing represent an important shift from the marketing of goth events before the 1990s, which tended to have more in common with punk and to be far less erotic (fig. 12). These advertisements emphasized gothic attire—including draped and cowed figures—and macabre images instead of skin and sex. In contrast, twenty-first-century advertisements for goth/fetish events frequently are high-quality, glossy, colorful af-

fairs that foreground a substantial contemporary development in the positioning of goth subculture vis-à-vis the dominant culture. Whereas 1980s goth event fliers tended to borrow a low-budget “cut-up” or “ransom-note” aesthetic from punk that situated such events as underground and antibourgeois, contemporary goth/fetish events package themselves as slick and professional and are much more in conformity with mainstream advertising aesthetics. The potentially subversive edge of these goth/fetish advertisements derives from the provocatively sexual nature of the images used, not the production values and aesthetic of the flier itself.

Goth/Fetish Fashion

The goth subculture has incorporated elements of fetish fashion since its beginnings. As Ted Polhemus puts it, “The Goths continued the Punks’ interest in fetishism and translated it into a more dressy, extravagant style” (qtd. in Steele 1996, 55). However, in an observation that holds true for the American goth scene as well as the U.K. scene, Hodkinson comments that in the 1990s, “aspects of the 1990s fetish scene and, indeed, the sex industry generally became popular. Goths of both sexes were increasingly likely to be seen in black and sometimes coloured PVC and rubber trousers, skirts, leggings, corsets, tops and dog collars” (2002, 51). Baddeley observes concerning the contemporary goth scene that “corsets, bondage-wear and black leather have become favoured evening-wear for female Goths” (2002, 227).

Hodkinson later comments in his sociological survey of the U.K. goth scene regarding rubber and PVC clothing purchased from retailers of fetish and sex accessories that “such items also constituted a useful example of appropriation since, when placed into the context of the overall goth style and worn in goth spaces, they were often stripped of most of their sexual connotations and appreciated largely for their aesthetic, stylistic value” (2002, 134). This, however, does not hold true in my experience of the American goth scene, where such outfits are appreciated as much for their provocative nature as for their intrinsic aesthetic aspects. It seems unlikely that goth participants anywhere fully abstract fashion items such as corsets and form-accentuating leather and rubber outfits from the physical bodies they adorn, and at American events like BOUND and Sin, goth patrons clearly are presenting their *bodies* in fetish fashion rather than simply the fashions themselves.

This observation about the visibility of the body returns me to Hodkinson’s claims concerning goth’s “dark femininity.” Hodkinson, referencing the characteristic goth makeup, fishnet tights, mesh tops, and silver jewelry, notes that “goth had from its very beginnings been characterized by the pre-

dominance, for both males and females, of particular kinds of style which would normally be associated with femininity" (2002, 48) and continues, "by the late 1990s, the long-term emphasis on femininity had intensified in both popularity and extremity compared with its importance a decade earlier" (49). In reference to this latter point, Hodkinson points to the increasing frequency of goth men in skirts (50). Hodkinson links this goth emphasis on feminine appearance with a "general acceptance and, sometimes, even veneration of sexual ambiguity," as well as of alternative sexualities (54): "There was at times [in Hodkinson's interviews with U.K. goths] a distinct impression that non-hetero sexualities, while not the norm, were a transgression to be admired" (55).⁶

While I agree with Hodkinson that goth's allegiances have always tended toward what has traditionally been considered the feminine—his phrase "dark femininity" puts it nicely—the increasing incorporation of fetish attire and fetish play into the American goth scene indicates a movement away from an emphasis on androgyny or "sexual ambiguity" and instead suggests a resexualization of the body—particularly of the female goth body. While it is not uncommon to encounter men in skirts and makeup at goth clubs, fetish attire, particularly, as Baddeley observes, corsets and high heels, tends to be more common on women than men and highlights the form of the body rather than obscuring it. In contrast, men who do wear skirts at goth events are seldom in drag—there is almost never an attempt at parody or female impersonation—and the skirts in my experience tend to be long, loose, and black.

