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## The Music of the Goth Subculture: Postmodernism and Aesthetics

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FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF MUSIC

THE MUSIC OF THE GOTH SUBCULTURE:  
POSTMODERNISM AND AESTHETICS

By

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## ABSTRACT

Goth was a subculture derived from England's punk movement, and it served as a pessimistic cultural and artistic response to The Cold War, and to the social and economic upheavals in Britain during the 1980s, and as an alternative form of English nationalism. Musical groups that came to be associated with goth developed a musical and visual style that was a postmodern pastiche of punk rock, glam rock, and Berlin cabaret styles. Gothic literature, classic horror movies, and early expressionist films were also influences on the music.

This dissertation uses the methodology of Dick Hebdige's theory of subcultures to demonstrate how bands used gothic signifiers and aesthetics as a way to sharpen and continue the social commentary of the punk movement. In addition, the artists recognized the masculine logic of power and control as the root cause of many social problems, and they embraced seduction and feminine signifiers as subversive devices. Goth bands purged their music and image of characteristics associated with masculinity, and they composed songs dealing with gyno-centered traumas, domestic abuse, and everyday cruelty. The songs typically treated sex as a source of danger rather than pleasure.

Goth was not simply a fanciful label; the music exhibited many characteristics associated with Gothicism. A preoccupation with mood and ambience, nostalgia, camp humor, and the mocking of power, were all hallmarks of the genre. In addition, the way in which goth bands were highly influenced by the aesthetics of film and their appropriation of a wide variety of signifiers reflect the postmodern social milieu as described by Jean Baudrillard. Musical artists featured in this study include Bauhaus, The Cure, Christian Death, Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Sisters of Mercy, and others.



## INTRODUCTION

I did not discover the music of England's goth subculture until I was twenty years old, when a friend introduced me to recordings by The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and Gene Loves Jezebel. At the time, I did not realize that these artists were associated with a distinct British youth movement and were considered part of a genre called "goth" on that side of the Atlantic. As a musician, I was impressed with how these bands were able to create strong melancholic moods with a few simple musical gestures. The guitar parts were not elaborate, but players had striking tone, and I came to admire their use of texture and color. The song lyrics seemed more sophisticated than what I was accustomed to in rock music. I still consider *Pornography* by The Cure to be one of the most moving albums of popular music produced during the 1980s.

Although I cannot claim to be an insider to the goth subculture, I was active in Oregon's heavy metal community from the mid-1980s until 1992. Prior to my discovery of goth music, I served as a guitarist in three bands who performed and recorded. Therefore, I have personal experience with subcultures and the production of popular music. The songs composed by my bandmates and myself were firmly rooted in the mid-late 1980s, revolving around anti-war sentiments, nuclear annihilation, class inequality, mass murders, fear of death, and the hypocrisies of the political system. We possessed all the fears and anxieties that most young people shared during the era—fear that President Reagan would provoke a war with the Soviets, fear of an uncertain economic future, and an underlying terror of not being in control of one's life. Many of these themes can also be found in the songs of English goth bands, so I was able to appreciate their perspective, even though their music was much different from the heavy metal songs that I had written. In fact, one of the best ways that one could come to understand goth would be to read Robert Walser's book on heavy metal and then imagine a style of music that was its antithesis in nearly every respect.<sup>1</sup> On the surface it might seem as though goth and heavy metal would have much in common—they both originated among the white, working classes in Great Britain, both kinds of bands used gothic symbols in their image (black attire, occult signs, ghoulish make-up), and the songs of both genres dealt with topics that

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).

make most people uneasy, dwelling on difficult emotions and grim aspects of life. When goth artists were at the start of their careers, unperceptive journalists often compared them to heavy metal groups. For example, Andy Gill, writing in *New Musical Express*, described fans of the iconic goth group Bauhaus as “more closely related to the heavy metal hordes than they’d like to believe,”<sup>2</sup> and stated that Bauhaus were simply a more hip version of heavy metal progenitors, Black Sabbath. The statement is untrue, and I will make frequent contrasts between heavy metal and goth throughout this dissertation.

There are many reasons why I, and probably many others in the U.S., did not come to appreciate the goth genre sooner: The artists received virtually no radio airplay, their videos were rarely shown on MTV, and *Rolling Stone* and other American music publications rarely mentioned them. Musicians’ magazines such as *Guitar Player* and *Guitar World* gave goth artists no coverage whatsoever, possibly because the players did not value the ability to improvise elaborate solos, which were in vogue in popular music throughout the 1980s.

I had an unfortunate prejudice against bands who recorded for small independent record labels, because I was misguided enough to believe that big record companies would not overlook talented bands. Therefore, I reasoned that the groups who were worth listening to recorded for major labels and artists on independent labels were inferior and not worth considering. But British goth bands were not understood by American distributors who misrepresented the artists’ works in the way in which they marketed them. For example, when the album *Dawnrazor* by Fields of the Nephilim, one of the most admired goth recordings by fans in England, was released in the US, the album cover and promotional materials featured images of a disposable shaving razor.<sup>3</sup> Not many young people in America would have investigated a recording packaged in such a ridiculous way. The few goth music videos that did manage to receive some limited airplay on MTV during the late 1980s, such as “Peek-a-boo” by Siouxsie and the Banshees or “Lullaby” by The Cure, were derived from the artist’s most lighthearted songs, which were not representative of most of their output. Therefore, goth artists did

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<sup>2</sup> Andy Gill, “Review of Bauhaus in the Flat Field,” *New Music Express*, 8 November 1980, 32. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/17 (2004), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Pettitt, personal interview, 26 October 2006.

not seem subversive to me in any way, and I simply wrote them off as unimaginative commercial artists with no critical edge. This was also a problem faced by many punk bands when they were presented to American audiences. For example, if one only knew The Clash from their videos for “Rock the Kasbah” or “Should I Stay or Should I Go” and were unfamiliar with their pointed social commentary on albums like *London Calling*, then one would be inclined to feel that the group was not particularly subversive. British goth and punk bands just had no appeal for many of us growing up in Reagan-era America, when heavy metal was receiving so much negative publicity and upsetting so many political conservatives.

Goth was a distinctly British subculture that sprang from the punk movement of the 1970s. I will not discuss punk rock in detail, since Dick Hebdige, Dave Laing, and others have already written extensively on the subject.<sup>4</sup> It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that punk rock has had more academic books and articles written about it than any other genre of popular music, with the possibly exception of rap. According to Hebdige and others, punk was a youth movement rooted in the boredom, unemployment, and poor economic conditions that plagued Britain during the late 1970s. Young people voiced their discontent with the political system, attacking the mythologies of capitalist economic security and prosperity, and the emptiness of life in the U.K. at that time. Punks voiced their protest through style, turning their clothing and bodies into symbols of rage, discontent and decay. According to my informants in Britain, punk was a way for the participants to remind themselves that they were not insignificant or inferior people, and that they had “the ability to do anything they set out to do.” In other words, it helped working class youths get through a difficult time in their nation’s history. As in the counter-culture movements in America during the 1960s, music played an important role in articulating the sentiments of the participants and served as a cultural statement around which people could rally. In other words, music served as a type of emotional support.

