THE EVOLUTION OF GOTH CULTURE

EMERALD STUDIES IN ALTERNATIVITY AND MARGINALIZATION

Series Editors: Samantha Holland, Leeds Beckett University, UK and Karl Spracklen, Leeds Beckett University, UK

There is growing interest in work on transgression, liminality and sub-cultural capital within cultural studies, sociology and the social sciences more broadly. However, there is a lack of understanding of the problem of alternativity: what it means to be alternative in culture and society in modernity. What 'alternative' looks like is often left unexplored. The alternative is either assumed un-problematically, or stands in for some other form of social and cultural exclusion.

Alternativity delineates those spaces, scenes, sub-cultures, objects and practices in modern society that are actively designed to be counter or resistive to mainstream popular culture. Alternativity is associated with marginalisation, both actively pursued by individuals, and imposed on individuals and sub-cultures. Alternativity was originally represented and constructed through acts of transgression and through shared sub-cultural capital. In contemporary society, alternative music scenes such as heavy metal, goth and punk have spread around the world; and alternative fashions and embodiment practices are now adopted by footballers and fashion models. The nature of alternativity as a communicative lifeworld is now questioned in an age of globalisation and hyper-commodification.

This book series provides a stimulus to new research and new theorising on alternativity and marginalisation. It provides a focus for scholars interested in sociological and cultural research that expands our understanding of the ontological status of spaces, scenes, sub-cultures, objects and practices defined as alternative, liminal or transgressive. In turn, the book series enables scholars to theorise about the status of the alternative in contemporary culture and society.

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THE EVOLUTION OF GOTH CULTURE: THE ORIGINS AND DEEDS OF THE NEW GOTHS

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Chapter 1

An Introduction

Definitions and Frames

What is goth? This book is an attempt to answer that question by exploring the history of the evolution of goth culture, that is, the origins and deeds of the goths. Goth, like culture or sub-culture or alternativity, is a problematic concept, having multiple meanings and uses. We want to avoid any attempt to provide a definitive story to what goth is, or where it started, because these are stories that are strongly contested by people who identity as goths. People who write popular narratives about the origins and deeds of the goths, what goth culture is or goth style is, may have some insider understanding, or they may be outsiders reproducing stereotypes about what the Internet thinks goths do and what they look like. We want to explore the construction of the collective memory of goth. That is, we want to explore what goths think are the important moments in their evolution and important aspects of their culture, and how that is reflected in wider accounts of that history and culture. Having said all that, for those unfamiliar with the history and culture of goth, a short explanation follows. First, gothic or goth emerged as a sub-genre label for a number of bands in the post-punk movement in the United Kingdom at the beginning of the 1980s. Since, it has survived and become globalised as a cultural practice associated with being alternative and transgressive. How that happened, what the evolution entailed and how goths and non-goths make sense of the history and culture will be made clear in the rest of the book. So, read on.

This book builds on work the authors have already published on goths and other alternative sub-cultures, some it by the two of us, some of it just by Karl alone or with others (Spracklen, 2014; Spracklen, Henderson, & Procter, 2016; Spracklen, Richter, & Spracklen, 2013; Spracklen & Spracklen, 2012, 2014). All our research is ethnographic and qualitative; we use our own ethnographic experience of being alternative combined with interviews of key respondents and content analysis. We follow a discourse-tracing approach (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009), which combines grounded theory with ideas from semiotics to try to make sense of how goths and others make sense of their histories, communities and cultures. In Spracklen and Spracklen (2012), we explore the paganism and Satanism on the fringes of one part of the goth scene and make the claim that such 'dark leisure' represents some authentic, communicative rationality in defence of the lifeworld (Habermas, 1984, 1987; Spracklen, 2009). In Spracklen and Spracklen (2014), we examine how the Whitby Goth Weekend has changed the perception of Whitby and the goth scene, and how the 'gothicness' of people attending the festival has been questioned by other goths (a theme we return to through this book). Spracklen, Richter, and Spracklen (2013) discuss the impact of gentrification and

privatisation, what we defined as eventisation, on the spaces of alternative scenes in one city, and suggests that alternative scenes were shrinking. Karl Spracklen (2014) argues that the communicative rationality of goth and black metal has vanished in online spaces, and has written extensively on extreme metal's precarious status as a communicative leisure space (Spracklen, 2009, 2014, 2015a). Finally, Karl Spracklen, Henderson, and Procter (2016) explore how people remember being members of the F-Club, a crucial formative space for post-punk and goth in Leeds (again, which we will return to later in this book).

