‘Performing’ Gender: Multiple Gender Identities Within the Gothic Subculture

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‘Performing’ gender: Multiple gender identities within the Gothic subculture

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ABSTRACT

We draw on a longitudinal study of the Gothic subculture to analyze how particular acts of consumption support the ‘performance’ of gender identities within a festival site. We identify a number of gender performances based around the themes of; ‘putting the curves back in the feminine’, ‘gender as fantasy’, ‘gender ideal as a holy grail’, ‘blurring the boundaries’ and ‘gender as fetishism’. We conclude by discussing how these gendered acts of consumption serve to challenge orthodox conventions of aesthetics.

INTRODUCTION

Two areas of study that have emerged as important sites of enquiry in recent years are gender and consumption (Palan, 2001; Hupfer, 2002), and, with a slightly shorter history in the consumer behavior literature, subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). Whilst the two fields have developed relatively independent of each other, a growing number of studies have embraced, either implicitly or explicitly, aspects of both. For example, studies of micro-communal consumption based on leisure, escape and fantasy have recognized the significance of gender roles, gender differences and gender ‘play’ as part of the neo-tribal (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2003) or communal experience (see for example Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Belk and Costa, 1998; Kozinets, 2001, 2002; Miklas and Arnold, 1999; Goulding, Shankar and Elliott, 2002). Other work has focused much more explicitly on the nature of gender and its centrality to the experience (Kates, 2002, 2003). However, there is gaining acceptance that subcultural contexts offer us an opportunity to glimpse the spectacular (Penaloza, 1998), the extraordinary and, what might be considered deviant, aspects of consumer behavior. They are sites of contestation where orthodoxy is challenged and identities are constructed and ‘performed’. As Kates (2003) in his analysis of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras argues, such festivals “seek to contradict or negate aspects of the social status quo” (p.7). Such sites may be interpreted as carnivalesque where the everyday is turned upside down in a reversal of norms and everyday behaviors (Bakhtin, 1984/1965) or liminal spaces that “transform relationships among individuals, gay communities and the heterosexual mainstream – if only for a day” (Kates, 2003, p.5). In this paper we draw on findings from a longitudinal study of participants of the gothic subculture and discuss some of the multiple gender identities that are ‘performed’ (Butler, 1990) at the biannual Goth festival held in Whitby.
GOTH: A FRAGMENTED COMMUNITY OF CONSUMPTION

Goth as a subculture represents a microcosm of behaviors ranging from the spectacular in terms of dress, to sacred and mythical consumption through to fragmented sexualities and gender identities. It is a culture that is highly dependent on consumption, personal appearance and encoded signs and meanings (see Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1963, 1967). Goth represents a site of creativity with an eclectic range of individuals drawn to its various communities through a collective appreciation of myth, make-believe and freedom of gender expression. It is a culture based around a fusion of aesthetics with fashions ranging from simple black tee-shirts and black jeans or bondage trousers to Victorian and Edwardian costumes constructed from velvet and lace. In effect it is a culture of consumption ensconced in a highly visual projection of materiality embodied in encoded appearances. These appearances in turn, act as a form of symbolic vocabulary (Elliott, 2003) where dress is articulated by a sort of sociological syntax, which could be called ‘costume’ (Calefeto, 1997).

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. Goth is not an 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 Oldman’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-cripped 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.

The town is the place where Goths of all persuasions get the opportunity to congregate at the Whitby Goth Festival which celebrated its twelfth anniversary in 2005. 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.

METHODOLOGY

The research was qualitative, adopting a theory building, grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in order to investigate the experience of...
being part of the Gothic subculture from a consumption perspective.

Recruitment of respondents

Prior to the October festival in 2002 we contacted the organiser 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 a quasi-ethnographic approach involving immersion in the setting and context of the experience (Arnould, 1998; Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994) through participatory observation of events and activities, including retail locations, 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. These interviews lasted over three hours each and took the form of individuals telling ‘their’ stories. This resulted in a snowball effect whereby we were introduced to others who also agreed to talk to us. In total we interviewed fourteen Goths face to face in considerable depth. However, in order to ensure balance, we also undertook an analysis of Gothic websites and chat rooms such as Gothic/Punk, where individuals publish their own stories, experiences and issues of interest or concern regarding the scene.