Punk music shared the same brutal aesthetics as its fashion—witty, acid-tongued political commentary and social satire in the lyrics, energetic but simplistic guitar riffs

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<sup>4</sup> See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1987), and Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985).

and drum patterns, metallic, grating, abrasive guitar timbres, and unpretentious technique both vocally and instrumentally. These qualities were both symbols of egalitarianism and a reinforcement of the punk doctrine of empowerment (anyone can do anything, anyone can perform music).

Current and former goths in Great Britain stated that during the early 1980s members of the subculture considered themselves part of the punk movement, but they later became known as goths when music journalists began describing the bands they favored as “gothic” in style. The goth subculture did have some similarities to punk; they, too, expressed their dissatisfaction with life in Britain through what Hebdige calls “aesthetic terrorism.” But instead of the defaced military and working-class attire worn by punks, goths dressed in black, embraced androgyny, and emulated the style of exaggerated make-up worn by film stars during the silent era. Musically, artists who came to be labeled goth retained punk’s veneration of amateurism, but they placed a greater emphasis on experimenting with harmony and timbre to create ambient sonorities that evoked the mood of the place or situation described in the lyrics. This was in sharp contrast to the riff-based, blues-influenced punk style. The overtly political lyrics of The Clash, The Sex Pistols, and other punk groups was replaced by reflective, introspective texts dealing with topics such as child abuse, environmental degradation, or the death of friends or family.

Basically, the goth subculture and the music associated with it, were about drawing strength from negative emotions. The culture expressed an extreme pessimism, with no faith in the social and economic changes sweeping Britain at the time. It displayed a fascination with decay, despair, and nostalgia. Its fashion and music were a pastiche of signs and symbols associated with melancholy, ephemerality, gothic art and literature, punk rock, glam rock, The Velvet Underground, and horror films from *Nosferatu* to the work of Vincent Price. The genre also featured musical characteristics appropriated from Weimar cabaret, with melancholic songs of decadence and political satire performed in a *Sprechstimme* vocal style, and presented with eerie gas lights at the front of the stage. Because goth bands sometimes wrote songs based on, or inspired by,

the work of E. A. Poe, English decadent poets, or the cinema, critics often referred to goth music as “art school rock.”<sup>5</sup>

As one might imagine, some goth artists chose to name their bands after gothic films, for example Nosferatu, Siouxsie and the Banshees (from the Rodger Corman film *Cry of the Banshee*), and The Cure (from a line in the text of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*). Other groups chose names with connotations of decadence, such as Flesh for Lulu, Sex-Gang Children, and The Danse Society. Some artists chose to emphasize their marginal status in society and position as outsiders—Southern Death Cult, The Cult, Alien Sex Fiend. Names associated with sympathy or empathy were common, such as The Mission, while others selected monikers based on irony or banality such as Red Lorry Yellow Lorry,<sup>6</sup> and The Sisters of Mercy (a religious order and a slang term for prostitutes).

Like the punk genre, goth flourished in small clubs, and on independent record labels distributed by independent record shops such as Rough Trade. Most bands had developed their styles and gained a considerable following long before they were ever signed to a major label. Therefore, it could be said that goth music reflected the ideal of popular music developed by the late Frank Zappa: “it should be original, composed by bands that perform it, created by them even if they have to fight record companies to do it, so that it really is a creative enterprise and not a commercial pile of sh-t thrown together by business people.”<sup>7</sup>

The formation of a subculture and an accompanying style of music that was based on a fascination with gothic art and aesthetics should not be surprising, since various manifestations of the gothic style in painting, sculpture, literature, and cinema have had a special resonance with twentieth-century audiences. As Linda Bayer-Barenbaum points out, “Gothicism represented a substantial artistic tradition that spoke to the modern

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Chris Bohn, “Northampton Discovers Art School Rock,” *New Musical Express*, 21 February 1981, 12. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/ 17 ( 2004), 34.

<sup>6</sup> It is unclear exactly what the band wished their name to signify. “Red Lorry Yellow Lorry” is a famous tongue-twister, but the group’s album covers typically featured artwork of red and yellow lorry vans. The group did not answer my e-mails to their website.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics, and Sociology* (New York: Cambridge U.Press, 1987), 92.

condition.”<sup>8</sup> She feels that gothic aesthetics have had a special significance in modernity because the media compels one to seek and create greater intensity and immediacy in art, and because technology has magnified the power of evil throughout the course of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> The author was speaking of contemporary literature, but her observations could equally be applied to popular culture, as well.

A considerable portion of my source material for this study came from interviews that I conducted in the U.K. with over one-hundred people who identified themselves as having been involved in the Goth subculture during the 1980s, most of whom still identified themselves with the movement, even though they were well into their thirties. I talked with many of them during the 2006 Whitby Gothic Weekend, a music festival held bi-annually in the northeastern seaport each year. Others I met in London at pubs and clubs that cater to current and former subculture participants, such as The London Stone, Slimelight and the Devonshire Arms, a goth-only pub located in Camden Town. Often this led to further introductions. I spoke with several DJs who had been involved with goth music since the genre began, and also with many band members themselves, whom I contacted through the websites of their respective groups. One of my best sources was music journalist Mick Mercer, the only writer to have consistently covered goth bands throughout the 1980s.

All of these individuals stressed that goth music came into existence because a portion of the punk audience felt that the music was becoming predictable and banal after bands began getting signed to major record labels who took a belated interest in the music. Mick Mercer states that “goth groups had a darker twist to them, it was a moodier approach.”<sup>10</sup> The genre developed primarily because groups toured constantly and were able to record on small independent record labels (and eventually major labels for some bands), who distributed their albums via independent record stores. Mercer writes,

When punk happened there wasn't a great mushrooming of bands originally, and they were spread throughout the U.K. But then labels began to start, often with a

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Sublime: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982), 13-15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> A Study of the Goth Subculture. <http://www.Gothics.org/subculture>, accessed June 9, 2004.

regional bias, which was natural. When people started forming bands, being influenced by punk but wanting something more expressive but retaining the urgency, it was natural that they would work with smaller labels, and with Rough Trade (an independent record store in London's Portabello Road Market area) operating a great distribution service, and with shops everywhere selling indie records, bands couldn't go wrong. It was a boom time and bands flourished.<sup>11</sup> Dave Thompson adds that most goth bands never succeeded in reaching a wide audience, or achieved a large following in America, because major record labels felt that promoting them would be too difficult and not worth the effort, when they had so many new wave bands, such as The Thompson Twins, Men at Work, The Police, Flock of Seagulls, etc., who were successful.<sup>12</sup>

I asked Mick Mercer to describe the live music scene in which goth groups participated and he offered the following observations:

Because of the punk movement you had this enormous audience for live music who didn't want to stick with anything in a punk or new wave direction but had a real hunger for seeing bands. Any band which was any good could easily go from performing smaller gigs and progress upwards rapidly. Bands could play several nights a week, play around the country, and the moment they got fanzine coverage and got a record out they found their reputation spreading. Goth bands were some of the most popular "indie" bands in the country for several years and many were probably ripped off by their labels but would still end up selling 20,000 copies of an album. Bauhaus and the Danse Society soon went from small venues to filling up large venues and their records stayed on top of our independent charts for months. The groups often attracted a diverse crowd but when it comes to a generic definition, a band is defined by its audience, and a majority of people at these gigs would have been goths and that's what it boils down to.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Dave Thompson, *The Dark Reign of Gothic Rock* (London: Helter Skelter, 2002), 144.