Goths have been the subject of a small body of work amongst sociologists (Hodkinson, 2002), cultural studies/gender theorists (Brill, 2008; Siegel, 2005) and popular music studies/musicology (van Elferen & Weinstock, 2016). Hodkinson's book on goths takes an ethnographic, sociological approach to understand social identity and belongingness in the scene as it was in the late 1990s, when his book's research was undertaken. It is an important starting point for research on goth; but it is dated, and limited in its lack of sustained critique of the commodification at work in goth. Siegel's book *Goth's Dark Empire* is highly problematic because of its false assumptions about what is part of goth, and what is punk or metal or something entirely unrelated. Brill's (2008) book *Goth Culture* is much better than Siegel, as it explores what goth actually is, though the emphasis on gender means only one part of goth's meaning is discussed. Finally, van Elferen and Weinstock's (2016) recent book *Goth Music: From Sound to Subculture* is only a brief (if useful) snapshot of goth's continued salience as a global, sub-cultural form. So, a book is needed that captures the history, sociology and philosophy of goth, and its meaning and history as understood by goths themselves – which is what you are reading right now.

This is a book about the nature of alternativity in goth sub-culture: where did the idea that goth is alternative and transgressive come from? And, is it still alternative and sub-cultural – or as one of us (Spracklen, 2014) has hinted in research in online spaces (as discussed above), has its transgressive nature suffered the 'heat death' of commodification? There is a growing body of work on transgression and liminality in cultural studies, which in turn is based on the theories of Bataille (1985, 1988), Turner (1969), Foucault (1986, 1991, 2002) and Lefebvre (1991, 1996, 2014), among others. This theory work is typified by the discussion in Partridge (2014) of the sacred and the profane in popular music, which he sees as a site of contestations over the meaning of good and evil between hegemons and musicians/listeners. In this cultural studies work, the problem of alternativity – what it means to be alternative in culture and society in modernity, what alternative looks like – is often left unexplored. There is a growing empirical and theoretical interest in transgression and sub-cultural capital in sociology and related social sciences; for example, in the work of queer theorists and gender theorists exploring embodiment, body modification and fashion (Holland, 2004; Winge, 2012; Yuen Thompson, 2015) as well as in popular music studies (Cohen, 1991; Hodkinson, 2002), youth studies (Bennett, 2000) and leisure studies (Rojek, 2000, 2010). These different explorations of alternativity and marginalisation demonstrate the salience of this book, and its relevance to scholars. But much of the work in these two approaches to alternativity often fails to

adequately theorise the meaning of alternativity *qua* alternativity. The alternative is either assumed un-problematically, or stands in for some other form of social and cultural exclusion.

Alternativity delineates those spaces, scenes, cub-cultures, objects and practices in modern society that are considered to be actively designed to be counter or resistive to mainstream popular culture. The idea of the alternative in popular culture became itself a mainstream idea with the rise of the counter-culture in the 1960s America, though there were earlier forms of alternative cultures in America and other Western countries. Alternativity is associated with marginalisation, both actively pursued by individuals, and imposed on individuals and sub-cultures. Alternativity was originally represented and constructed through acts of transgression and through shared sub-cultural capital. In contemporary society, alternative music scenes such as heavy metal, goth and punk have spread around the world; and alternative fashions and embodiment practices are now adopted by footballers and fashion models. The nature of alternativity as a communicative lifeworld is now questioned in an age of globalisation and hyper-commodification (Spracklen, 2014). This book critically interrogates the alternative and marginal nature of goth, and narratives about goth.