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. In all we made three visits to the Whitby Goth festival over a three year period, collecting further interview data and video material. We concluded our research with personal home visits and videotaped interviews. Several themes emerged from the data which had explanatory power in relation to understanding the experience of being a Goth. One of these centered around the issue of gender and gender expression.

EMERGENT THEMES

It is legitimate to say that the Goth festival consists of a menagerie of gender types, gender expressions and sexualities. Many Goths are straight and wear either masculine or feminine
costume according to their preference. For example, we spoke to ‘straight’ men who had no problem in expressing their ‘feminine side’ by wearing the lace, ruffles and velvet associated with the ‘Gothic dandy’; the flamboyant look of Byron and Shelley and most commonly associated with the ‘Romantic’ movement. As Thompson (2004) points out, this was a movement that was celebrated for its “veneration of creativity, authentic self expression and the cultivation of imagination...”. Some dressed in pirate costume, while others adopted the dark, brooding attire of the romanticized vampire. There were also gay men who wore male clothes, gay men who wore female clothes, bi-sexuals who chose to emphasize one particular aspect of their gendered self and others who elected to conceal their gender completely. Nonetheless, we are not proposing gender expression is the basis for the subculture, it is more a consequence of its evolution, divergence and fragmentation. It is also a subculture that embraces difference and is tolerant of those who choose to be different. It could be argued that it represents a Utopian space for many who face prejudice and ridicule in their everyday lives.

One thing that became very clear, however, was that without the paraphernalia or objects of consumption, these gendered identities would have been curtailed and suppressed. As they stand, they represent the codes, language and symbols of identification that signify belonging; a form of subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995) that distinguishes the tribe (Maffesoli, 1995), and subtribe, that each member belongs to. Consequently, the nature of appearance is central to how gender is ‘performed’ at the festival. As Wilson (1990) notes, the word appearance itself actually acknowledges the performance elements in dress. Through the choice of clothes, hairstyles and make-up the individual creates an ‘appearance’ for private and public consumption. Moreover, clothes, coverings and the objects we adorn ourselves with are the forms, or the signs through which our bodies relate to the world and other bodies (Calefato, 1997). In the following section we outline some of the multi-gendered identities identified through the research.

**PUTTING THE ‘CURVES’ BACK IN THE FEMININE**

Within the Gothic subculture, as well as an array of gendered identities that may well challenge orthodox conventions regarding what is ‘normal’, there are also variations in shape and size which define perceptions of gender. These often verge on the extremes of voluptuousness to excessively thin. Many, particularly the Victorian Goths, went to considerable efforts to highlight their bodies through corseting and decoration, a process that could take up to three hours to complete the ‘look’. In a society that defines the ideal shape as tall and slender (Joy and Venkatesh, 1994; Holbrook et al., 1998) a number of Goths actively challenge the ‘beauty mystique’ by celebrating and emphasizing their ‘curves’.

Laura (23): To generalize I would say that Goths tend to the extremes of physical appearance, they’re either really skinny, or really big so they do have more opportunity to play around with clothes, the asexual and the voluptuous looks. I think that the cyber look on a lot of Goth men is great, but it demands the wearer to be skinny, whereas the Victorian look is great on the
There were numerous women at the festival who would define themselves as ‘large’ or more commonly ‘voluptuous’, but they flaunted it with pride, wearing corsets that emphasized their curves, bellies, thighs, breasts and hips in particular. In effect the festival context gave them an opportunity to defy contemporary images of idealized beauty ‘shapes’, create their own ‘beauty mystique’ and celebrate their femininity which is rooted in a more historical concept of beauty. They used the ‘tools’ available to mold, shape and refigure their bodies into their own personally defined aesthetics, As Bordo (1993 p.54), argues, the “truly resistant body is not one that wages war on feminine sexualization, but the body that uses simulation in such a way that challenges stable notions of gender, a celebration of the female body that can be refashioned in a plethora of identities and plural styles.” The clothed body is thus a body whose openings, confusion of signs and intersections of discourse assume a profound value (Calefeto, 1997), particularly when refusing to acknowledge that the body’s material characteristics are taken as immutable limits (Thompson and Hirschman, 1998). However, outside of the festival context many admitted experiencing discrimination, insults and prejudice which made them reluctant to dress in a revealing manner for fear of repercussion. This in itself was the source of frustration, conflict and a curtailing of their own feminine ‘true’ identity which supports Bordo’s (1993) assertion that the metaphor of the body as a battleground, is one that captures the practical difficulties involved in the political struggle to empower “difference”.

