

BETWEEN SUBVERSION AND STEREOTYPE

**THE 'GOTH' MOVEMENT AS A CASE
STUDY OF GENDERED REPRESENTATIONS
IN SUBCULTURAL MEDIA AND STYLE**

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**D.Phil (European Doctorate)
in Media and Cultural Studies**

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(May 2005)

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: _____

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the kind help and support of various people and institutions. My sincere thanks go to:

- * My supervisors Dr Caroline Bassett and Dr Michael Bull for their competent and critical guidance, and above all for enabling me to realise a rather unusual research project which has been personally meaningful to me
- * The former Research Centre for Culture and Communication of Sussex University for granting me a *Seedcorn* scholarship
- * The Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) for granting me a doctoral research scholarship
- * The numerous Goths in Brighton, Edinburgh, Cologne/Bonn and Berlin who agreed to be interviewed, and who shared valuable information and sometimes very personal views and feelings with me
- * The founders/Webmasters and the participants of the Internet forums or newsgroups uk.people.gothic, slashgoth.org, de.soc.subkultur.gothic and Gothiccommunity.de, whose online communities did not only prove invaluable data sources but also a very entertaining read
- * Tim and Sarn of Synthetic for proofreading, and for many enlightening discussions about the German and British Goth scenes
- * Jolie, Julia and Steffi for patient help with scanning, formatting and other technical matters
- * Laura (Brighton) and John (Edinburgh) for giving me accommodation during my additional research trips to these places
- * My parents for continuing support throughout my educational career, and for always believing in me

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SUMMARY

This thesis undertakes a qualitative analysis of gendered identities and representations in the sartorial styles and alternative media of the Gothic subculture in Britain and Germany. The aim is to explore discursive constructions of masculinity and femininity within this subculture, and particularly to highlight the tension between ‘subversive’ and ‘stereotypical’ elements in such constructions. Through an in-depth textual analysis of ethnographic interviews, Internet forum content and music fanzines/magazines, gender-related norms and values in Goth are traced across different practices or aspects of the subculture; namely dress, male-female relations, sexualities and music. The analysis reveals a gendered hierarchy of subcultural capital (i.e. subcultural mechanisms of status attainment) lurking behind the ideology of ‘genderlessness’ pervading Goth rhetoric. Certain constitutive practices of the Gothic scene which supposedly hold progressive or subversive implications in terms of gender – e.g. the idealisation of male androgyny in Goth style, or the veneration of alternative sexualities as a trope of transgression – are shown to partly serve the cementation of stereotypical gender norms within the subculture. However, the analysis also points to the potential for progressive gender politics some of these practices offer. In the sartorial, musical and discursive practices of Goths, many explorative renegotiations of traditional constructions of masculinity and femininity can be found. It is concluded that to reach a full understanding of the socio-political relevance of subcultural practices, it is imperative to consider both the micro-political (i.e. individual or intra-subcultural) and macro-political (i.e. concerning general culture) dimensions of such practices. From this dual perspective, it becomes apparent that gender-related codes and practices which cement restrictive gender norms and status hierarchies internal to a subculture can simultaneously work to challenge gender stereotypes in society at large, and vice versa. Finally, the notion of subculture as a postmodern preserve for collective Utopian impulses is rendered problematic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1 Gender, Subversion and Subculture – a Theoretical Overview	7
1.1 Conceptualising Gender	7
1.1.1 Gender as Performative.....	7
1.1.2 Gender as a Contested Discourse and the Productive Role of Representation	9
1.2 Sites of Subversion.....	11
1.2.1 The Subversive Potential of Cross-dressing and ‘Queer’ Identities.....	11
1.2.2 Gender Subversion through Style Practices?.....	15
1.3 Conceptualising Subculture	19
1.3.1 Subculture as Subjective Identification.....	20
1.3.2 Subcultural Ideology and Subcultural Capital	22
1.4 Subcultures and Masculinity.....	24
1.4.1 A Tough Boys’ World – the Construction of Masculinity on the Subcultural Turf	25
1.4.2 Masculinism for Girls – Male-defined Standards and Female Presence.....	28
1.5 Subcultures and Femininity	31
1.5.1 From ‘Teenie-bopper’ to ‘Ladette’ – the Status of Girls within Youth Culture	31
1.5.2 Girls Strike back – Femininity as a Subcultural Value and Female Subjectivity as Rebellion.....	34
1.5.3 Reality Check – Female Subcultural Capital and Other Complications	39
2 Methodology	43
2.1 Interpreting Subcultural Practices: Socio-symbolic Analysis.....	43
2.2 Sampling Decisions and Other Practical Considerations.....	47
2.2.1 Selection of Interviewees, Magazines and Internet Sites.....	48
2.2.2 Interview and Observation Practices.....	50
2.2.3 Handling Quotations and Writing up the Analysis	52
2.3 Analysing Interviews and Media Texts: Subjectivity and Discourse	56
3 Setting the Scene – the Gothic Subculture in Britain and Germany	60
3.1 A Brief History of Goth, and its Current State in Britain and Germany.....	60
3.2 Goth in a Nutshell – Lifestyles, Values, Practices.....	65
3.2.1 Lifestyles and Attitudes.....	65