<sup>13</sup> Mick Mercer, personal e-mail, 23 October 2005.

Many other past or continuing participants also stressed the importance of John Peel and his BBC *Radio One* sessions as being critical to the development of the goth style. A survey of the John Peel archives does reveal that the broadcaster took a special interest in bands that would come to be known as goth, and groups often used sessions with Peel to showcase their most dissonant, experimental, or potentially controversial songs.

In spite of Peel's advocacy of goth music, it was considered England's most ambiguous and mysterious genre of popular music. Mick Mercer asserts, "It was a movement that flummoxed those outside it. Punk had a political point and whether you liked it or not, the argument for its appearance, existence and survival was pretty obvious. Goth eluded mental capture in this way. The reaction of many was derision and a lot of people hated it. Goths became targets and a surprising amount of violence existed."<sup>14</sup> Statements such as this attest to the participants' dedication to the music and how strongly it affected them.

For this study I have limited my focus to include only those bands who have been consistently singled out as being the exemplary artists of the genre by music magazines such as *Melody Maker*, or described as the most representative of the goth genre by my informants and journalist Mick Mercer. I also discuss groups that I have seen included on goth compilation CDs and DVDs. I have selected music by Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, Christian Death, Alien Sex Fiend, The Sisters of Mercy, Play Dead, and songs from the first four albums by The Cure for analysis, but my observations about the music could also be applied to the work of Fields of the Nephilim, Gene Loves Jezebel, Sex-Gang Children, Red Lorry Yellow Lorry, The Mission, All about Eve, Echo and the Bunnymen, and other bands that Mick Mercer has characterized as being representative of goth in his books<sup>15</sup> and that are described as goth by the staff at Rough Trade.

Joshua Gunn, in his study of how goth fans come to label their music and define its boundaries, states, "The trouble with genres, especially musical genres, is that they are

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Mick Mercer, *Gothic Rock: Everything You Wanted to Know But Were Too Gormless to Ask* (Birmingham: Pegasus, 1991).



labels that only make sense in retrospect, often a long time after a particular kind of music has expanded to include sounds and styles that its label fails to include.”<sup>16</sup> Currently there is music being labeled as goth that does not share the same aesthetic values as British goth music during the 1980s (for example, Marilyn Manson, who has more in common with heavy metal than any of the bands covered in this dissertation), but the idea that genres only make sense in retrospect is untrue. For example, one of the first questions that I asked my U.K. informants was if goth was recognized as a distinct genre during the 1980s, and they all answered affirmatively, even if the music was still often considered a new type of punk by some.

The primary goal of this study is to come to grips with the essential musical characteristics of British goth music when it came into existence and flourished from circa 1978-1990, and to determine if there truly was anything gothic about its features. It will help to explain how and why a substantial group of young people in Britain were attracted to aesthetic values traditionally associated with Gothicism, and how the music differed from other genres of music popular at the time. Another area of concern is the question of how bands who sounded so diverse could be considered to represent the same genre. From the perspective of timbre and sound, goth had no consistent set of musical characteristics, the way punk and heavy metal did. In answering these questions, much information can be gained about the effect of The Cold War and English nationalism on youth subcultures, the special fascination that goth had for women, and the way goth reflects characteristics of postmodernity

### Survey of the Literature

As previously stated, my primary sources of information for this dissertation were participants in the U.K., DJs, the musicians themselves, and journalist Mick Mercer. However, secondary sources were consulted in each of the different sections of this study, and the reader will find complete citations in the bibliography.

Most of the books about goth music, or individual bands of the genre are of a popular rather than an academic nature. Mick Mercer’s *Gothic Rock* is not a history of the style but instead discusses the bands the way popular music journalists often do,

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Nancy Kilpatrick, *The Goth Bible* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004), 87.

reviewing each with a combination of wit, satire, and colorful descriptions. His book was helpful in determining which bands were part of the goth canon and in determining what fans found attractive about the music. Dave Thompson's *The Dark Reign of Gothic Rock* contained information on how goth was perceived at the time and provided background material on the artists and their influences. Books by Mark Paytress, and Bowler and Dray are biographies of Siouxsie and the Banshees and The Cure, respectively, and they provided illuminating quotations concerning what the artists were trying to communicate and convey in their music. The special edition magazine *NME Originals: Goth* was a compilation of nearly every review and interview of the most popular goth artists from the late 1970s through 1992 published in *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express*, in one volume. It was invaluable for gauging the critical response to goth bands at the time.

The scholarship of Cynthia Freeland, George Haggerty, Richard Davenport-Hines, and particularly Linda Bayer-Berenbaum was my primary source materials for understanding the essential characteristics of Gothicism in the arts and the central concerns that this style brings to the foreground. The volumes by Julian Petley, Isabel Pinedo, and Peter Hutchings helped explain why gothic films and gothic aesthetics were so influential to artists who came to be labeled goth. They also discussed why the horror genre was, and is, reviled in Great Britain and why gothic films were considered particularly subversive in British society.

To date, there has been little academic writing on British goth music, and this dissertation seeks to fill that void. The most significant academic writing on goth is the article "Bela Lugosi's Dead and I Don't Feel So Good Either" by James Hannaham, a critic for the *New York Times*. Hannaham attempts to trace the roots of goth back to blues music, but he mischaracterizes the genre and does not understand its subversive strategies or the role of gender in this music. The works of Paul Hodkinson and Carol Siegel are more concerned with the current state of the goth subculture than its origins or its music during the 1980s. Hodkinson joined the goth subculture in the early 1990s, and he explains how goth survives today through the internet and through small businesses that produce its fashion and sell recordings. Siegel's book is more a study of how Foucault's observations on power and sexuality manifest themselves in the contemporary goth scene. She makes the mistake of believing that the current goth subculture in

Europe and the U.S. is wholly related to the original goth movement in Britain during the 1980s, when the original subculture emerged from a very different set of social circumstances. Joshua Gunn's article "Goth and the Inevitability of Genre" investigates how current goth fans maintain and police the stylistic boundaries of the genre. He examines the language and descriptions that are used to determine what counts as "goth" as opposed to "pop" music and explains how this reflects various sociological theories. None of these scholars is a musicologist, and their work contains no musical analysis. *Break All Rules* by Tricia Henry and *One Chord Wonders* by Dave Laing provided material on the punk movement, while books on The Velvet Underground and Brian Eno by Joe Harvard and Eric Tamme respectively, were also beneficial in explaining what goth artists appropriated from earlier styles of popular music. Goth bands went beyond the boundaries of popular music in their borrowing of styles and symbols, and Kent Ljungquist's study of Edgar Allen Poe, James Willsher's anthology of English decadence and Mel Gordon's work on Berlin cabaret all contributed to my understanding of goth appropriations of non-popular sources.

The study of popular music often requires methods of analysis that are different from those used in the scholarship of art music traditions. Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* served as a model for how to discuss and analyze an entire genre of popular music. Richard Middleton's *Reading Pop* furnished examples of how to study texts in popular songs. Simon Frith's works helped provide a working model of an aesthetic of popular music, while the books of John Covach and Graene Boone, and Phillip Tagg stressed the importance of critically analyzing the rhythm and timbre of popular songs.

