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Into the Darkness:

Androgyny and Gender Blurring within the Gothic Subculture

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the nature of gender identities within the Gothic subculture, a subculture firmly rooted in consumer based objects of music, clothes and symbols. It argues that the Gothic scene is a site of praxis where accepted norms are challenged and alternative sexual politics are established. Based on the findings of a qualitative study it explores the emergent themes of gender blurring, playing with gender and privileging the feminine as part of the Gothic experience.

INTRODUCTION

The theme of this paper is androgyny and gender blurring within the Gothic subculture. The study of subcultures, their activities, power relations, hierarchies and constitute identities has a long tradition of intense conceptual and empirical analysis within the discipline of sociology (Hall and Jefferson 1977; Hebdige 1979; McRobbie 1995). However, despite the materiality that underpins, supports and defines the very
existence of many subcultures limited attention has been paid to the consumption experiences of those involved (see for example, Goulding, Shankar and Elliott 2002; Kates 2002; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Miklas and Arnold 1999; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). This is despite the fact that subcultures may be defined as sites of praxis, ideologically, temporally, and socially situated where fantasy and experimentation give way to the construction, expression and maintenance of particular consumption identities. These identities, which include gender and/or sexual identities may be seen as part of the pluralistic and ongoing project that constitutes the self in contemporary society (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Indeed it may be argued that the breaking down of boundaries, the challenging of accepted norms and the establishment of alternative sexual politics is an integral aspect, central to many subcultural experiences. For example, Goulding (2003, p. 66-7) in her analysis of subcultures based on nostalgia and retro suggests that:

While marketing has always been about consumption gender has always been about difference (Kacen 2000)...However the embracing of retro from the 1970s onward has involved significant flirting with the idea of androgyny, where masculinity and femininity are conceived as a coadunation of scattered meanings and shifting significance.

Androgyny and gender blurring has been a theme of youth-based subcultures since the 1960s. For example, during the hippy movement men grew their hair long, wore kaftans and beads and “got in touch” with their more feminine and spiritual side. The 1970s saw the introduction of “glam rock” spearheaded by such groups and singers as T Rex, Roxy Music and David Bowie. Here conventions of masculinity
and femininity were flouted with men wearing make-up, sequins, feather boas and platform shoes, while female singers such as Patti Smith (not exactly glam rock, but very underground) adopted male attire in the form of suits, shirts and loosely draped ties. The punk rock era that followed was possibly more androgynous with the obligatory bondage trousers worn by both males and females, spiked hair, dog collars and a collective adherence to the wearing of black. The “new Romanticism” of the 1980s on the other hand was predicated on a nostalgia for a time long gone; for pirates as exemplified by Adam Ant, and for poets such as Byron and Shelley whose aesthetic preference for lace and velvet was mimicked by such bands as Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet and taken to pastiche proportions by the likes of Boy George.

However, whilst these subcultures have been relatively short lived, one micro-community that emerged from the punk rock generation of the late 1970s and continues to flourish, albeit in a number of refashioned incarnations, is the gothic movement. Goth is a subculture closely associated with the wearing of black, an interest in the “darker” side of life and death, a particular musical aesthetic and in the UK at least, with the cult and sexuality of the vampire. However, before these issues are discussed it is important to provide some historical context for the movement and the research that gave rise to the findings concerning sexual identities within this particular context.

Issues of Sexuality within the Gothic Genre

Whilst the term “Gothic” has traditionally been associated with a particular style of medieval architecture, art and jewelry and the writings of such notaries as
Edgar Allen Poe and Mary Shelly, it also has a strong symbolic sexual connection in the minds of many, largely reinforced by the popular cultural media of the 20th century. The issue of sexuality is a key theme in the portrayal of the most iconic of all gothic mythical creatures, the vampire. In film the vampire has held a fascination for audiences since the release in 1922 of the German Expressionist F.W. Murnau’s “Nosterfaratu, ein Syphonie des Grauens.” In the story the vampire can only be released by a virtuous woman who is willing to give her blood until the sun rises. A plethora of films followed, portraying the Count as a much more elegant and seductive character, from Ted Browning’s 1932 “Dracula” starring Bela Lugosi, through the Hammer horror films of the 1960s and 1970s for which Christopher Lee became famous, to Francis Ford Coppola’s more recent version of Dracula, publicized as the most faithful adaptation of Bram Stoker’s novel. Whilst undercurrents of sexuality permeate most of these films (it is generally accepted that the act of sucking blood represents the sexual act) issues of sexuality are rarely explicit, although when it comes to biting necks vampires do not discriminate between genders. However a subgenre of the myth does have a history based on homosexuality and particularly lesbianism. Although Victorian morality strictly prevented the publication of graphic erotica J. Sheriden Le Fanu’s vampire novel “Camilla” was a clearly veiled story about lesbian love.