GENDER AS FANTASY

Goth also relies heavily on fantasy and myth. One of the central fantasy figures within the Goth culture is that of the vampire. A mythical creature, but one that is reified by participants through the adoption of costume, names, fangs, and for those who choose to take ‘play’ to the extreme, by sleeping in coffins. Although a product of Bram Stoker’s imagination, the iconic vampire portrayed in Dracula (reprinted 1992) takes on a reality that is played out by many participants. It would however, be a misrepresentation to suggest that Goths think that they ‘are’ vampires, they do not. They do not advocate the drinking of blood or other associated rituals. For them the myth is a romanticized ideal whose appeal is equally seductive to both males and females, to quote Clinton, a 27 year old ‘vampire Goth’:

‘It’s easy to see the attraction of the vampire, he lives for ever, he never gets old and he always gets the girl’.

The attraction of the vampire is equally strong for female Goths who adopt the flowing costumes, pale make-up and long hair of the Victorian temptress. It is seen as an empowering image and one of equality with men. In effect vampirism 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 men and women,
masculinity and femininity are deliberately blurred (Gelder, 1994) and many consider the vampire to be bisexual or bi-erotic (Stater, 1997). In essence, the Goths, through their multifaceted gender performances allow themselves to subversively play with gendered meanings and in so doing, show how they can be resignified (Butler, 1990).

**FLAUNTING THE FEMALE WITHIN**

Goth is not simply about dressing in period clothing or indulging in romantic fantasies about mortality and eternal youth. It is also about overt sexual expressions of gender identity. For example, Mark is a 6’4” transvestite. He attends the festival with his wife who is straight and his son who is gay, representing a number of gender identities, or perhaps more accurately, sexualities, within the family unit. He is a self confessed exhibitionist who loves to be the centre of attention, or in his own words, “I’m a complete camera slut darling”. One of his costumes comprises of a plastic nurse’s apron, a cap, a collar, six inch platform soled shoes and fishnet tights (with nothing underneath). On his head he sports a long straight red wig and his face is made up excessively, complete with false eyelashes. Mark has a definite view of aesthetics which he finds most manifest in the female form and in the exaggerated ‘look’ of the transvestite. Mark also views his time at Whitby as a ‘performance’ that allows him to express his ‘real’ self:

*Goth allows me to be myself. I’m a nurse in my ‘real’ life but I can hardly turn up to work wearing this (indicating his costume). People are generally intolerant, which is more of an indictment on them. In Goth it’s just accepted.*

According to Holbrook, Block and Fitzsimons (1998) gender is “socially and culturally constructed and acts as an achieved status that depends among other things, on styles of consumption……from this perspective, cross dressing sometimes serves as a form of consumption symbolism in the service of enacting a role related script via the symbolic expression of gender through clothing “ p.15). They discuss the motivation of the transvestite as striving to achieve a position of uniqueness. “Such a character departs from social norms and conventions governing the communal standards for physical attractiveness” (p.28). For some the pleasure comes from shocking others just accept it; for Mark the pleasure comes from being the center of attention. He enjoys flaunting himself and goes to great lengths to ensure he is noticed. Mark has a high regard for consumer objects that allow him to stand out. He sees beauty in the female form and adopts and adapts feminine products to help him achieve his ideal of beauty and glamour (Schroeder and Borgerson, 1998). Rather than interpreting Mark’s appearance as deviant or transgressive as Holbrook et al suggest, his behavior may also be seen as an oppositional reaction to mainstream society and a refusal to conform for the sake of acceptance; an act to re-appropriate difference by reclaiming the power of the refigured and re-inscribed body in defiance of phallocratic hegemony (Wiegman, 2001).