3.2.2	Gothic Values.....	67
3.2.3	Gothic Practices	68
3.3	A Sense of Place – the Four Different Regions of My Research.....	71
4	Gendered Goth Styles and Subcultural Capital.....	74
4.1	Subcultural Rhetoric and the Ideology of Genderlessness.....	74
4.2	Gendered Ideals of Beauty: Male Androgyny and Female Hyperfemininity	76
4.3	The Gendered Currency of Subcultural Capital: Female Attractiveness versus Male Rebellion	81
4.3.1	Female Goth Style (Hyperfemininity): ‘Mainstream’ Compatibility and Co-optation.....	84
4.3.2	Male Goth Style (Androgyny): Transgression, Courage and Subcultural Capital	87
5	Subjective Functions of Female Gothic Style	94
5.1	Hyperfemininity as ‘Masquerade’ and Empowerment	94
5.2	Alternative Feminine Identities for Women from Marginalised Groups	101
5.3	The Empowering Potential of Androgyny	104
6	Androgyny versus Affirmation of Masculinity in Male Gothic Style	110
6.1	Liberating Functions of Androgyny and Critique of Traditional Masculinity.....	110
6.2	Affirmation of Masculinity despite/through Androgynous Style	117
6.3	Negotiating the Appropriate Boundaries of Male Androgyny.....	122
6.4	Male Androgyny versus Masculinity in Gothic Style: the UK and Germany	129
7	Gender Relations in the Gothic Subculture.....	135
7.1	The Gothic Scene as a Heterosexually Gendered Space.....	136
7.2	Gendered Status Criteria in the Gothic Scene.....	142
7.2.1	Age, Status and Heterosexual Relationships.....	143
7.2.2	Male versus Female Status Criteria.....	146
7.2.3	Physical Attractiveness as a Gendered Source of Courtship-related Capital	149
7.3	Traditional Gender Roles and Progressive Renegotiations.....	155

8	Gender and Sexualities in the Gothic Subculture	163
8.1	Acceptance and Openness toward Nonconventional Sexualities.....	164
8.2	‘Normative Bisexuality’ and the Myth of Genderlessness	167
8.2.1	A ‘genderless’ Bisexual Utopia?.....	167
8.2.2	Bisexuality as a Normative Standard	173
8.3	Bisexuality and Female Subcultural Capital	176
8.4	The Conflicted Status of Male Homoeroticism in Goth	182
9	Gendered Representations in Goth Music and Media	191
9.1	The Sonic and Textual Construction of Gender in Goth Music Media	193
9.1.1	‘Seductive Divas’ and ‘Tough Guys’	194
9.1.2	Stretching the Boundaries – Progressive Gender Role Negotiations	203
9.2	The Visual Construction of Gender in Goth Music Media	208
9.2.1	Woman as ‘Eye Candy’ and Sex Object	208
9.2.2	Goth at the Intersection of Competing Value Discourses	214
9.2.3	Sex Sells – the ‘Commercial’ Discourse in German Goth Media.....	219
	Conclusion.....	227
	Bibliography	240