My discussion of subculture social theory was primarily informed by four different volumes *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* by Dick Hebdige, a Marxist and semiotic study of mods, punks, skinheads, and other British subcultures, and is the most famous and oft-quoted book in the field. I will explain how Hebdige combined both semiotic and Marxist methods in his analysis of subcultures in the opening pages of Chapter 1. My dissertation used this author's methodology extensively. David Muggleton's *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* is a postmodern critique of Hebdige that concludes that youth subcultures are largely meaningless

aesthetic play. While I found Muggleton's approach less convincing, it did prompt me to think critically when using Hebdige's methods. Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures* is another major work in the canon of subculture studies, providing the first major examination of Britain's "rave" culture. She also views subcultures as modes of resistance but sees them as providing space for the young and not necessarily as militant acts of revolt against bourgeois capitalism, as Hebdige does. Gelder and Thornton's anthology *The Subcultures Reader* presented theories on the strengths and limitations of subcultural expression in promoting changes in society.

Information on the actual social conditions in Britain that gave birth to these subcultures was obtained from Michael Bracewell's *England Is Mine*, a survey of British popular culture from the perspective of a non-academic, and the anthology *British Cultural Identities* edited by Childs and Storry, which examines such topics as the economy, the family, youth, and politics during the late twentieth century. *Decade of Nightmares* by Phillip Jenkins was also a useful study in showing the effect of Reaganism and Thatcherism on America and British society and how goth clearly voiced disapproval of the political conservatism of the 1980s, as this dissertation will show.

My discussion of goth and gender is primarily based on the postmodern gender theory put forth by Jean Baudrillard in *Seduction*, and in the work of his feminist advocate Victoria Grace. Criticisms of popular music presented in anthologies such as *Sexing the Groove*, edited by Whiteley, and *Disruptive Divas* by Burns and La France are also examined through a discussion of goth music and style.

Camp is typically a major component of the gothic style from any era, and the music of British goth was no exception. The scholarship of Susan Sontag, Andrew Ross, and Mark Booth provided the criteria for what constitutes camp culture, the political potential of camp, and why some people are drawn to it.

Finally, the works of Jean Baudrillard were my primary points of reference when discussing goth in the context of postmodernism. Books by Foucault and Durkheim were useful for understanding goth in the context of late twentieth-century society, and Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory* provided a useful and frank discussion of the social and political ramifications of any and all works of art.

## Chapter Overviews

Chapter 1 presents a survey of the most important theories and ideas in subculture social theory, and musicology's potential for contributing to the field using goth as an example. Of central importance is the question of whether youth subcultures represent a mode of resistance to bourgeois ideals or simply constitute another form of consumerism. Chapter 2 discusses social and political conditions in the U.K. when goth music was at its peak of popularity and how the genre addressed issues of concern for young people at the time. The third chapter examines what goth musicians appropriated from punk rock and glam rock, the two most significant influences on the genre. Chapter 3 also examines how the musicians molded these influences in the service of gothic aesthetic values. The fourth chapter explains what exactly is gothic in style about gothic rock, using musical examples by Bauhaus, The Sisters of Mercy and Alien Sex Fiend. The chapter also talks about how these bands drew influence from horror films and authors such as E. A. Poe, and why gothic signs and symbols resonated with them so strongly. The importance of camp in goth music is discussed in this chapter as well. Chapter 5 is a study of goth music and gender. It explains why the feminine is exalted in this subculture and why misogyny is virtually absent from the music. The works of Siouxsie and the Banshees are examined in light of Jean Baudrillard's theories on the importance of seduction in postmodern life. The chapter also seeks to determine how goth music strengthens or weakens feminist ideas, and criticisms of popular music.

The final chapter demonstrates how goth music reflects the postmodern principles of Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson. It shows how postmodern theory can reflect lived experience and how bands found creative and dramatic ways to express themselves in a world that is increasingly as banal as it is diverse and colorful.

CHAPTER 1  
MUSICOLOGY AND SUBCULTURE SOCIAL THEORY

The majority of bands associated with the English goth movement have never been widely known, understood, or appreciated beyond the confines of the subculture itself. In fact, few genres of popular music are associated with such a narrow demographic. This is not to suggest that people outside the goth subculture could not or do not relate to the music of goth bands, or that goths were close-minded or excessively opinionated about their musical tastes. I am simply acknowledging that the music of bands labeled as “goth” had a special significance to the participants as a source of cultural unity. Previous investigations into youth subcultures such as goth have not given adequate attention to the music favored and created by these groups, and this represents a significant gap in the field of subculture social theory. Because music is often a source of inspiration to youth subcultures, this chapter focuses on how musicology could augment the work of social theorists.

The *New Oxford Dictionary* defines culture as “Artistic and intellectual achievement, and its appreciation.” A subculture such as goth could then be considered the creative and intellectual achievement of a group within a larger society, but this is not the definition that sociologists prefer. Dick Hebdige, in his groundbreaking study *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* describes these youth movements as symptoms of the breakdown in the political consensus of the postwar period, representing an expression of political impotence and pessimism about the future. In essence, he feels that subcultures represent a menacing threat or challenge to the dominant bourgeois society, voiced through literature, fashion, and music.<sup>17</sup> Sarah Thornton characterizes subcultures as “underground taste-cultures that have been given a specific label by the media (like goth, punk, skinhead, mod), or groups of people that congregate on the basis of a shared taste in music and consumption habits.”<sup>18</sup> Based on my own experiences as both a subcultural

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<sup>17</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 73-89.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 20-35.

participant, and musician, I would add that at the core of subcultures is what could be described as a distinct attitude, philosophy, or outlook that gives expression to specific concerns and fears, dissatisfaction with one or more aspects of contemporary life, and a rejection of mainstream social values. It has also been my experience that members of subcultures are frequently underprivileged or have been subject to rejection or verbal or physical abuse either at home or by their peers and are in search of a means of acceptance. Members seek kinship to escape feelings of anomie, to find a place in a social order of their own making and on their own terms, based on values that they share with others. What studies of subcultures often overlook is the fact that the members are people. Subcultures often reflect and express the same loss of social community, the same fascination with the irrationality of society, emptiness, cultural pessimism, and the same preference for the imagination over reality that can be found in the works of many individual creative artists, from Baudelaire to Schoenberg, who sought to find humanity in an impersonal, urban, industrialized society.

Although musicology has been slow to weigh in on subculture theory, the discipline can help to inject some emotional sensitivity, understanding and empathy into the sociological theorizing. In turn, a familiarity with subculture theory can provide musicologists with additional approaches and perspectives for the study of popular music. Several points of contention that are debated among subculture social theorists could be of potential interest to musicologists: the question of whether metanarratives (semiotics, psychoanalysis, Marxist criticism, etc.) are still useful in the analysis of subcultures, exploring how subcultures support or undermine postmodern social theories, the role played by the media in shaping the tastes and values of a subculture, whether an analysis should distinguish between the original members of a subculture and those who joined after the movement has been spread through the media, and perhaps most importantly, whether subcultures represent a serious attempt at social critique by its members or simply constitute postmodern play and consumerism. I would like to examine what perspectives musicology could potentially bring to each of these questions.