**GENDER IDEAL AS A ‘HOLY GRAIL’: SEEKING THE UNOBTAINABLE**

While Mark is a self confessed exhibitionist, Monty represents a
different side of the coin. He is in search of an unobtainable beauty but is fully aware that he is never going to achieve this ideal. He is not happy as a man because he feels the masculine appearance is alien to him. He cannot wear make-up during the course of his everyday life because he recognizes that it contradicts prevailing cultural norms and leads to isolation and alienation. Unlike Mark, Monty is quiet and withdrawn. He wears full Victorian dresses, his face is chalk white and his eye and lip make-up is black. He does not like to come out in the day because the ‘light shows up all his flaws” and makes him feel ugly. During the Sexy Sunday event (the finale to the Goth weekend where music is played by star djs), he led us into the hallway where there was a picture of him on the wall, and to quote:

This picture was taken by a professional. It’s the only time in my life I’ve ever felt I looked beautiful. The light catches me just right, I don’t look like me at all. I wish I could look like this all the time.

In the picture Monty is dressed in a flowing period red gown, the lighting positioned in an upward, Dietrichesque reflection, highlighting shadows and contours, giving structure and a feminine definition to his face. Monty stood for a while staring at the photograph and for the first time he looked genuinely happy. Monty is a rather more complex case than Mark. He showed no evidence of gender dysphoria as in wishing to ‘be’ a woman, nor was he a ‘woman trapped in a man’s body’. His whole issue centered on aesthetics and his image of beauty and perfection which he associated with the female. This however, merely resulted in a sense of confusion, alienation and a relentless search for the unobtainable which ultimately led to disappointment. Garber (1992, p32) 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.”

**BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES: ANDROGYNY**

Both Mark and Monty represent examples of males privileging the feminine in their ideal of beauty, albeit in exaggerated forms. Others adopted a more bricolage approach to their gendered appearance. For example there were men at the festival who were extremely masculine in some ways, wore beards and in some cases tattoos, but who crossed the look with female tightly drawn corsets, stockings and high heel shoes. For some the emphasis was on androgyny. Androgyny theory holds that every person has the potential to develop both the masculine and feminine aspects of their nature instead of suppressing those traits that society labels as appropriate only for the opposite sex (Bem 1974, 1975). According to Bem, psychological androgyny is both adaptive and desirable offering a liberationist ideology in so far as it views masculinity and femininity as independent rather than bi-polar opposites. However, some suggest that it does not go far enough in recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of both masculinity and femininity (Spence, 1984).
Jordon/John offers us a case of androgyny in both his appearance and attitude. Jordon wears a beard, make-up, a headscarf, a skirt and stiletto heels. He freely describes how he is bisexual in nature and enjoys experimentation with both his male and female side. In terms of appearance he has no personal conflict with combining what might be considered ‘oppositional’ appearance traits (beard/lipstick, blouse/hairy chest etc). In a similar vein to Mark, he attends the festival with his eighteen year old daughter who is comfortable with her father’s appearance and sexual orientation. Jordon is a professional photographer who lives in Newcastle in the North east of England. He 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.

Jordon: “I come from Newcastle, a place where if you’re not involved in the macho football scene you’re regarded as some kind of 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.”

Like Jordon a number of other men combined female attire with male bodies, sporting corsets made from lace with tattoos, long hair and frequently beards, almost as if they were taking to the extreme those most feminine and masculinity symbols of gender identification. There were also those who chose to disguise their genders as far as possible through the adoption of gender neutral costumes such as skeletons, cyborgs, masks and even ‘sacred costumes’ such as monks robes (Keenan, 1999).

**GENDER AS FETISHISM**

At the festival there was also evidence of cross over with the fetish community. Stalls at the Pavillion (the site of the main events) catered for bondage, constriction and pain. There were masks with zips on sale, black rubber and leather costumes, leather and pvc corsets, handcuffs, whips and leads. Customers included both males and females. These outfits were also worn with little inhibition in the pubs, restaurants and especially at the ‘gigs’ and ticket only music events.