The new goths take their name from the old Goths, the warriors who sacked Rome (albeit briefly), and established their own kingdoms across the European landscape in what historians call Late Antiquity. The origins and deeds of the old Goths were constructed by Roman historians in fear of the Goth as barbarian outsider; at the same time, the Goths were themselves the heroic subject of their own histories, constructed as stories of their mythical origin and the deeds that led them to be rulers of their own kingdoms in the post-Roman period (Heather, 1989, 1996). Who the old Goths were, their origins and their deeds, was a product of history, historiography and myth-making: by historians and by others, including writers and readers of the present era (Wickham, 2009). The existence of these old Goths and the adoption/adaption of the goth/gothic name by – or the imposition of the name on – the subjects of our book has led to the name being capitalised when people (goths and non-goths alike) discuss the new goths, that is, some people say Goth, not goth. We prefer goth, not Goth, because we are speaking of a culture, or genre, or space, or scene, or lifestyle or possibly sub-culture. It is a descriptor like punk, or skinhead, or indeed vandal (those modern-day hooligans named after the Vandal barbarians who, like the Goths, invaded the Roman Empire and carved their own kingdoms from it).

We use the late-antique framework of origins and deeds of the old Goths here to explore the controversies and boundary-making surrounding the genesis and progression of the modern gothic alternative culture. In this book, we argue that goth as sub-culture in the 1980s was initially counter-cultural, political and driven by a musical identity that emerged from punk. However, as goth music globalised and became another form of pop and rock music, goth in the 1990s retreated into an alternative sub-culture based primarily on style and a sense of transgression and profanity. By the 2000s, goth became the focus of teenage rebellions, moral panics and growing commodification of counter-cultural resistance, so that by the 2010s goth had effectively become another fashion choice in the late-modern

hyper-real shopping malls, devoid generally of resistance and politics, but which still had some communicative rationality at work.

We use archival research, interviews with participants and content and semi-otic analysis of relevant internet sites. The eight participants we interviewed (four males and four females) are all goths associated with the scene in the north of England, and are individuals who have long history of being goths. In no way are they representative of all goths, and we do not make any such claim anywhere in the book. But our respondents offer ways in which we can shed light on how some goths think about the origins and deeds of the new goths, the history and culture. As goths ourselves to a greater or lesser extent, we have our own history, memory and awareness of what it means to be a goth.[1] Combining our positional stance with our respondents' thoughts and memories with the other data, we make the case that goth has changed its meaning for its participants, and for wider society, though its short existence. The book engages with the work of other researchers and authors on goth, before developing a new theory of alternativity as a communicative lifeworld standing in opposition to the instrumentality of the mainstream. As such, goth, like punk, is in danger of being co-opted altogether by capitalism.

The Structure of the Book

There are three aims that guided how we structured the contents of this book. The first aim is chronological and ethnographical. We wanted to make sure that it would be read as a conventional research monograph that explores the history of goth from its origins to the present-day, which includes wider discussions about goth culture and the philosophy and sociology of goth. So, we have included chapters in a roughly chronological order: on the origins of goth and the early deeds of the goths, then chapters about the evolution and globalisation of goth culture, then the commodification of goth and the (possible) end of goth in this century. Our second aim was to make sure that we highlighted two key elements of British goth culture, namely the well-known and contentious band 'The Sisters of Mercy' and the similarly contentious 'Whitby Goth Weekend'; so, we have these two unique case studies as separate chapters alongside inter-disciplinary explorations of the sociology of goth online, goth fashion and the moral panic about goths in mainstream society. Our final aim was to develop new theoretical frameworks that allow commodification and alternativity to be explored, so we have a chapter developing that as well as a chapter review of literature.

The book begins, then, with that review. Chapter 2, 'Academics and Popular Writers on Goths', is a literature review that will examine and critique other writing on the goth scene. This work allows us to situate this book in the work of others who have also written about goths, from academics to popular writers. The review will begin with academic writing on goth. This section of the review will focus, in particular, on the key research monographs on goth, from the work of Hodkinson (2002) through Siegel (2005) to Brill (2008) to the more recent book by van Elferen and Weinstock (2016). We will argue that while their work is invaluable, it is either too grounded in small parts of the goth phenomenon, or too reliant on the work of cultural theorists to make sense of the everyday practice of

goth. In the second section of this chapter, we will explore the work of popular authors on goth, from the work of authors such as Mick Mercer to Wikipedia. In writing about academics and popular writers on goth, we will sketch out the salient features of the history, culture and sociology of goths.