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule

Appendix 2: Declaration of Consent

Appendix 3: Original German Data

Appendix 4: Pictures

PICTURE INDEX

A group of Goths.....	60
Goth couple with matching styles	74
Scantly clad Goth woman with attitude	94
Sean Brennan, singer of London After Midnight.....	110
Goth couple in traditionally gendered positions	135
Two Goth girls ‘sticking together’	163
‘Erotic’ stage show of German Goth band Umbra et Imago	191

INTRODUCTION

Eerie, wailing guitar sounds, deep husky vocals and pounding drumbeats fill the foggy air of the small club. On the dancefloor, I see theatrical, mysterious figures and shapes slowly moving amongst the fog. Most wear flowing velvet dresses or capes, elaborate make-up and long black hair, and even when the fog lifts for a moment it is often hard to tell whether these strange, beautiful, black-clad creatures elegantly swaying their bodies are male or female. In fascination, I watch a girl with pale make-up, dark lipstick and heavy black eyeliner, wearing a hooded velvet cape around her frail body. Only when my eyes are caught by the waving movements of the rather large, bony hands sticking out of the wide black sleeves do I realise that 'she' is actually a boy. In my plain black jeans and shirt, I feel slightly out of place among all these meticulously styled, arcane beings, but still I am instantly hooked. A rather inconspicuous, bookish girl of 18, I have just discovered alternative music for myself, and this is my first encounter with the Gothic subculture.

More than a decade later, I am again sitting in the corner of a smoke-filled Goth club, watching people dance. The eerie guitar sounds have become rare over the years; the rhythms have got faster and harsher, and so have the dance styles. I spot a man with a crew cut, combat fatigues and a muscle shirt, stomping back and forth in a martial manner to the sound of distorted electronic beats. Next to him, there is a girl dressed in a tight black PVC corset, miniskirt and high-heeled platform boots, whose tiny-stepped, wriggly dancing somehow calls to mind a dark, lascivious nightclub sequence from a David Lynch movie. A woman in a luxurious medieval dress is sitting in the corner opposite me, obviously waiting for more mellow sounds to resume the gentle, fairylike dancing she displayed earlier.

All these people have long lost their mysterious, untouchable air to me; in fact, many of these 'strange creatures' are now my friends or acquaintances. However, I again feel a certain distance as I am watching with a critical eye, jotting down fieldnotes. I am in the second year of my PhD, gathering empirical data in order to answer some questions which have formed in my head over the years – in the process of moving from the initial uncritical fascination of someone who has just discovered a new world for herself, into a phase of disillusionment at encountering all too familiar flaws in this world, and finally to a realistic, almost mundane perspective on the once so

arcane subculture, which came with gradually turning into what Goths themselves jokingly call a 'sad old Goth'. I have long wondered what really lies behind the seemingly 'genderless' but at the same time heavily gender-saturated styles, practices and images of Goth. Now, I have set about finding some answers...

With the present study, I attempt a qualitative analysis of gendered representations and identifications in the Gothic subculture and its media (fanzines/magazines and Internet forums) across the UK and Germany. The analysis explores gender-specific representations and self-perceived gender identities within this subculture in relation to dominant cultural values of both 'femininity' and 'masculinity'. It centres on the question of to what extent this subculture and its media incorporate and reflect common gender stereotypes, and to what extent they offer alternative or even subversive images and identities.

There exist some academic studies addressing gender in subcultures such as Heavy Metal (Delski & Sholle, 1992; Walser, 1993a), Rave (McRobbie, 1994; Pini, 2001), Punk (Evans & Thornton, 1989; Leblanc, 1999) and Gothic (Gunn, forthcoming; Williamson, 2001). However, these studies tend to revolve almost exclusively around the representation and construction of either femininity (in the case of Rave, Punk and Gothic) or masculinity (in the case of Heavy Metal or Rap). Although a focus on feminist sensibilities and female subjectivities seems justified in view of the way girls within subcultures have been neglected and marginalized in early subcultural analyses, and a focus on masculinity in the context of Heavy Metal or Rap seems natural given the male-centred nature of these subcultures, a one-sided approach focusing exclusively on masculinity or femininity fails to take account of the relational character of the two sides of the gender binary. As Kimmel (1987, p. 12) points out, "one cannot understand the social construction of either masculinity or femininity without reference to the other". Consequently, studies addressing gender construction and representation should ideally be designed to address both sides of the binary.