According to Schroeder and Borgerson (2002) fetishism is a psychological phenomenon that replaces human relations with commodified object relations. These generally revolve around particular items of clothing, often leather, normally black and constraining or molded to the body. “A critical factor in fetish clothing is the way it conforms and transforms the body. The tighter the clothing, the stronger the fetish potential. Tight clothing accentuates the human form, often isolates certain body parts like the pelvis or the breasts, and reveals the body’s shape” (p.80). Corseting was particularly prevalent for both genders, some of whom took it to the extreme. Whilst corseting has a long history, most notably, the introduction of the iron corset by Catherine de Medici in the late C16th who decreed that the
average waist size should be 13 inches (Spanbauer, 1997), it has usually been associated with female beauty rituals. At the festival, however, there were men and women who, over a period of years, had trained their bodies through corseting to extreme exaggerated proportions. One woman had reduced her waist to 18”. Pain was also considered to be part of the experience and even ‘performance’ as in the case of the ‘Queen of Goth’ who timed her entrance for maximum impact and spent the night in a steel ribbed corset that she explained left her bleeding. She managed to stay the course, however, determined to see out the night in the full glare of the spotlight. Moreover, body training was not confined to women. There were also men who had altered their shapes, in the process acquiring slender, ‘nipped in’ waists of female size and shape. For some this was purely aesthetic, for others the constriction added to the experience and heightened their sensuous experiences.

However, it was also within this group that the darker side of the subculture was most in evidence. Members of the Sado-masochistic fraternity were much more serious, and literal, in their interpretation of the Vampyre myth than the ‘Vamp Goths’ who merely adopted the look or role played. Fetishists viewed these Goths as simply ‘play acting’ without any real involvement or commitment. One participant who was there in the role of retailer laughed at the idea of the ‘Whitby Vampire Society’ (a group of people who meet for re-enactments, visits and celebrations) and spoke about his own society, which he claimed was the only ‘real’ vampire society in existence in England. This was based in ‘Crouch End’ in London, and he described the link between Gothic dress and vampiric practices. While he did not advocate the biting of necks and the drinking of human blood, there was a strong link to blood rituals and bondage. Pelmutter (1999) describes the tenuous link between vampires and Goths in so much as,

“vampires distinguish themselves from Goths and the Gothic scene, although aesthetic styles are similar and many times they attend the same clubs. The differing criteria are that Goths do not become members of clans or adopt the vampire ideology……vampires frequently attend fetish scene and body scene clubs, which involve public sadomasochistic activities…………besides dressing in the latest leather sadomasochistic designs, original accessories include catheter bags filled with blood and urine, medical bags filled with blood, and air hoses when necessary” (p.9/10).

DISCUSSION

It is certainly not new to say that gender identities are complex, multi-layered and contentious. Nor that gender extends beyond simple dichotomies of male/female, gay/straight, bi-sexual/a-sexual. This has been explored and reported in numerous studies from the cultural, sociological, psychological and anthropological. Indeed the field of gender studies is a minefield of healthy debate with a range of often conflicting theories co-existing at the present time. In this paper we have attempted to scratch the surface regarding a range of gender expressions through acts of manifest consumption within a particular site. We chose to focus on a subculture of consumption due to the fact that historically subcultures have provided creative spaces for those who ‘dare to be different’ or refuse to
conform to conventional norms. They are also vehicles for self expression and sometimes act as platforms for what may be considered deviant behavior. By their nature they are marginal or at least different, but at the same time they can also serve as microcosms of the wider society. In other words, by examining the extreme we can sometimes gain insights into that which lives within us all. Certainly the idea of multiple gender identities is not confined to the realm of the subculture, it may be that they are simply expressed with less inhibition within the subcultural environment.

According to Butler (1990) all gender is performed. It is an act of ‘drag’ that is produced and expressed through signs, symbols and codes. In essence, according to Butler, there is no central or core gender identity. Rather, gender subjectivity is understood as a “history of identifications, parts of which can be brought into play in given contexts and which, precisely because they encode the contingencies of personal history, do not always point back to an internal coherence of any kind” (p.331). Within the Gothic subculture there was evidence of gender ‘play’ or ‘performance’ inherent within the acts of consumption that enabled the expression of particular gender identities. This could be seen in those who adopted the costume and paraphernalia of that iconic mythical figure, the vampire, a very sexual and seductive figure, but one that is also associated with gender equality. Equally, gender performance was played to great effect by the transvestite, cyborg, androgynous and fetishists who attended the festival, although with various degrees of ‘experimentation’.

These manifestations of gendered identity were primarily the outcome of costume and appearance. Holbrook, et al (1998) draw attention to the role of personal appearance and in particular the beauty mystique and its place in consumer culture. They offer a typology based on four distinct perspectives which provide insights into the motivations behind our appearance ‘behaviors’. These include:

**Configuration:** This involves individuals starting from a normal position and striving to maintain this by conforming to the norms of society regarding personal appearance. In other words they attempt to blend in in order to match the dominant configuration.