Vampirism thus resists any straightforward gender classification. In keeping with the tenets of Gothic fiction to disrupt normal reality, the vampire is used to symbolize what our culture represses (Hanson 2003). The ambivalence towards gender created by the notion of vampirism accordingly disrupts traditional delineations of gender roles. Because the sex act (sucking blood) is the same for both sexes and women vampires also penetrate with their “phallic teeth” (Hanson, p. 2), the
boundaries between man and woman, masculinity and femininity, are deliberately blurred (Gelder 1994). Many consider the vampire to be bi-sexual (or “bi-erotic” according to Stater, 1997), as Auerbach (1995, p. 181), recounting a meeting with Sandy Stone, a well known transsexual writer, notes:

Sandy Stone theorized her-and his-existence by summoning vampires. Sandy Stone is a performance artist who has not exchanged one gender for another; s/he embodies both. Shadows of a woman dart out of the man; glimpses of man flicker in and out of the woman. Only by evoking the freedom of the vampire could s/he convey the transcendence of boundaries to which transsexuality aspires.

Images of Contemporary Gothic Subculture

On account of their associations with these darker, disrupting forces, Goths are also a group who has suffered greatly from negative media stereotypes portraying them as manically depressed, morbid and death obsessed. However for most Goths this is a far cry from the reality of the situation. Our experience revealed that many Goths are actually creative individuals who enjoy dressing up in a style that is unique and reflects their interests and personality. Moreover, despite common perceptions they do not take themselves too seriously, nor do they believe themselves to be “un-dead” or supportive of white supremacy. Goth is based on a musical, literary and artistic aesthetic. It is also a form of escape and fantasy and is made up of a broad range of the social spectrum. It embraces multi-ethnic membership and it is one of the few subcultures which welcome individuals of all ages.
Contemporary Goths also love vampires, they love fangs, they love dressing in black and they love bats. It is an international movement that transcends conventional categories of gender and whilst most Goths would agree that the cult of the vampire holds a fascination for them (and for some much more than others) the subculture itself extends beyond an interest in death and mortality. Goth has evolved and fragmented in terms of music and fashion. Labels applied to the various musical genres now include “original Goth”, “mellow Goth”, “metal/industrial Goth”, “experimental/folksy/occult Goth” and “new Goth”. Similarly fashions range from simple black tee-shirts and black jeans or bondage trousers to Victorian and Edwardian costumes constructed from velvet and lace. However, it is possible to identify common and enduring symbols and interests. These include the wearing of Gothic colors particularly black, white, purple and scarlet, black and white make-up, religious symbols such as the Christian cross, Egyptian ankhs and Wiccan pentacles. Goths also tend to have an interest in medieval, Victorian and Edwardian history and in the works of Poe, Dante, Byron and the films of the German Expressionists.

RESEARCH SITE

For two weeks of the year, one in April, the other at the end of October, the quiet fishing town and seaside resort of Whitby in the North East of England is taken over by over 2,000 Goths. The town is the place where Goths of all persuasions get the opportunity to congregate at the Whitby Goth Festival which celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2003. Whitby on face value may seem an incongruous location to hold a venue that attracts individuals the width and breadth of the country and even as far away as Australia and the US. However its significance becomes clear when linked to
the vampire myth. Indeed, it was while living in Whitby that Bram Stoker penned his novel Dracula, which saw the aristocratic vampire’s arrival in Britain, thereby immortalizing the abbey and Victorian graveyard which stand high above the town. Therefore, in a way the location represents a spiritual home for Goths and was thus chosen as the site for our research. For the duration of the festival Whitby is transformed. During daylight hours Goths pack the streets, the shops and the restaurants. They can be seen wandering around dressed in full costume, posing for the tourists who now flock to the town to “Goth watch”. Goths are welcome visitors who contribute strongly to the local economy without disruption or incident. Indeed, in the words of John, one of our informants: “Where else can you get over 2,000 people under the same roof without trouble?”