Therefore, Hodkinson's assertion of goth's "dark femininity" needs to be modified somewhat to accommodate contemporary American goth fashion trends and gender politics. Instead of a singular dark femininity, it appears that the contemporary American scene manifests two forms of dark femininity: what may be referred to as the "cool" femininity of men who express their "feminine sides" by adopting sartorial and behavioral characteristics conventionally associated with women, and the "hot" femininity of women who, through the adoption of fetish fashion, project a sexualized image of feminine power (which one provocatively might wish to designate "dark feminism").⁷ As men within the goth culture on the whole have continued to deemphasize masculine characteristics, women within the scene have increasingly called attention to their feminine attributes. This seems to be a response to the perception that, while it remains transgressive for a man to wear a skirt, androgyny for women is a passé 1980s phenomenon, as well as to the increasing awareness and incorporation of fetish themes and fashions into American women's fashion more generally.

Hodkinson's comment about the veneration of nonhetero sexualities

also, in my opinion, requires a bit of nuancing to be fully applicable to the contemporary American goth scene. Hodkinson reports that “the [U.K.] goth scene was often perceived [by those he surveyed at the Whitby gothic music festival] as being characterized by open-mindedness and tolerance in respect of social characteristics such as gender, race and sexuality” (77). Baddeley agrees with this and comments that “The rising profile and acceptance of sexual fetishism has shadowed the increasing tolerance of homosexuality” (2002, 230). My own experience within the American goth scene (as I shall elaborate upon below) supports that American goths consider themselves to be more tolerant and open-minded as regards race, gender, and sexual preference than the mainstream. However, as indicated above, while goth album covers and promotional fliers, echoing the dominant culture, make free use of the more socially acceptable lesbian imagery, homosexual imagery or overtones involving males is scrupulously avoided. Similarly, marketing and promotional materials seldom feature people of color, which more or less reflects the homogeneity of the American goth scene, which in my experience is almost wholly Caucasian.

What is clear, however, is that fetish attire has constituted an increasingly significant component of goth fashion, particularly for women. This re-emphasis or reemergence of the female goth body considered as voluptuous (in corsets) and powerful (in dominatrix gear), marks a reconfiguration of gender attitudes within the goth subculture in which goth’s dark femininity manifests itself as more explicitly sexual. While, as Steele observes, “many who wear black leather and fetish gear—including goths—are not necessarily ‘into’ fetishism” (1996, 194), the association of such apparel with deviance invests the goth subculture with the allure of the forbidden and the perverse.

Goth/Fetish Play

Beyond the prominence of goth bands employing fetish themes, goth events marketing themselves through the use of fetish imagery, and goth patrons dressing in fetish apparel, the clearest evidence for the convergence of goth and fetish cultures in contemporary America is the participation of club patrons in fetish play at goth events. Events like Hartford’s BOUND make available to patrons various forms of restraints and fetish toys like floggers, which can be used to apply sensations of varying intensities. Patrons may either be attended to by the dom (who is generally female but, in some cases, may be male) on duty, or may “play” with one another under the supervision of the dom. In some cases, club doms provide demonstrations of various bondage and fetish play techniques, including ropes play (the incapacitation of the sub through an intricate and artful arrangement of



Fig. 13: Jayde

ropes), fire play (stimulating the body with the often dramatic application of flame), electric play (application of low-voltage electrical shocks to sensitive parts of the body), mummification (wrapping the sub entirely in plastic wrap or other material), and cutting (making surgical incisions in the body of the sub that form a design) (figs. 2 and 13).

Fetish play “scenes” at goth clubs often take place on a highly visible stage, in a particular room (or “dungeon”), or in an area in some way segregated from the main space of the club. This sectioning off of the fetish play arena establishes a player/spectator division that marks the fetish play area as a type of performance space. The “staging” of fetish play is often emphasized by lighting and sometimes by the rhythmic coordination between fetish activities and club music. At BOUND Hartford, for instance, fetish play occurs on a stage at one end of the dance floor and has the feel of a theatrical production. Fixed stage lights emphasize the onstage performance and differentiate the stage area from the moving lights of the dance floor. Some patrons gather around the stage area to watch the proceedings while others dance without paying much attention to the onstage activities. At other club events, such as the Fantasy Factory at Manray in Boston, spontaneous fetish play often breaks out as patrons engage in impromptu scenes.