One could perhaps simplify the question of whether metanarratives still have a place when seeking to understand post-war youth movements by simply asking, “Is Dick Hebdige still relevant to subculture theory?” Hebdige’s book *Subculture: The Meaning of*

*Style*, first published in 1979, set out to break the stylistic code of subcultures using Marxist and semiotic methodologies based on the works of Antonio Gramsci and Roland Barthes.<sup>19</sup> Hebdige was primarily interested in how English, working-class, youth movements used fashion as a source of subcultural unity, from the body piercings and Mohawk hairstyles of the punks, to the mopeds of the Mods, to the appropriation of Edwardian clothing of the Teddy Boys. He observed how a safety pin, a shaved head or a black leather jacket had a distinctive and rather anti-social connotation to the subculture participants. In other words, the members were imbuing their clothing, accessories, and hairstyles with the signification of rebellion. Hebdige saw the re-signification of signs as an important and subversive strategy that young people from the laboring classes used in the struggle to gain more control over their lives and particularly over their future. In his view, refusal and rebellion at the level of style, fashion, and signs only appears to be a superficial gesture of defiance for in actuality, subcultures are a threatening breakdown of consensus, a signal to the ruling class that their power is not hegemonic.

The Marxist and semiotic approach employed by Hebdige is of course not foreign to musicology, for virtually any historiography of musical style will undoubtedly demonstrate how the economic and political structure of a society helped shape the form and content of the music. In terms of popular music and subculture, many of the author's ideas could be enhanced through musical analysis. For example, Hebdige feels that all aspects of culture have semiotic value, and every signification either subverts or reinforces the primary ideology of the upper classes. Therefore, one must consider the sound and musical style favored by the subcultural participants as much as their choice of fashion in order to understand what the various youth movements are trying to express.

One of the most important aspects of analyzing any post-1960s music is to observe how the artist is appropriating gestures from other bands, genres, or styles. In the case of rock music, borrowing and appropriation can take many different forms. The first of these is intensification, where the artists assimilate only the most forceful, prominent, or dramatic gestures from the music they are taking possession of. For example, much of

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<sup>19</sup> It should be understood that Hebdige's study, although it has been referred to as "semiotics," is not an orthodox work in the field of semiotics per se; i.e. his study of signs is not to elucidate a theory of signs themselves but to demonstrate how symbols and symbolic behaviors were used to make a social statement. Hebdige's writing does not belong to the field of semiotics practiced by Northrop Frye or C.S. Peirce.



the guitar work of Jimi Hendrix, or Eric Clapton during his years with Cream, could be considered an intensification of the blues guitar vocabulary.

The second type of appropriation is recontextualization, where styles or gestures appear in new surroundings or circumstances but retain their usual meanings and connotations, for example the Ghanaian and South African music that appears on Paul Simon's album *Graceland*. Artists' choices of "cover tunes" and their attitude towards the music they are re-interpreting is an important part of recontextualization that musicologists should not overlook.

Frequently rock composers will use the appropriated material as a momentary point of color. Sometimes this technique uses the music for its symbolic value, and other times it is done strictly for contrast, or uses rapid stylistic changes to create the pure visceral thrill described so often as a key component of postmodernism by Jean Baudrillard.<sup>20</sup> Other times, artists will combine multiple musical signifiers simultaneously to create a complex emotional experience, each appropriation contributing to a distinct mood or effect. The works of David Bowie often use both of these approaches, particularly on the albums *The Man Who Sold the World* and *Aladdin Sane*.

In order for a musicologist to contribute to the methodology used by Hebdige, the musical borrowings employed by groups with whom members of a subculture identify, must be scrutinized for the way they are appropriating, what is being borrowed, what the styles and gestures typically signify to the mainstream, and the groups' attitudes toward the music they are assimilating. Of course, no analysis would be complete without examining what the musical appropriations contribute to the text setting, the key to understanding vocal music. Musicologists should also be sensitive to how musical styles such as rap, heavy metal, punk, etc., which have typically been associated with sentiments of rebellion and refusal, are appropriated and recycled to determine if and how any meanings may have shifted. Often appropriating gestures of refusal will allow artists to narrow the scope of their critique, making the general specific. Marilyn Manson for example, assimilates gestures from rap, punk, metal, and glam rock. He maintains the

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<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard & Caroline Schutze (Paris: Editions Galiléé, 1988), 11-29.

signification of refusal and defiance that the styles were intended to represent, but his simultaneous, composite use of multiple styles makes his music seem deliberately artificial, flaunting the way his popularity is based on recycled gestures, thus satirizing the shallowness of consumer society.<sup>21</sup> Re-signification, or a creative use of sign-play, is perhaps an underrated art form. Finding the right sights, sounds, and their combination to effectively signal a point of refusal requires sensitivity and insight. If Hebdige is correct, and resistance at the superficial level of style is an important way in which the lower classes can defy the hegemonic power of those who control society, the role of music should certainly be examined.

Hebdige believes that members of a subculture wear their concerns on their sleeve, taking specific goods, hairstyles, clothing, and accessories and using them against the society that created them by recontextualizing the objects and turning them into symbols of refusal, rebellion, and non-conformity. There is no element of randomness at work here; the participants are very specific in their appropriations, actively creating their styles by repossessing objects, goods (and sounds I may add) that have been invested by the dominant culture with meanings, associations, and social connotations.<sup>22</sup> To summarize, members of a subculture seek out signs and symbols that they know are going to upset the dominate culture when they take possession of the signifiers and turn their meanings upside down. They may also try to intensify those that already carry negative connotations in the parent society.

Outsiders who wish to understand the concerns of the subculture must “discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surface of style.”<sup>23</sup> But without an understanding of the music valued by the subculture there is no way to appreciate why the signs and symbols are threatening, why any re-significations are a thorn in the side of the dominate culture, and why the sometimes desperate elements that make up the style of the subculture “gel” into a coherent statement of resistance. Analyzing the fashion and outward appearance of the participants will not fully communicate the richness of the

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<sup>21</sup> Charles Mueller, “The Postmodern Trajectory of Brian Warner,” unpublished paper presented at the Extreme Folklore and Musicology Conference, Indiana University, March 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 100-112.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

subculture experience, the ideas and feelings that generate the passion and commitment the members feel for their beliefs.

Musicology could be particularly useful in a semiotic approach to subculture studies, to help explain how and why the participants are appropriating select commodities and creatively altering their signification. The goth subculture is a case in point; much of their imagery and musical inspiration came from Weimar-era cabarets, the decadent poetry of the 1920s, early black-and-white horror films such as *Nosferatu*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and even the works of Alfred Hitchcock, which were banned in England and, like all horror films, carried degenerate connotations in English culture.<sup>24</sup> However, without an analysis of goth music, there is no way to discern how these works resonated with members of the subculture and how or why they were interpreted.