Most Goths will also make the pilgrimage to Whitby abbey, climbing the 199 steps up the steep hill in order to explore the graveyard and the abbey ruins. Goth is not a homogenous culture and the sense of theatre is created and enhanced by the diversity of costumes and looks embraced by the different factions. For example, vamp Goths can be seen patrolling the street, the men in top hats and tails reminiscent of Gary Goldman’s Dracula, the women in tight bodices, bustled dresses, feather-trimmed hats, and black lace parasols. The Romantics nostalgically clad in Byronesque, flowing velvet coats and lace-ruffled shirts contrast with the pale faces, jet-crimped hair and black street garb of the Punk Goths. Cyber Goths, on the other hand, introduce some color in the form of red and black striped leggings, whilst still retaining the black in the form of long leather coats and four inch thick metal soled boots. This in itself does not reflect the eclecticism of Goth. Add to this pirates, nuns, devils, 1920s flappers, men dressed as women, women dressed as men, and some so
totally androgynous as to be indistinguishable and the picture becomes more representative of the reality of the Goth scene.

By night Whitby takes on a new life particularly around the festival sites. The Elsinore public house, the venue for the first Whitby Goth festival is packed beyond capacity with revelers spilling onto the streets and into neighboring establishments. As a rule there are two main events, one of which is “Sexy Sunday”, the main showcase for star Gothic DJs. The other event takes place at the spa pavilion overlooking the sea. Here bands such as the “Damned”, the “Dream Disciples” and the “Mission” play to a packed auditorium at ear splitting levels, the sound so loud it can actually be felt through the soles of the feet and up the length of the body. The dance floor becomes a heaving mass of bodies, blending into one another, arms raised in a common salute. In the main foyer those who prefer to be seen pose around in a brighter lit space, talking, catching up or just performing for the cameras. Few leave early and the night only starts to wind down around 2.00 am. For many however this is not the end as they make a return visit to the abbey to sit around the graveyard, burn candles and drink wine. Nonetheless, this is an accepted part of the ritual. To quote the Vicar of Whitby:

The Goths are a great bunch of people in my experience. A few of them have even thought I was one of them because of my black costume and I’ve even had offers for it. It can be a little bit scary though. I remember the first time walking out into the graveyard at midnight on Halloween (usually the start of the festival) only to find the place packed with all these people wearing long flowing black clothes, fangs flashing in the moonlight…..Strangely enough many of these same people were at my Sunday service.
METHODOLOGY

It is probably important to note that we are not Goths and prior to the research had no first hand experience of the Gothic subculture. As consumer researchers our initial interest was triggered by our past research into subcultures and identity and the supporting props and materiality which enabled their existence. Consequently, rather than define the parameters of the research before entering the field, we adopted a theory building approach in order to allow the data to generate concepts (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and ideas. The general aim of the research was to develop grounded data driven insights into the experience of being part of the Gothic subculture from a consumption perspective. In this paper we focus on the theme that emerged from the data regarding the role of gender and the nature of gender construction within the Goth scene.