On the whole, as a result of the imposing size of racks, the space needed for fetish play scenes, the dramatic lighting, and the titillating effects of certain fetish play scenes, fetish performance at many goth clubs is highly visible, thus magnifying the role of fetish play within the larger goth scene. Although only a small percentage of goth club attendees may participate in fetish play on a given night, the presence of fetish play is often inescapable and quickly becomes taken for granted by clubgoers as part of the goth club experience.

Fetish play at goth events, it should be pointed out, differs in substantial ways from fetish play at S-M “dungeons” and venues overseen by professional doms that cater exclusively to members of fetish subcultures. Unlike many such venues, goth clubs permit the consumption of alcohol and, depending on local statutes, smoking. In addition, goth clubs tend to attract younger—and often less economically privileged—patrons for whom, in many cases, fetish play is a novel experience. In addition, the dual focus of goth/fetish events results in patrons attending for different reasons. Some who attend may not come with the intention of participating in fetish play but choose to become involved; others may opt not to engage in fetish play at all.

The reasons members of goth subculture participate in fetish play at goth events vary as well. Some of course have established commitments to promoting alternative lifestyles and derive enjoyment from role playing and administering or receiving sensations of varying intensities. Others enjoy the fact that they are participating in a scandalous activity more than the sensations produced by that activity itself. Many have exhibitionist streaks that can be gratified by being the center of attention during a fetish play scene. And some simply take advantage of the permissive sexual atmosphere of goth/fetish events—not to mention the ready availability of expensive and bulky fetish play equipment—to experiment with fetish play. For those who have never participated in fetish play, such activities at a goth event afford a ready opportunity to give fetish play a try. Whatever the reason for their participation, however, the overall effect of the high visibility of fetish play at some goth events is to strengthen the connection between goth culture and fetish culture.

In one important respect, fetish play at goth clubs and events differs from representations of fetish play used in the marketing of goth albums and events. In my experience, fetish play participants at goth clubs are of both genders and include both male and female same-sex couples. During my tenure at BOUND Hartford, the event employed both a male and a female dom, and each would perform scenes with members of both sexes. Simi-

larly, at BOUND in D.C. and at other fetish events, I have observed women perform fetish scenes with other women and men perform them with men. What this indicates is that the patrons at the events themselves are more tolerant of displays of alternative sexualities, including male homosexuality, than suggested by the marketing of goth products, which often has in mind appealing to adventurous members of the mainstream.

Conclusions

Although engaging in S-M and fetishism is not new within the goth subculture, the increasing prominence of such activities represents a contemporary development within the goth scene. Goth artists and event promoters make use of fetishistic images and themes with such regularity, and fetish attire and, to a certain extent, fetish play, are so common at goth clubs and events, that fetish culture now takes the form of an integral component of American goth culture at large.

Since the goth subculture has always positioned itself as disdainful of what it perceives as the conformism, close-mindedness, and puritanism of mainstream sexual mores, the movement toward incorporation of fetish play can be considered as consistent with established attitudes and as articulating a challenge to conventional morality through flirtation with social taboo. Goth S-M fetishism should be appreciated as a subcultural strategy to remain subversive. At the same time, however, one must be wary of overstating the radicality of goth's convergence with fetishism. While the flirtation with fetishism positions the goth subculture as relatively deviant in relation to the dominant culture, it is a trendy form of deviancy that fails to constitute a radical rupture with mainstream gender and sexual politics and extends upon, rather than breaks with, American culture's current preoccupation with alternative sexual practices. Furthermore, goth's emphasis on the resexualized female body in marketing and fashion constitutes a conflicted gesture that, while marking the female body in the form of the dominatrix as a site of power, simultaneously inscribes goth within a system of heterosexual power relations that relies upon the familiar practice of using female sexuality to sell products. The most radical aspect of goth's current preoccupation with fetishism is the incorporation of fetish play into club events. This practice can be considered as transgressive not only in its encouragement of goths to experiment with S-M fetish play, but also in its permissive attitude toward displays of alternative sexualities.