Another way musical analysis could complement a semiotic study of subcultures is in the area Hebdige refers to as “style as signification practice,” which essentially means that the author views subcultural style as a subversive “text,” or what might be called aesthetic terrorism: vandalism and destruction through language and signs. Hebdige bases this complex interpretation on the writings of the *Tel Quel* group and Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*, works that collectively represent an assault on the idea that “the way things are said imposes restrictions on what can be said.”<sup>25</sup> He admires subcultural style for the same reasons that Kristeva appreciates the work of the French symbolist poets, namely the way their use of unconventional language undermines the power of the dominant groups who control social discourse. “Style as signification practice” refers then to how the participants take an activist approach to the language that “shapes and positions the subject (speaker) while it always remains in process, capable of infinite adaptation.”<sup>26</sup> In other words, at the heart of subcultural style is the principle that lies at the core of deconstruction: all texts possess only an allusion of coherence, there is always some word, sign, or gesture that appears inconsistent or

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Kermode, “The British Censors and the Horror Cinema,” in *British Horror Cinema*, eds. Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 11.

<sup>25</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 119-20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 117-19.

contradictory with what the work is supposed to mean in definitive terms. This could be considered the Achilles heel of the hegemonic power of the dominant society, which subcultures seek to exploit.

The disruption of the signifier/signified relationships handed down by the upper classes allows working-class youths to steal a measure of power in society. It is true that many subcultures lodge their protests against the established social order by creating stable, easy-to-decipher alternative identities for themselves, but most subcultures are ominous and threatening because it is unclear what their style signifies. They resist authority because they defy interpretation. Hebdige goes on to argue that this rebellion through lack of clear signification, a symbolic break with the dominant culture, is the only way the participants can break free from the stereotypes that mainstream society assigned them based on their class. This separation is what makes the social critiques by the subculture so effective; they now hold a “new location” in class experience and basically become the living embodiment of the ills of society.<sup>27</sup> Members do not articulate problems; instead they “are” a vision of social reality, their style is inseparable from its meaning and cannot be traced back to its origins. Their art is what Hebdige describes as “the realities of life transformed into entropy and disturbance.”<sup>28</sup>

If subculture style can be read as text, as Hebdige theorizes, then an analysis of the music associated with the movement can aid in understanding the specifics of that text, re-tracing the steps from disturbance back to the feelings about the realities of life that motivated the members to initially join the culture. Participating in a subculture that is associated with a dramatic style of fashion and music helps to distract attention away from the members low social status, and it therefore makes their feelings and values perhaps less likely to be easily dismissed. The artistic and intellectual achievement of their music helps to confirm the members’ belief that their concerns are real and legitimate.

Music can give young people the confidence to question and challenge the mainstream values that they feel work against them, and to demonstrate that there are alternative points of view to be considered. It provides them with a subversive artistic

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 106-12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

medium with which to distance themselves from the dominant culture. One could say the music uses many of the same tactics of “expression through rupture” as their fashion statements do. For example, the music favored by participants often is constructed from a myriad of influences and styles that are not easy to trace to their origins, creating that threatening sense of undecidability that is particularly disruptive to modern society, as scholars such as Derrida have pointed out.<sup>29</sup> Part of this “defiance against interpretation” that is so important to many styles of rock, is that the influences that created it are often intensified beyond recognition or are only a part of the pastiche that ends up subverting the connotations that the original styles once held. In heavy metal, for instance, it is often difficult to hear the clean-toned blues that serves as the foundation of the style, but at the same time all that blues is commonly believed to signify is still present in an exaggerated form. If Hebdige is correct in his claim that subcultures do not represent anything, that the barrier between form and content is broken and subcultural styles are a distinct interpretation or vision of reality, then music analysis is surely key in understanding their perspective. In particular it can help to clarify why some of the signifiers of their style are stable and others are deliberately difficult to interpret, i.e., how these symbols help create their distinct vision. Often music will help give a subculture the ideological basis it requires in order to play with signification and alternative meanings, thereby expressing the concerns of the members.

Part of this re-positioning and breaking away from mainstream labeling and signification practices involves turning the language of rock upside down, as well, since the genre is no longer subversive the way it was during the 1950s. The bands must forge a sound and style that appeals to a narrow and specific sensibility and at the same time contains elements that will repel, anger, or disgust most of other members of society; the creativity involved to realize such an achievement is underrated. The lyrics, timbres, images, song structures, and a combination of these elements must undermine or contradict the message of the accepted mainstream styles in heavy rotation on radio or video playlists, and sustain themselves through niche marketing.

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<sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 37-83.

However, the most significant way that music supports the signification practices of subcultural style is by functioning as what Barthes refers to as a “third text, the obtuse meaning that works against the informational and symbolic meanings and causes the reading to slip.”<sup>30</sup> Quite often in the music of subcultures, the music, image, or lyrics will seem to contradict one another, or at least refute a stable meaning. For example, the importance of camp in the goth subculture appears to offset or confuse the seriousness of the lyrics and the macabre atmosphere of the music. David Bowie’s use of doo-wop, to cite an example, does not on the surface appear to be compatible with the apocalyptic mindset of his lyrics and album concepts, just as the appropriation of classical music by artists such as Yngwie Malmsteen, The Scorpions, and the guitarists for Ozzy Osbourne, seems out of place in the largely anti-establishment message and image of most heavy metal. Yet it is precisely these seemingly contradictory gestures that make the artistic expression of subcultures so rich and fascinating. The so-called “third text” is part of the nuance of postmodern expression, the most significant point of interest, where the individual creativity of the artist is most apparent. Since postmodern art of all kinds is characterized by its use of pastiche and recycled gestures, it is how the influences are molded together, how they interact, and how the sometimes disparate elements harmonize or threaten to unravel that should be analyzed.

### Subculture, Class and Musicology

Hebdige feels that a Marxist study of subculture style achieved through semiotic means is appropriate because he believes that there is a natural connection between these youth movements and class-consciousness. He states in chapter 5 of *Subculture* that the class experience during the late twentieth century is unique in the history of Great Britain. He argues that as a result of changes to the family structure, the amount of leisure time available to the laboring classes, and an increase in the disposable income of young people, the ideology of the working class became highly fragmented.<sup>31</sup> To Hebdige, style in subcultures reflects the consciousness of the working class because it symbolizes a

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<sup>30</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 56-59.

<sup>31</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 73-79.

victory of sorts; youths now have much more freedom than they enjoyed in the past, and their discourse at least partially reflects the mindset of the parents. Subcultures also simultaneously support and refute what the mass media propagates about the proletariat, and provide a strategy for learning to live within those stereotypes.<sup>32</sup>

Hebdige's predecessors in subculture social theory John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, in their article "Subculture, Cultures, and Class," express far less faith in a youth movement's ability to impact social discourse. They believe that the dominant culture either undercuts or absorbs all methods of resistance by the lower classes, but their hegemonic power is constantly being won or lost in a relentless struggle, and subcultures represent one theater of this conflict.<sup>33</sup> Youth subcultures are significant, according to these scholars, because youths encounter class issues in a different way than adults, and are even more vulnerable. Clark and his colleague's pessimistic view of subculture as a defense mechanism lies with their belief that the participants' solutions to problems are only symbolic and cannot effect real change.<sup>34</sup> To them, youth subculture is simply a fetishization of leisure, a "last fling" before a difficult life of hard, dull routine.

From a musicologist's standpoint, the intersection of youth subculture and class is a window into the thoughts and feelings of a marginalized, but significant portion of society. The way young people view class is nuanced and complex. On the one hand, contemporary youths do have more free time and disposable income than their predecessors, but their future economic prospects are anything but optimistic. In many cases economic conditions have broken or strained family relationships, or subjected the participants to various degrees of prejudice. These experiences are reflected in the music favored by youth subcultures, expressing varying degrees and types of fear, resistance, aggression, melancholy, and hope.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> John Clarke, Stuart, Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts, "Subcultures, Cultures and Class," in *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 100-111.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 103-5.