Chapter 3, 'Constructing a New Theory of Alternativity', is where we do the important theoretical work that allows us to develop a critical lens through which we can make sense of the rest of the book. This short chapter will develop a new theory of alternativity through combining the work of Adorno (1991) and Adorno and Horkheimer (2016), Habermas (1984, 1987), Butler (2006) and Lefebvre (1991, 1996, 2014). Although Adorno and Habermas are part of the same Marxist tradition of critical theory, and Butler and Lefebvre belong to a post-Marxist, post-structural epistemology, the four theorists may seem strange when analysed together. We situate ourselves firmly in the epistemology and ontology of Adorno and Habermas, although we accept that humans can still make choices to resist, even if such resistance is shaped by the power of hegemony. We will show that Butler and Lefebvre offer new theoretical insights into the nature of alternativity, transgression and resistance, which can be added to Marxist critical theory so long as the epistemological relativism of post-structuralism is not brought with it. This new critical lens will allow us to make sense of the origin and deeds of the goths, and the move from being defined through alternative space to being a commodity, a social media meme and fashion choice.

Chapter 4, 'The Origin of the Goths', deals with the complex history of the invention of the goths. We approach this origin story through the memories of our respondents and the wider goth community, as well as through popular narratives. We will use these multiple data sources from our research to sketch out the origin of the goth scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s Britain. As with the barbarian Goths of the first millennium, we will show that the genesis of the goth scene was partly a result of musicians thinking about how to be alternative and real, and partly a result of promoters and journalists seeking to label 'new' music and scenes. We will situate goth in the post-punk music scene in the United Kingdom, as a radical musical counter culture committed to radical politics.

Chapter 5, 'The Early Deeds of the Goths', is, like Chapter 4, constructed from our multiple data sources: from the memories of our respondents, popular narratives of the history, primary sources such as music magazines and more credible histories of the period. This chapter will show how goth developed as a discrete musical sub-culture in the 1980s in the United Kingdom and beyond, and became an accepted part of the alternative music scene. We situate goth in this period primarily as a sub-genre of post-punk, alternative music that shared many similar fashions and ideologies with the wider alternative scenes especially in the United Kingdom and Germany. We show that this post-punk, alternative politics in the goth scene was challenged by bands that abandoned goth for a contemporary hard rock sound, and by goth rock bands such as 'The Mission' who discarded the radical politics and took the goth sound and aesthetics into the charts and the mainstream at the end of the 1980s.

Chapter 6, 'The Sisters of Mercy: A Case Study', is the first case study of the book, and covers the most important goth band in the 1980s: the Leeds band 'The

Sisters of Mercy'. If The Sisters of Mercy were not the inventors of goth aesthetics and goth sounds, they are clearly the band that became famous world-wide for being the popularisers of goth. This band came to exemplify the goth look and the goth sound, and came out of a crucial local scene where goth was allegedly first used to describe the music. The band became hugely successful in the commercialisation of goth rock, but subsequently the band's leader, Eldritch, publicly disowned the goth name. The band's history and its status in the collective memory of goths and those interested in eighties popular music more generally is still significant, even if Eldritch might argue otherwise. The band was *the* goth band, the band that made the scene around the F-Club so important in goth memory, the band that made Leeds the goth capital of England and arguably the world. This chapter will explore the band's story and liminal state through published interviews with band members, reviews and features by journalists, ethnography online and the interviews with our goth respondents undertaken by the authors.

Chapter 7, 'The Goths and the Globalisation of Popular Culture', explores the trends that made goth music, culture and aesthetics cross from the post-punk scene in the United Kingdom into Europe, America, then the rest of the world. In this chapter, then, the globalisation of goth sub-culture is re-constructed. We will explore how goth initially spread as a form of alternative culture in the 1980s, and continued to maintain its alternative status once its moment of fashionability had passed in the early 1990s. By using our multiple data sources, we will explore how goth was transformed in the process of globalisation, thus becoming an identifiable form of popular culture from the 1990s onwards, and seen as both an alternative space operating underground and far from the mainstream – while, at the same time, being an alternative space that embraced mainstream cultural practices and habits, as well as one that became increasingly defined by the stereotypes imposed on it by mainstream cultural commentators. In this chapter, we will explore the connections between goth and metal, and how metal started to claim some practices and forms from goth, from wearing black to transgressing everyday cultural norms.