Notes

1. Both racks and horses are pieces of furniture designed to restrain individuals and limit movement. Racks typically resemble large Xs and allow a person to be stretched out, while horses resemble sawhorses and involve lying on one's chest or bending over.
2. As William Pietz (1985) comments in his three-part analysis of the development of the notion of the fetish, the term *fetish* itself originated out of mercantile trade with West Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and served to designate material objects felt to possess magical powers by virtue of their connection with religious practices. Karl Marx developed the idea of commodity fetishism in the nineteenth century to refer to the idea that objects—with the paradigmatic example being money—have some intrinsic value, value outside of the use that can be made of them and that for which they can be traded. W. J. T. Mitchell glosses Marx as follows: "Money is a mere symbol, but one which has, in the internal logic of capitalism, ceased to be recognized as a symbol, and has become a fetish, the thing itself" (1986, 192). Sigmund Freud in turn adapted the term *fetishism* in the late nineteenth century to designate a type of sexual deviation in which a fetish object—an inanimate object or body part—is necessary for sexual arousal and satisfaction. According to Freud, fetishism arises out of the little boy's discovery of his mother's lack of a penis and his subsequent fear that this fate could be his own. The fetish object is an object that allows the subject to repress castration anxiety. In Freud's words, "the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and . . . does not want to give up" (1927, 152–53). This object, which assumes a magical character, allows the subject to disavow the possibility of castration.
3. As noted above, *fetishism* historically connotes reliance upon a particular object in order to achieve sexual satisfaction and, within the field of psychoanalysis, has been associated almost exclusively with men. Sadism is the intentional infliction of pain on another person, or the threat to do so, for sexual excitement. Masochism refers to the condition in which a person derives sexual gratification from being subjected to pain or to the threat of pain. Neither sadism nor masochism is, strictly speaking, a fetish, neither is restricted to men, and their etiologies are wholly different from that of fetishism: for Freud, masochism develops as a result of an overactive or sadistic superego that fills the ego with the desire to atone by punishing itself. Sadism, which Freud relates to masochism, is derived from the externalization of this unresolved sadism toward oneself. See Freud 1924.
Although psychoanalysis considers fetishism and masochism and sadism to be different phenomena, it is easy to see how terminological slippage has developed. In the first place, the ritualistic aspect of S–M sexual practice is in some ways comparable to the fetishist's reliance upon a particular object. Perhaps more to the point, S–M fashions have historically made use of objects and materials associated with fetishism, including leather, rubber, high-heeled shoes, and corsets.
4. Due to long-existing Washington, D.C., laws preventing flogging at establish-

ments that serve alcohol, the D.C. branch of BOUND can no longer permit fetish play.

5. The eye of Horus is in fact the marketing logo for famous goth record label Cleopatra Records.
6. Melton also observes goth's "androgynous ideal" (1994, 268).
7. The relative progressiveness of women in sexualized fetish wear is a topic of debate. For an overview of the controversy, see Steele 1996.



THE AESTHETIC APOSTASY



Look up *goth* in your library's online catalogue and you get nothing but Ostragoths and Visigoths, history's perpetual barbarians at the gates, wearers of hairy skins in streets of laundered togas. That association (conscious or unconscious, for who can tell an Ostragoth from a Visigoth these days?) must account for some of the fear aroused by America's black-clad goths, familiar sights in malls, schools, and universities. For who would not fear *goths*?

Why isn't anything going on in the senate?
Why have the senators given up legislating?
Because the barbarians are coming today.

What's the point of senators and their laws now?
When the barbarians get here, they'll do the legislating.
—C. P. Cavafy, "Waiting for the Barbarians"

Too bad Goths didn't prefer *gothic* or *gothick*. Then it would have been clear from the start that this is a matter of hypercivilization rather than barbarism. Hypercivilization in a sweet and decadent sense: art rather than iconoclasm, a culture that lives in the accretions of genre—and what do barbarians care about "genre"?