The music can express a sense of transcendence (as observed by Walser in his study of heavy metal),<sup>35</sup> generate feelings of empathy, reproach mainstream society for social injustices, or warn of their consequences, and articulate common fears, all of which are sentiments difficult to verbalize or represent solely through fashion/style statements.

Music favored by specific subcultures exhibits far more diversity in terms of both style and content than one would imagine from reading the literature on subculture social theory; the artists do write songs about a wide variety of experiences. However, one frequently encounters the same sense of anger, despair, and pessimism expressed in songs about personal relationships as one finds in music that addresses issues concerning society in general. It is as if the negativity of the participants' class or social experiences casts a shadow over other aspects of their lives, even though they may not consciously perceive it.

Clark, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts state that “youth encounters the problematic of its class culture in a different set of institutions and experiences from those of its parents.”<sup>36</sup> To judge from the amount of work, dedication and skill that young musicians employ to bring feelings of powerlessness, insecurity, and fear of the future into the public consciousness, the class experience clearly influences their work. What is particularly noteworthy from an aesthetic point of view is how the music associated with subcultures often has such an intensity and immediacy that it can quickly imprint its sensibility on the mind of a listener. For participants, the experience can impact their consciousness for the rest of their lives.

Music plays a significant role in the way members of a subculture resist and accept the process in which the mass media, in the words of Hebdige “overlooks, overstates, denies, and reduces to caricature” the experience of the working classes.<sup>37</sup> The musicians (and those who identify with them) show that they are “worth something” through their creativity and skill, and bring to the surface, in creative ways, topics ignored or trivialized by the media that directly impact their class. The music reflects that

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<sup>35</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*.

<sup>36</sup> John Clarke *et al.*, “Subcultures, Cultures and Class,” 105.

<sup>37</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 187.



strength, sensitivity, intellect, and compassion of youths that is too often lost when the media reduces class and economic struggles to caricature.<sup>38</sup>

### Class, Critics of Hebdige, and Musicology

The methods employed by Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* have drawn critical fire from subsequent social theorists, including Sarah Thornton, David Muggleton, and Paul Hodkinson.<sup>39</sup> These scholars found fault with Hebdige's arguments not so much for his semiotic approach as for his Marxist interpretations, for they believe that these youth movements have little or nothing to do with class struggle or poor economic prospects for the young. What is particularly striking to a scholar working in a discipline outside of subculture social theory is how dismissive writers in this field are of the ideas and theories that preceded them. It may be true that neither a semiotic nor a Marxist interpretation can adequately account for all social phenomena but many of Hebdige's interpretations are credible and agree with many of my own experiences as a subculture participant and those of my informants. Unfavorable economic and social conditions do often motivate youths to join subcultures, and much of their style, both in music and fashion comes from appropriating and defiling signs and meanings that originated in mainstream society. How else could subcultures express refusal in the postmodern world except through aesthetic violence? However, many of the criticisms leveled against Hebdige are certainly worthy of consideration, and just as musicologists could gain insight into popular music from that author's methodology, so could they from those who critique it.

In her article "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital" Sarah Thornton argues that reading subcultures in the structuralist manner of binary oppositions is not always

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<sup>38</sup> For example, popular music often depicts the class experience with greater truth and realism than one finds in television comedies where class struggle is trivialized, films where the class experience is treated in a superficial way, or in the newspapers where the problems of the lower classes are largely ignored or covered in such a way as to downplay injustices perpetrated against the lower classes. See Linda Holtzman, *Media Messages* (Armonk NY: Sharpe, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> See Thornton, *Club Cultures*. Also, David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), and Paul Hodkinson, *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture* (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

appropriate, because the groups do not consistently use signs to position themselves against mass culture or mainstream society.<sup>40</sup> She states that it is often the participants who view themselves as superior and the outsiders in the mainstream as inferior, so subcultures cannot always be seen as a response to oppression. She is convinced that scholars from the Birmingham Center for Subcultural Studies, such as Hebdige, have allowed their own negativity towards bourgeois culture to color their research, causing them to read too much politics and rebellion into subcultural style, putting words in the mouths of the participants, as it were. Thornton strongly objects to the vagueness in Hebdige's characterizations of mainstream society and to the fact that youths who did not belong to subcultures were left out of his analysis completely. Thornton was perhaps attempting to remedy these shortcomings with her study.

Thornton's research has primarily focused on ravers and dance clubs; she has not studied teds, punks, goths, or heavy metal fans, who were far more subversive in dress and behavior than youths who spent time in dance clubs, and her work includes no analysis of the music of any groups associated with subculture. It is true that many participants do feel that they are superior, both artistically, and intellectually, to members of mainstream society but this can be interpreted as a defense mechanism. They have no power, and that is their point. She offers no evidence that Marxist criticism cannot yield important insights.

In his book, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*, David Muggleton echoes many of Thornton's concerns. He also objects to the way scholars of the Birmingham Center for Subcultural Studies "over determined events with their interpretations," which he also feels were motivated by Marxist biases that destroyed their objectivity.<sup>41</sup> Muggleton is particularly put off by the semiotic methodology of Hebdige, which he feels is academically elitist because it views subcultural style as a text that must be interpreted.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Sarah Thornton, "The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital," in *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 200-210.

<sup>41</sup> Muggleton, *Inside Subculture*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Although Muggleton's criticisms of Hebdige may seem trivial, such debates are common in the field of subcultural studies.

As an alternative, *Inside Subculture* draws on the theories of Max Weber, which foreground the subjective views of the participants over any totalizing theory.<sup>43</sup> Muggleton notes that Weber believed cultural values exist independently of economic or material conditions, so any study of subculture using his methods would be limited to the study of observable phenomena, the views of the participants in particular.<sup>44</sup> In theory, a Weberian interpretation of subculture would have the advantage of providing insight into the patterns of behavior that gave the group its defining characteristics, rather than focusing on patterns of exploitation, the way a Marxist reading would. Muggleton found Weber's methodology attractive because he views these youth movements as a postmodern version of Romanticism, where members are free to pursue "self knowledge" and "self-realization," and escape social and cultural institutions that inhibit and prohibit self expression.<sup>45</sup> Muggleton goes on to explain that traditionally, the upper middle class has been the most preoccupied with self expression and the liberation of the imagination, but due to the expansion of public education the working classes have begun to champion those values, as well, which is why joining a subculture is often seen as liberating by the participants.<sup>46</sup> Muggleton maintains that, based on the fieldwork he has conducted, members of a subculture view their participation as self-expression rather than dissent of any kind, and they actually come from many different social classes.

Muggleton has his share of critics, as well, particularly Paul Hodkinson, who has written the first sociological study of Britain's current goth subculture.<sup>47</sup> Hodkinson is one of many scholars who feel that subcultures constitute postmodern aesthetic play rather than representing resistance to oppression of any kind. Hodkinson feels that *Inside Subculture* is flawed because Muggleton took the information he collected from

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Hodkinson, *Goth*. It should be made clear that Hodkinson's study focused on current goth participants. He did not study goths who were a part of the movement during the 1980s.

participants too much at face value; the members probably just told the author what he wanted to hear.