Chapter 8, 'Goths as Harbingers of Doom, and Moral Panics About Them', explores the ways in which goths have been stereotyped as dangerous outsiders. In this chapter, the reception of the globalisation of goth culture in hegemonic, mainstream public discourse and spheres is explored. The chapter will examine how goths came to be seen as dangerous outsiders by moral majorities in different nations around the world. Much of the data for this chapter will be found from online sources such as new sites and conservative religious campaigns against goths – both Christians in the West and Muslims in the East. We will explore how some of the stereotyping about goths has operated in a general way to stigmatise all those considered alternative, transgressive or deviant – and consequently, goth has come to mean anyone in black, with emos and metallers being lumped together under the goth category.

Chapter 9, 'Goth as Virtual Identity and Virtual Culture Online', argues that goth survived through the 1990s and 2000s partly due to the rise of digital leisure and digital culture – but the Internet by its nature has changed goth identity and culture. This chapter will explore the rise of .alt culture on the Internet in the

1990s through to the 2000s, and the ways in which goth culture has been continually reconstructed and its core identity reproduced. Using online ethnography, we will show how goths struggled to define gothness that was both inclusive of others seeking belonging, while being exclusive in the forms and myths associated with being a goth. We will show that goth has essentially changed from being a music sub-culture into one defined by some loose idea of darkness and transgression found online.

Chapter 10, 'Whitby Goth Weekend: A Case Study', tackles a topic we have touched upon in our previously published research (Spracklen & Spracklen, 2014). The second case study will be the history of the Whitby Goth Weekend, its status in British popular culture and the attitude towards it from goths. Whitby Goth Weekend is one of the most important events on the goth calendar, and historically it has appealed to goths across the country and the globe. Whitby Goth Weekend takes place in the town of Whitby on the coast of Yorkshire, famous for its ruined Abbey, its seaside resort delights and its key role in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. In that book, it is the place where Dracula first appears on British soil, when the ship that is carrying him is caught in a storm. Unfortunately, it is also the place where Lucy Westenra is convalescing, and she is soon in Dracula's control. Bram Stoker also stayed at Whitby when he was writing the book. The chapter will explore how the weekend has become both a way of creating a 'Gothic' status for Whitby, and a way for everyday individuals to play as goths for the weekend. We will argue that while the Weekend is seen as important in the memory of our goth respondents, they question its continued relevance and fear it has been taken over by people who want to be steampunks, or people who just want to listen to eighties rock bands.

Chapter 11, 'Goth as Fashion Choice', will look at the importance of fashion and style in the rise of goth. In this chapter, we will begin with a discussion of the change and continuity in goth fashions and goth aesthetics since the formative years of the 1980s. We will show how the goth aesthetic borrowed from punk, post-punk and hard rock; then, we will show how goth and metal have had a symbiotic relationship in terms of transgressive, alternative fashions. In the second section of the chapter, we will show how goth in this century has become primarily a fashion choice, with gothness being performed as pantomime by amateurs, or as professional career choice by models. We will briefly discuss the development of steampunk out of goth, and show how goths have resisted or embraced the steampunk aesthetic. In the final section of the chapter, we will then describe the ways in which goth fashions and styles have become co-opted by mainstream fashion, and mainstream popular culture.

Chapter 12, 'The End of Goth?', is the most controversial chapter in the book. In this final substantive chapter, we will take the pulse of the goth scene today, and show how its commitment to alternativity, and its self-imposed marginalisation, is being threatened existentially and materially by the forces of instrumentality that govern late modern global capitalism. We will explore how goths today make sense of goth ideology and style through our interviews with our goths and online ethnography, and argue that although goth is alive and well in its radical, communicative state, it is at risk of becoming side-lined, or taken over and changed into something more corporate.

Chapter 13 is our short conclusion, in which we return to the big themes of goth's radical politics, its communicative leisure and culture. We want to show how goths are actively engaged in resisting attempts to subvert their alternative space, and they are involved in boundary work, memory-making and community action to maintain that. But there is a danger that such work will fail as the idea of the alternative changes in wider society. In the final part of our concluding chapter, we make a short return to our new theory of alternativity, and explore what it suggests what the future of goth may be.

Note

1. We both grew up in Leeds, and have a long-standing interest in goth as partici-
   pants in the eighties onwards. Both of us stepped away at different times, but we
   have retained interest in goth since we started to live together in 1997 in Bradford.
   Beverley became a tribal-fusion dancer, and achieved some recognition in that
   scene with the goth troupe Tanzhexen. Karl became a full-time academic in leisure
   studies.