But goth subculture has its origins in punk, which is apparently a kind of barbarism. Punk is our first postmodernism. After the fall of Saigon, what claim could civilization stake? Punk was always self-divided, politicized in its English cradle among fascists, anarchists, and nihilists. In America, it masked, with its interminable renunciations, a resentment that the idealism of the 1960s was suddenly and completely unavailable. The virulent

anti-hippie plank in its platform was tinged with envy. Punk wanted to continue the counterculture without the embarrassing “peace, love, and weed” content—and so retain the pure form of revolution. The truth is that while punks trumpeted anarchy, they were formalists: short, tight songs unadorned by elaborate jams and guitar leads, cosmetic practices that beautified the ugly and uglified the beautiful, as if there were a formula; drugs (like meth and nitrous) that simply got you high, without the social and spiritual pretensions.

Yes, those crypto-formalists were ideological anarchists. But when theory and practice clash, practice wins. One of the several pragmatic orders that issued from punk (leaving others like hardcore and grunge for another day) was an active aestheticism: dramatizing social and sexual relationships (role-playing games, bondage and discipline), dramatizing the self (black clothes, piercings, radical hair), and dramatizing daily life as if it were really art. This strain in particular evolved into goth. It is in part the result of punk’s democratization of performance, where musical talent and preparation were no longer prerequisites. The wall of mystery that surrounded the stage as an aesthetic precinct came down. The party and the entertainment merged and inverted. The lead singer leaped into the pit.

This is a significant departure from traditional aestheticism, which usually belongs to an elite of some kind. The steady cultivation of beauty is difficult when you’re working a day job. Of course there are nine-to-fivers like Stéphane Mallarmé and Joris-Karl Huysmans to test that rule, but historically most aesthetes are either rich or bohemian (regal poverty)—or just too young to buy into the bourgeois world of getting and spending. Even though goth is now about thirty years old, it is perpetually a youth culture. As Zille, a San Francisco goth, says in an interview, “Actually, age and maturity tend to be the undoing of most Goths. The teen years are a perfect time to get into the Goth scene, as it is one of the most angstful periods of your life.” Some young people escape the tedium of school and suburbia with sports, some with drugs, some with electronic games, some with cars, some with violence—but some with art. This path is not the goths’ alone, of course. Any kid with personal stereo earphones to eclipse the hubbub of the quotidian world is using art as a heterocosm. But it’s a flight to the internal, whereas goths choose to externalize art as if to alter reality rather than just themselves.

The signature black clothing is, at first glance, a generic gesture of negation. It goes back to Hamlet, and even earlier medieval figurations of melancholia, *acedia*, *tristitia*. All of these are personifications of despair, the one unforgivable sin (since it cannot seek forgiveness), and forerunner of gothic

angst. It connects with Charles Baudelaire, who made his own clothes, all of them black. It smacks of monasticism, vampires, and funeral directors. But to consider the symbolism of black in a vacuum is to miss something. Goths do not go out in direct sun, so that their skin remains an alabaster white. This stands out against the dark gear in a most striking way. It asseverates the purity of the person, dressed as if in mourning for a still-visible innocence. The goth motif of the fallen angel expresses this condition. It is not that the angel has fallen from a condition of intrinsic grace, but that he or she has fallen anxiously into a graceless world.

White and black are extremes—all colors of the spectrum, or none. For goths, an extreme appearance becomes performative in that it is not the constitution of a static dialectic so much as a setting of the stage, a statement of the givens of a drama that remains to be played. In other words, goth culture does not end the minute the outfit is ready. The perpetual question is: What now?

A chronic misunderstanding about goths comes from the idea that people who dress alike must always act alike. But the costume does not determine the drama, in life or in the theater. The goth enactment may be sexual, musical, poetic, or in the realm of performance art. Its scope is potentially as wide as that of art itself.

Aestheticism entails renunciations, of course. To enclose oneself in the ontology of artwork may require the sacrifice of sincerity, authenticity, and even honesty. This is a fact about art more than a fact about goths: we know that art isn't real. Our relationship to artistic representation always depends on what John Dryden called a willing suspension of disbelief—that is, we agree to be deceived. This is relatively easy for an audience as long as the artwork is contained within one of its traditional generic precincts: the theater, museum, or opera house. When creatures of art break loose from books and paintings and spill gothic novels into shopping malls, the audience may be less willing to suspend their disbelief. That is: people passing a gaggle of goths in a pedestrian mall may mistake their theater for "reality" because it's out of context. We want to go to artworks; we don't want them coming after us.