Recruitment of Respondents

Prior to the October festival we contacted the organizer, Jo Hampshire, who was responsible for initiating the first and subsequent bi-annual events which have continued to grow over the last ten years. We explained our interests and asked for her assistance in recruiting informants. She invited us to design and submit a poster detailing who we were, what the research was about and contact addresses. These posters were then distributed at all the pre-events and were displayed throughout the duration of the festival at all the major venues. Jo also provided us with passes
allowing access to all areas and all events which enabled us to engage in participatory
observation in addition to collecting data by way of the interview method.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection consisted primarily of participatory observation of activities
including retail settings, band venues and dance nights. Observations were written up
in the form of memos, and photographs were taken over a seven day period. In
addition, the posters generated a great deal of interest and we were contacted by an
initial six respondents who agreed to be interviewed about their experiences. Each
interview lasted over three hours and took the form of the individuals telling their
stories. This resulted in a snowball effect whereby we were introduced to others who
also agreed to talk to us. These interviews were audio-taped and transcribed as soon as
possible afterwards. Consequently data collection and analysis were simultaneous
consisting of an inductive, interactive process between data collection, preliminary
analysis, idea generation, further data collection and more focused questioning, in
keeping with the grounded theory tradition of theoretical sampling and constant
comparison (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Following on from this we were contacted via
email by a number of people who had seen the poster and were keen to participate.
The time gap allowed us to reflect further on the data collected at the site, refine our
ideas and construct a more structured interview schedule which we conducted by
email with new respondents. This was also delivered to the original group who were
asked to reflect, adjust anything they felt was not right and add to their original
narratives. The informants were told that the intention was to publish the research and
all involved were asked for permission to use their data, whether in the form of words
or photographs. We also offered to change the identity of those who might wish to remain anonymous, although nobody did. In fact the reverse was true. All were keen to express their views and be known for them.

In this paper our analysis and interpretation revolves around three major themes that emerged: the blurring of gender boundaries; the performance of gender and privileging the feminine. We continue with an elaboration of each of these in the following sections.

**FINDINGS**

The Blurring of Gender Boundaries

Deeply rooted in its associations with vampirism, the Gothic subculture creates a symbolic space, or a liminality, where gender boundaries can blur. The Goth pageant in Whitby, like Bakhtin's (1984) carnival space, breaks down the distinction between actors and audience and turns the “taken for granted” on its head in a reversal of norms, roles, and expectations. The “normal” world is suspended for the duration of the festival. In effect, the Gothic subculture itself, in its embracing of difference, provides a never-ending carnival space for those who “dare to be different” in terms of dress, music and sexuality. The subculture has an openness that, according to Lucy, attracts individuals who enjoy experimentation:

Many Goths are bi-sexual; it’s what attracts them to the culture in the first place. Goth is a very tolerant and open culture, it doesn’t discriminate on the grounds of people’s sexuality. In fact it doesn’t discriminate on any grounds. If you look around you’ll see Goths of all ages, some of the really old ones in their forties have been around since the beginning of the movement when it emerged out of punk.
This temporary destruction of existing gender structures may also be marked by reversals of ordinary behavior. For many, it is an escape from the pressure to conform in everyday life, largely as a result of prejudice or misconceptions, and is a welcome release. For example, John, a professional photographer (see photo 1) who lives in Newcastle, a city in the North east of England, described how life was a constant battle if you were male, experimental and dared to transgress traditional gender boundaries either in look, dress or behavior.

I come from Newcastle, a place where if you’re not involved in the macho football scene you’re regarded as some kind on nonce, so you can imagine their reaction to me when I go out wearing eye-liner. I don’t know how many times I’ve been beaten up. I was in a bar come restaurant the other night and a man was in there with his children. They kept looking over at me and the father kept pulling them back towards him as if I were going to jump up and attack them. I made a deliberate decision to talk to him and eventually he started to relax and I think see me as a person and not some kind of freak because I chose to wear make-up.

Garber (1992, p. 32) puts this into context when describing how the act of cross dressing is located at the junction of gender. Hence transgressing against one set of boundaries is “to call into question the inviolability of both, and of the social codes of
sex- already demonstrably under attack-by which such boundaries were policed and maintained.”

However, we do not imply that Goth is necessarily a gay subculture. Whilst some are openly gay, or bi-sexual, many are heterosexual, with a small number preferring to remain androgynous. Indeed, it is the lack of discrimination that exists within the subculture that allows for a playfulness and experimentation not normally accepted in “mainstream” society and this is often manifest in a theatrical show of exhibitionism and performance supported by the wide range of styles and props. These include corsets of varying shapes, size and style, fangs, whether custom made or bought “off the shelf”, masks, wigs, leather and PVC, and period costumes.