Moreover, empirical analyses of subcultures tend to either focus one-sidedly on the 'object' side of cultural practices in the form of a semiotic or discursive reading of subcultural images and artefacts (e.g. Evans & Thornton, 1989; Walser, 1993a), or on the 'subject' side in the form of subjective accounts of members gathered through interviews and other ethnographic techniques (e.g. Pini, 2001; Williamson, 2001). There is a lack of studies addressing constructions of both femininity and masculinity, which

systematically analyse the material expressive or representational forms of subcultures (across different media and signifying practices like style) as well as their members' subjective interpretations and identifications with regard to gender.

Subcultural movements have developed their own communication networks, referred to as *alternative media* (Atton, 2002; Duncombe, 1997), mainly in the form of fanzines and Internet sites. Analysing the visual and textual content of these media, along with subcultural practices of self-stylisation and their subjective construction, can shed light on the shared values, norms, and preferred images or self-representations within subcultures. As subcultures are often regarded as indicative, symptomatic or even productive of present or future trends in society at large (see J. Davis, 1990; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995), such an analysis could in turn yield a deeper insight into some structural and dynamic aspects of general society.

I aim to examine constructions and representations of femininity and masculinity in the Gothic subculture through a systematic analysis of both the material and representational practices or media (sartorial style, fanzines, music, the Internet) and the subjective (self-)perceptions and media receptions within this subculture in a cross-national study. To this end, I track representations of gender-specific images, norms and values in selected British and German Goth fanzines or magazines, Internet sites, music media and stylisation practices. I also explore the reception of such images by and the gender-related self-concepts of Goths in both countries. My analysis centres on three main sets of questions:

1. How are masculinity and femininity represented in Gothic style and media (music, magazines, Internet forums)? Which gender-specific norms, values and stereotypes feature in their visual and textual content?
2. How do the gendered self-stylisation practices of Gothic dress and the gendered representations in Gothic media relate to the subjectivities of male and female Goths?
3. How do these self-presentations and representations relate to subcultural status criteria, hierarchies and 'capital' in the Gothic scene?

I proceed from the idea that despite the subcultural rhetoric of rejecting 'mainstream' norms and values, subcultural movements – in this case, the Gothic subculture – and their media to a certain degree incorporate and reflect these very values. Hence, the

gendered representations in Goth media and the gendered self-images of Goths should partly correspond to common cultural gender stereotypes. Moreover, I examine to what extent the Gothic subculture and its media offer alternative or even subversive gender representations (e.g. in texts, photographs and other artefacts), modes of self-presentation (e.g. in sartorial style and demeanour), and identities (e.g. in gender-related attitudes and behavioural norms).

Throughout the analysis, I also pay attention to potential regional or national differences between the gendered representations and identities circulating in the British and German Gothic scenes. The question of national differences is particularly interesting as the subculture and its factions have developed differently in the two countries. Most importantly, while the German scene has turned into a commercially viable pop cultural force with newsstand magazines, big festivals and clothing companies over the last decade, its British counterpart has remained a rather small-scale 'underground' phenomenon.

As an interdisciplinary enterprise drawing on three related fields (media studies, cultural studies, sociology), the present study employs theoretical frameworks and research methods from various backgrounds. Specifically, I combine a media-centric, discourse analytical approach (i.e. analysing visual and textual elements of Goth media) with the people-focused approach offered by ethnography (i.e. analysing the construction of gender-related self-concepts among Goths).

The thesis is structured as follows: In chapter 1, the central theoretical concepts guiding my study – namely gender, subversion and subculture – are clarified. I outline a conceptualisation of gender as a fragmented, contested and continually negotiated discourse, and introduce a modern definition of subculture based on the works of Hodkinson (2002), McRobbie (1994) and Thornton (1995). This definition focuses on subjective identification, individual investment and the notion of subcultural capital, which highlights the microstructures of power at work within subcultural groupings. In addition, I present a critical overview of existing academic studies revolving around gender issues in subcultures.