Any decontextualization of art creates a crisis of interpretation. We have seen it before in companies like the Living Theater, the Open Theater, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe, which sought to dissolve the barrier between players and audiences. Or in any number of guerrilla theater groups who once brought antiwar allegories to nervous Middle Americans.

Or in Andy Warhol's importation of commercial objects like soup cans into the sanctum of the art museum. We hear it in street musicians who, un-requested, turn passersby into audiences without their consent. Or in the music emanating from a loud boombox carried through the avenues by an aggressive would-be DJ who brings his picks to often unwilling ears. Most of the time these decontextualized artworks are not even perceived as art, but only as intrusions. This is why mall walkers who could just as well ignore a group of goths may be offended by them. Aesthetics without consent feels like invasion.

Feels like invasion, but is it? Zille notes, "If you look back over the centuries you can find Goths in almost every era, the out-casts who wore dark colors and brooded in graveyards, and whom everyone thought of as 'Well, s/he's polite enough, but just too melancholy!'" (e-mail, May 31, 2001). Hamlet, the greatest proto Goth, fits this bill. His problem is not that his melancholia leads to violence, but that it does not. His preoccupation with art, as manifested in his involvement with the company of actors in the play-within-a-play, his problematical sexuality, his black suit, his psychotic angst, prevent him from avenging his father's death as the moral code of his world requires. Goths, as his descendants, are similarly nonviolent. This does not mean, however, that goths' life-in-art lacks *representations* of violence, any more than the play-within-a-play does. B-D dramas, fascination with vampires and demons, and so on, are conventions of the genre goths inhabit—a genre running from *Hamlet* to old gothic novels to twentieth-century revivals like those of Anne Rice. Because of these representations, goths are always on the list of suspects when an incident of youth violence occurs.

On January 4, 1997, two teenage boys in Bellevue, Washington, murdered a nineteen-year-old acquaintance and her family in a home invasion. The *New York Times* reported on February 3 of that year,

What has particularly gripped and baffled the town . . . is the two teenagers' involvement with fantasy games like Dungeons and Dragons, [and] their apparent attraction to a small macabre subculture known as Goth. . . . Goth is a term in use since about 1980 that refers to people, usually young, with a penchant for the darker side of life. They like such things as black clothing, the occult, and such intentionally frightening performers as the rocker Marilyn Manson with his ghoulish makeup. The two teenagers are described by the authorities as partial to wearing all black including black trench coats, and sitting in the local Denny's into the wee hours of the morning drinking coffee and smoking, a sinister-seeming

pastime for 17-year-old Eastside boys. They were also said to have played fantasy games so seriously that they had been kicked out of an informal group of players by other participants for overdoing it.¹ (Goldberg 1997)

Similar allegations followed the Littleton Columbine killings in April 1999, where the perpetrators came to be known as the Trench Coat Mafia.

Never mind that the trench coat is not a standard element of goth attire. One informant suggested to me that this fashion statement (at least as late as Columbine) derives from the 1999 film *The Matrix* rather than Poe or Bram Stoker. There is a logical error in deducing "All who wear black are goths" from the statement "All goths wear black." Bikers, nuns, and Hasidim wear black; the Islamic veil is black. But even those whose dress is clearly influenced by goth black may not be true goths. Many goths resent Marilyn Manson for what they take to be a superficial appropriation of certain of their iconographic elements. As Zille says, "It does piss me off a bit that the 'cool' people in some Junior High School can go into Hot Topic and buy Goth togs. There should be some way to keep Goth for the outcast, the lonely, the losers, nerds, and freaks. I wish we could install some detector in Goth stores to weed out the people who don't think, who haven't felt alone in their uniqueness, who won't really appreciate what it means to be Goth."