**Transfiguration:** This occurs when the person starts from a deviant position but attempts to transform themselves in order to achieve acceptance. This may be accomplished through the consumption of physically beautifying products and clothes. They provide the example of transsexuals who may experience gender dysphoria and through gender realignment surgery achieve their normal sexual identity.

**Refiguration:** By contrast this occurs when the person starts from a normal position, but chooses to depart from prevailing norms through acts of transgression and resistance, which may constitute an act of rebellion or a critique of the dominant norms. Such consumption behaviors may include tattooing the body, piercing and/or extreme hair styles.

**Disfiguration:** This is where an individual either elects to be deviant or is forced to remain deviant. Such individuals may be considered misfits or outcasts. They remain in a permanent condition of difference in personal appearance and display patterns of behavior and consumption that are normally associated with the
“unfamiliar, strange, weird, bizarre, deformed, repulsive, hideous or monstrous” (p5). Such individuals may include transvestites who often represent a parody and exaggeration of the female form through excessive make-up, wigs and dresses.

Using this analysis one might consider that a number of Goths fall into the latter two categories. Indeed on face value many may find the acts of consumption and appearance inherent in the Gothic subculture as oppositional and transgressive (fangs, corsets, gender blurring through dress etc). However, within the festival context the bizarre is normalized and aestheticized. Certainly, Goths challenge the mainstream version of beauty and gender ideals through acts of creative consumption that allows them to express themselves on a number of levels, including gender identities that may be viewed as deviant. Nevertheless this needs to be seen in the light of the dominant ideology concerning personal appearance and gender behavior. As Pitts (2000) points out, from a feminist poststructuralist view, bodies and subjects are shaped within a context that privileges heterosexuality, binary gender roles and certain forms of self presentation over others. Moreover, the quality of the person is often associated with how they look. Joy and Venkatesh (1993, p354). Accordingly, women should fit a specific beauty ideal and ‘men should look like men’.

However, developing Lacan’s assertion that virile display in the human being has a feminine aspect, Garber (1992) claims that the real male cannot be embodied at all, that embodiment is a form of feminization. In a study of male icons (Valentino, Elvis etc..) Garber shows how fetishized images of masculinity bear within them traces of the feminized – man transvestite and thus point towards their own constitutive instability and displacement. As Healey (1994) notes, the very over- compensatory nature of hypermasculinity, or the efforts to authenticate ‘maleness’ can often serve to expose, rather than allay anxieties about projected images of manliness.

Moreover, just as much as beauty or acceptable forms of appearance are culturally defined, so are acts of deviance, or possibly better defined, deviations from the accepted equilibrium of conventional aesthetics. We can take many communities, such as those associated with tattoos, piercings and indeed the Gothic community where what is perceived as grotesque by ‘outsiders’ is seen and defined as beautiful within that given social and cultural context. Indeed, early anthropological work (Mead, 1935) has stressed the mutability of sex roles and perceptions of gender as being culturally defined (see also Zucker, 1999 for a cross cultural discussion of gender socialization), and the idea of gender as a determinate reflection of the negotiated representation of cultural practices (Zakin, 2000) is prevalent throughout the literature.

On a more individual level, Foucault (1985) asserts that identity is not simply imposed from above but is also actively
determined by individuals through the deployment of ‘practices’ of the self, or ‘self stylization’. Once this becomes conscious, then the potential for a reflexive or ethical form of self fashioning – an aesthetics of existence’ emerges (Foucault, 1985). Self stylization is an example of what Foucault terms the “practice of liberty”

Within in the Gothic culture there is evidence of participants engaging in such a reflexive ‘practice of liberty’ and the festival offers a space to enact desired gender identities in a collective environment. This notion of enactment has resonance with the work of Judith Butler (1990) whose concept of performativity suggests that as a constantly reiterated cultural norm, gender is deeply inscribed upon our bodies. At the same time, the cultural necessity for a performative reiteration points to a constitutive instability in gendered identity. It is this instability that can be prized open to create a space for the construction of marginal or ‘abject’ sexualities. Goth offers such a space. It could be argued that it comes close to a “gendered paradise that is radically different from the existing social order” (Kacen, 2000, p.345), where participants feel free to express their ‘real’ and ‘desired’ gendered selves unfettered from prejudice and ridicule.

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