The Performance of Gender

Goth represents a neo-tribe (Mafessoli 1996) which provides the security to leave behind everyday gender identities. It can certainly be described as a tribe that encourages free expression. Solidarity is maintained through lifestyles that favor appearance and form, and this is evident at the Goth festival which allows the individual to flout gender convention, play with the rules and escape normal gender constrictions through acts of transformation of body and mind. The performance of liminality is often linked to spectacle and these gender transformations can be interpreted as primarily a performance or spectacle. These acts of high drama, however, are not random, but are shaped, scripted and enacted. In other words, it is possible to interpret spectacles as performances for others and not performances “with” others, such as occur in routine face to face interactions (MacCannell 1992).

Essentially, Goth is a combination of masquerade, liminality, spectacle, and in some cases the challenging of gender stereotypes, held together by a carnival
atmosphere. In other words you can be what you want. In accordance with Butler (1990), here we can see that all gender is a form of “drag”, “an act rather than an attribute – a doing rather than a being” (Harding 1998, p. 6). Through their many multifaceted gender performances, the Goths are subversively playing with gendered meanings and showing how these can be resignified (Butler 1990). For example there are many “types” of gender evident at the Goth festival. There are men who are obviously men, regardless of whether they wear the costume of the vampire, the Victorian gentleman, or the black of the cyber-Goth. Similarly there are women who dress to emphasize their extreme femininity. There are also gay men and gay women who do not draw attention to their sexuality with regard to their attire. Then there are men, who are obviously men but who flirt with femininity in the form of corsets and bondage (see photo 2), sometimes crossing the threshold between Goth and fetishism, a practice that was quite openly discussed as having a link for some with the Gothic experience.

Insert photo 2 about here

There are also men who dress as female vampires, choosing the feminine form as opposed to the masculine, whilst at the same time taking the representation to extreme proportions, as evident in the case of Monty (see photo 3).

Insert photo 3 about here

Like Monty there are many transvestites who take full advantage of the extravagant spectacle that is the Goth festival to indulge in the more flamboyant forms
of dress. For example, Mark (photo 4) who is a transvestite (pictured with wife Pauline) uses the event to dress to the extreme in Victorian/fetish costume complete with wig, make up and high heel shoes. Mark’s family display typical Goth attitudes toward sexuality. The fact that Mark is a bi-sexual transvestite is accepted by his wife without any question, she is straight and their son is gay.

Others use the relaxed attitude to engage in anonymous play reminiscent of the Venetian masked balls of the seventeenth century where for a short period of time identities were hidden and anonymity allowed for indulgence in sexual liaisons which would have caused scandal if made public. This anonymity sometimes crosses the boundaries between genders, producing in the process the androgynous individual. For example Rossi a performer who describes herself as the first lesbian vampire queen, and Christine who crosses Goth garb with belly dancing attire, talk about the excitement which stems from the uncertainty of gender and the element of surprise:

One of the interesting things with Goth is that quite often you really can’t tell the difference between men and women, but that can make it all the more exciting, you sometimes don’t know what you’ve got until you get them home and into bed. (Rossi)

My partner was being chatted up the other night by this beautiful creature, they spent the whole night talking and it was only at the end that she turned to
him and said, you do realize that I’m a man don’t you. To which he replied of course I do darling. (Christine)

Some go as far as to mask their gender completely so to play out the night in total gender anonymity choosing identities that remain unisexual (see photo 5). For example a skeleton lacks the major bodily attributes that define sex. This would appear to run contrary to the overt sexuality that is a characteristic of the Goth look.

Privileging the Feminine

Despite the many, varied displays of differing sexualities, one major issue to emerge was the role of the feminine in these performances. Although we have previously described much gender blurring, this blurring was more caused by males dressing as females rather than vice versa. Moreover, from our observations it was very obvious that, regardless of their sexuality, both men and women more frequently went to great lengths to display femininity. For example, our field notes and photographs document the many women dressed in tight corsets to enhance physical features such as waist, hips and breasts, which were then given further emphasis by elaborate outfits that included jewellery, feathered hats and boas. Even female cyber-Goths found ways to make their form more appear more feminine by wearing short kilts and tightly fitting jackets alongside their heavy military style boots. In addition there were a number of transvestites who all wore elaborate female costumes, paying great attention to detail and often wearing long flowing dresses and wigs.
Traditional (in this context) masculinity (for example, the stereotypical vampire portrayal à la Christopher Lee) was much less in evidence during our observation. There were many examples of men adopting more effeminate attire through the frequent use of period costume that encouraged the use of lace, velvet, and ruffle shirts. Even what might be termed the more “masculine” Goths used make-up, jewelry and other decorative accessories.