These diverse errors have a common cause, one that is familiar from a number of other cultural vantages. This is the assertion that art, by representing certain activities, fosters their occurrence outside the world of art—in the so-called real world. It is a version of the debate about pornography and its power to "cause" certain kinds of sexual behaviors, or the debate about whether Hollywood's ceaseless representation of violence "causes" actual violent crime. No artwork can assure how it will be read. Goethe did not intend to trigger a wave of copycat suicides when he published *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, but that is exactly what happened. The imputation of a goth "cause" for the many recent instances of school violence is partly just scapegoating, but it also reflects a general misunderstanding of what art is and does. Perhaps in some sense goths have unintentionally brought this upon themselves, since those who would live in art are violating the barrier between object and representation that has traditionally made it pretty easy to say where life begins and art ends. News media, who claim to represent only what is real, are naturally nonplussed by representations of the imaginary. For a newspaper reporter, a novel might be a kind of professional failure.

Plato condemned art because it presents simulacra and therefore draws its audiences farther away from truth. The notion that such simulacra could

somehow be the causes of things they represent is a recent notion, one quite at odds with the traditions of the West. Gangsta rap was attacked because its depictions of violence and drug use were taken as promotions and endorsements of those actions, as if the artist were really, to paraphrase Shelley, the legislator of the world. Similarly, goths are blamed for real-time violence as if the representation were somehow the cause of the thing represented. Ironically, a subculture whose only desire is to withdraw into art is held responsible for events in the quotidian world they are trying to escape and forget.

Certainly not one of the numerous mass murders in American schools has been conducted under the aegis of art—at least not in the ordinary sense of the word. Most have been provisioned and planned as paramilitary operations. We may still pose the question whether the representation of military action in video and computer games bears any relationship to the killers' strategy and tactics in each of these instances, but that entails an interrogation of these games as art—or not. Many derive from air force training devices, flight and combat simulators designed to improve hand-eye coordination in the hope that this will translate directly into improved ability to operate high-tech weaponry. Whether this practical etiology allows us to postulate these games as an art form is a vexing question. Is it possible to learn hands-on skills, so to speak, from pornography? Become a better lover in the technical sense, as a gamer may become a better marksman?

No matter how these questions are answered, the complex of representations subsumed under the term *goth* includes nothing correlative to the atrocities for which they are always suspects. Vampires do not use machine guns. As literary creatures, they kill so intimately that it seems like sex. There is no "collateral damage," to use the infamous phrase of Timothy McVeigh. In fact, there is no damage at all, since vampires do not exist, except in the richness of our dreams.

To pull the zoom back for a moment, we need to understand that the scapegoating of goths is part of an official campaign against the arts begun in the Reagan administration and continuing, for example, in the policies of New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani. That the goth subculture came into existence right at the beginning of the first Reagan administration is no coincidence. Reagan himself, understandably because of his background, identified true art with simple entertainment. Any kind of artistic engagement with social issues was, for him, an intrusion into a world of policy unencumbered by imagination or intellection. If film, music, literature,

and the visual arts were suddenly to be blamed for all the social changes issuing from the 1960s, changes repugnant to the conservative movement, artists were redefined as enemies of American values. Since young people are acutely aware of changes in the cultural atmosphere and are likely to take them more seriously than their jaded elders, were the first goths doing anything other than taking the expulsion of the artist as the principal theme of their drama? There they stand at the margins, occupying the place that has been set out for them just as Satan, after the fall, made the best of hell.

The mating of angst and aesthetics is standard fare; it may be that for some goths their expulsion triggers a confluence of art and anger, a stance inherited from punk and audible in the names of bands: My Life with the Thrill Kill Kult, Switchblade Symphony, Hate Dept., Sister Machine Gun, Marilyn Manson, and so on. But without the representation of rage, what docile travesty of art would we have? Do we want Reagan's harmless disengagement? Should artists—or their audiences for that matter—sink into silence out of consideration for moral or social conventions?

These are the questions that must come to mind when media represent representations as if they were not only real but the very causes of reality. This is worse than mere literal-mindedness; this is consciousness without imagination, envious of those who possess it.

Note

1. The kids who were kicked out of the role-playing games for "overdoing it" were probably hoping for real violence, rather than the theatrical representation of it.



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