Chapter 2 develops a suitable methodological framework for my study of gender representation in Goth, based on Willis' (2000) notion of ethnography as socio-symbolic analysis and Turner's (1967) distinction between three basic levels of field data analysis. Furthermore, the practical implications of this framework and the concrete methodological steps to be taken in the study are outlined. In particular, I

introduce an approach to data analysis based on critical discursive psychology, which enables the researcher to treat qualitative materials as reflecting both subjectivity/identity and discourse/ideology.

Chapter 3 present a descriptive account of the history, lifestyles and practices of the British and German Gothic subculture. Moreover, the particularities of the local Goth scenes in the four different regions where I conducted my fieldwork (Brighton, Edinburgh, Cologne/Bonn, Berlin) are introduced.

Chapters 4 to 6 revolve around Gothic style, examining it from different perspectives. In chapter 4, male androgyny and female hyperfemininity in the self-representation practices of Goths are discussed with regard to their relative value in terms of subcultural capital. I argue that despite the ‘ideology of genderlessness’ pervading the Gothic scene, the (sub)cultural values attached to the typical dress styles of male and female Goths differ markedly and privilege maleness.

Chapter 5 focuses exclusively on the self-stylisation practices of Goth women, in particular highlighting the subjective functions and empowering potential of hyperfemininity. Drawing on the concept of hyperfemininity as masquerade (Doane, 1982) as well as on the ‘stories’ of Goth women from marginalised social groups, I unearth the reasons why many female Goths experience their style practices – despite their subculturally normative character – as liberating, protective and empowering vis-à-vis the world outside the subculture.

Chapter 6 focuses on male Gothic style, highlighting the positive functions and progressive potential of male androgynous style as well as the tensions between androgyny and hegemonic masculinity which manifest themselves in the stylistic and discursive practices of Goth men. These tensions are traced in male Goths’ discursive construction of androgynous style as ‘masculine’, and in their practical and rhetorical negotiation of the appropriate boundaries of male androgyny. Finally, differences between Britain and Germany regarding the status of hegemonic masculinity versus male androgyny in Gothic style are discussed, particularly in relation to the different factions within the subculture.

In chapter 7, the focus turns from issues of style to the seemingly more mundane sphere of everyday heterosexual gender relations. The chapter looks at Goth gender relations from different perspectives, revealing progressive as well as reactionary tendencies in the gendered courtship norms, status criteria and role expectations of the subculture. I demonstrate that despite its rhetoric of genderlessness, the Gothic scene

functions as a heterosexually gendered space with relatively distinct behavioural and evaluative norms for men and women.

Chapter 8 elaborates on this argument from a different angle, focusing on gender and sexualities in the Gothic subculture. After having examined the structure of heterosexual relations in the preceding chapter, here I discuss the attitudes and practices of Goths regarding nonconventional sexual orientations. In particular, I focus on what I call ‘normative bisexuality’ as a specifically female source of subcultural capital, and on the attendant fantasies of genderlessness and fluid sexual identities espoused by Gothic ideology.

Chapter 9 highlights the role of music media in the Gothic subculture. It examines the gender ideals informing the presentation and reception of Goth music and imagery, particularly as they manifest themselves in subcultural music magazines. I trace the sonic, textual and visual construction of gendered meanings in different subgenres of Goth music, in Goth photography, and especially in the media discourses surrounding these art forms. More precisely, the role of hyper-gendered images and of different value discourses in the representation and reception of Goth music and imagery is rendered problematic.

In chapter 10, the conclusion, an attempt is made to bring together the findings of all analysis chapters to highlight common threads as well as apparent tensions both within and between different aspects of or perspectives on the Gothic subculture. I argue that to reach a full understanding of the socio-political relevance of subcultural practices, it is imperative to pay attention to their micro-political (i.e. individual or intra-subcultural) *and* macro-political (i.e. concerning general culture) dimensions. Furthermore, I critically discuss the notion of subculture as a postmodern preserve for collective Utopian desires.