It seems that there are several significant factors at play here regarding the privileging of the feminine. The first is to do with cross-dressing and the fact that no female Goths dressed as male ones or tried to emphasize any masculine attributes (apart from the female cyber Goths and their heavy boots). It may be that here Goths are merely reflecting more traditional views that stem partly from images of the acceptability or otherwise of cross-dressing as depicted in popular media. For example, cross-dressed men in films are generally more popular (and acceptable) than their female counterparts (i.e. Mrs Doubtfire and Tootsie). Even the few well-known women cross-dressers, such as Dietrich, have usually had to retain their overall femininity to ensure acceptance. Halbersham (1998) points out that when women cross-dress as men it is more likely to be concluded that they are flawed women and that the overriding message is that only men can perform men but anyone can perform femininity. This is somewhat supported by the fact that when Goth men dress as women they do so with extreme confidence and even competitiveness with their performances of femininity overshadowing those of their female counterparts.

The second factor is that the female body and, in turn, femininity, has long been associated with the gaze and with providing spectacle (Stratton 2003). This has its roots in the fact that women were simultaneously constructed as consumers and as objects of visual consumption as they entered into the public sphere of shopping.
(Bowlby 1985; Stratton 2003). Consequently there is more scope to perform femininity, a scope that is reflected in the following quote from Mark, a transvestite who describes his feelings of restriction by men’s clothing:

I feel restricted when dressed as a man but when I dress as a woman, I feel it gives me greater freedom to express myself. You’ve got much more room to be creative and beautiful. Women are so lucky. Men are limited in what they can do, you wear make-up and you’re accused of being queer, but who cares, how boring, stuck in the suit or jeans uniform.

This creativity and sense of aesthetics is closely associated with the feminine as spectacle. To quote Muggleton (2000, p. 38), “women have “fashion”; men, sober, somber and static, have style.” We observed many lavish performances with varying degrees of femininity. Taking it to extremes, one woman performed as Marie Antoinette, heavily corseted, wearing a skirt spanning 17 feet, a powdered wig, and period make-up. Her partner, himself heavily made-up, was dressed as Louis, the Sun King, in silk stockings, buckle shoes and a velvet jacket. Not only are they performing femininity, or elements of it (as in the case of more “feminine” male period dress), but they are also using femininity to enable them to perform often in an excessively theatrical style.

The third factor in this privileging of the feminine is that the Goth and Vampire myths expose and undermine traditional feminine myths. Whereas many myths of femininity help perpetuate the patriarchal order (i.e. passivity, self-sacrifice, humility, modesty) the female vampire stands in sharp opposition to these values. All
vampires evoke fear and the female vampire is empowered through her ability to instill terror and through her bi-erotic qualities that defy sexual categorization.

**CONCLUSION**

In summary, Gothic embraces diversity in terms of style, music and sexuality, in contrast to a society that is still primarily predicated on a culture of discrimination. The Goth subculture, with its regular festivals, opens the door onto a temporary stage where gender can be performed and played with at will. This is often in complete contrast to the otherwise mundane and restricted lives of many participants.

Goths have developed strategies for maintaining and expressing sexuality through these festivals and meetings. These strategies question traditional gender stereotypes and blur the boundaries between male and female by subverting the norms and expectations of masculinity and femininity. As part of this, the Goth subculture draws on the myth of the vampire to privilege the feminine.

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PHOTO 1

JOHN
PHOTO 2

TWO MALE GOTHs DRESSED IN CORSETS AND BONDAGE
PHOTO 3

MONTY THE FEMALE VAMPIRE WITH A FEMALE VICTORIAN GOTH
PHOTO 4

MARK, PAULINE HIS WIFE AND SISTER IN-LAW
PHOTO 5

ANDROGYNOUS GOTH