These scholars make valid points about subculture and class where musicology could offer additional perspectives. Muggleton's criticism that Hebdige had little or no interest in the opinions of the punks, mods, teds, etc, but was simply interested in molding subculture style to fit into a totalizing theory, is partially true. Hebdige seems to have conducted little fieldwork (only one quotation from an informant appears in his book), and the fact that he has little to say about the music of subcultures is a serious oversight in his study. However, the author was not trying to use Marxist criticism to explain every aspect of the subcultural experience, only to point out some of the social/economic factors that seem to show up in the styles of various youth movements. After all, participants may not be fully aware of the significance of their own style and behavior, even though they may be greatly in touch with the social, political, and economic tensions of the times and be aware of what is happening in the media. It should be noted that most Marxist scholars (as well as most deconstructionists) from the Frankfurt school onward have been highly critical or dismissive of "pop" culture, but Hebdige expresses a refreshing respect for the artistic achievements of young people.<sup>48</sup>

Muggleton stresses the need to examine the subjective motivations for the actions of the participants. Perhaps the most appealing aspect of the Weberian approach is that one can get a sense of what draws individuals to one particular style or subculture but not another, e.g., why a person would feel attracted to punk but not goth, or mod but not ted. After all, most subcultures address many of the same issues (the environment, the economy, nuclear war, and personal relationships, to name a few) and yet each style is distinctive. What better way to understand the sensibility of a subculture than through the music, for each individual band and each of their songs are a testimony of what motivates the participants. Studying the music helps to clarify the emotional experiences that the members find appealing and perhaps why they take aesthetic pleasure in creating/hearing songs that are dominated or colored by a single, overriding affect: the primal, unrefined

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<sup>48</sup> In general, deconstructionists and scholars from the Frankfurt school feel that commercial or "pop" culture makes individuals passive and uncritical. Therefore, in their opinion, popular culture possesses little subversive power. For example, see Theodore Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991), particularly pages 44-5.

aggression of punk, the cinemagraphic atmosphere of goth, or the thunderous intensity of heavy metal. Part of the fascination behind the music associated with specific subcultures is how the songs can be about a wide range of experiences but still maintain a single sensibility (generated mostly by the timbre) and seldom become monotonous or dull. The role that music plays in attracting people to subcultures and the nature of that role should be important elements in the study of subculture.

Muggleton dislikes the reading of subcultures as text because he feels that it is elitist to view these youth movements as a mysterious code that only a semiotician can interpret. However, participants themselves may not fully understand every detail as to why certain sounds or symbols resonate with them, but on some level they do understand why the symbols all fit together. Style does not require an academic to crack the code, and Hebdige never claims that there is any great mystery in decoding subculture style. It would be better to determine whether there is a subversive text behind the style after the music has been analyzed and considered along with the sensibility and the fashion.

Based on his fieldwork with a select group of informants, Muggleton insists that subcultures are loose organizations that allow the participants to express a measure of individuality from the mainstream and cannot be viewed as expressions of resistance in the Marxist sense. But why do these youth movements have to be interpreted as falling into mutually exclusive categories rather than being appreciated as a type of expression that works on many different levels? Sentiments expressed by musicians who are associated with specific subcultures support the idea that participating in such a movement can simultaneously express both personal sentiments and a social conscience.

Steve Vai, a former student of Frank Zappa, whose playing is highly admired in the heavy metal world and particularly by guitar aficionados, supports Muggleton's point about subcultures serving as a means to self-fulfillment:

When I was growing up, and many times even now, when I was not playing I was in pain. I was a gawky kid in school who did not have a social group, and there were issues with my family that left me empty at times. But mastering the guitar gave me a sense of dignity that I really needed. I'm just a tormented spiritual seeker. When we enter the creative part of our brain, I believe that we gravitate towards those things that are the most interesting to us. That's why a lot of artists

focus on political issues; it's very important to them or love issues because their heart is broken. But when I enter that space I tend to gravitate toward spiritual issues.<sup>49</sup>

Here, Vai explained how he used the guitar to increase his self-esteem and make his life more fulfilling, but the fact that his instrumental virtuosity allowed him to connect with a social group also seems to have been a part of what made music rewarding for him, just as it did for virtuosos from other time periods. One typically does not become a rock guitar virtuoso but have no desire to perform and connect with others. Personal sentiments like those described by the guitarist can quickly become part of the collective expression and identity of a subculture. As Vai states, "When you play, somebody has got to care."<sup>50</sup>

John "Ozzy" Osbourne, whose career as a vocalist with the pioneering heavy metal group Black Sabbath and as a solo artist has made him an icon in the metal scene, supports Hebdige's view of subculture as resistance: "Sabbath grew up in Birmingham England, which was a polluted, dismal, industrial pit and we were angry about it, and that was reflected in our music. My life was sh--t. I was frightened by fear. Fear has been my closest friend throughout my life."<sup>51</sup>

Obviously there are many who feel as Osbourne does, judging not only from the popularity that metal has enjoyed but also from the level of commitment fans have to the music, generated by their continuing sense of fear mixed with anger. Based on the interviews I have conducted with English and American goths, Britons who joined the punk movement in the early 1980s, and my own experiences as a heavy metal musician, feelings of being scared, subjugated, and trapped were reasons why many joined a subculture. For example, Mick Mercer, a journalist who covered punk and goth music during the late 1970s and 1980s remarked, "anyone who says that punk was not an expression of resistance has no idea how horrible economic conditions over here were at the time and what miserable lives we had. To say that punk did not express

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<sup>49</sup> Alan Paul, "Use Your Illusion," *Guitar World*, April 2005, 54.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Brad Tolinski, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ozzy," *Guitar World Presents: Guitar Legends*, #80, 48. This periodical was a special edition of *Guitar World* magazine.

anything...it's a nonsensical statement."<sup>52</sup> Even when participants come from relatively stable economic or family backgrounds, many are moved by events or conditions in their communities, circumstances surrounding people that they care about, and various events reported in the media.

I have never met or interviewed a subculture participant, even those not particularly committed, who did not find mainstream values--from fashion to social justice--to be insincere, unintelligent, unnatural, or highly hypocritical. Even if Muggleton is correct that his informants did not see themselves as resisting or oppressed, many find something amiss or sorely lacking in modern society, otherwise they would not have joined a subculture. This particular sense of emptiness, which is a central feature of subcultures, has been noticed by British directors from the 1980s to the present, who often use these youth movements as part of the setting of their films when engaging in social critique ( particularly when expressing anti-Thatcher sentiments). In the adaptation of Colin Dexter's *Cherubim and Seraphim*, Inspector Morse (played by the late John Thaw) investigates a series of unexplained suicides among Oxford's electronic dance "rave" culture and cannot understand why a group of healthy eighteen-year-olds from stable families would want to take their own lives.<sup>53</sup> What the authorities find particularly disturbing is the fact that the teens made no attempt to "cry for help," left no note behind, and killed themselves in horrific ways, where there was absolutely no hope for survival. The victims were sober when they committed suicide, and seemingly wanted to accentuate how carefully they considered their actions and were determined to see them through. As the inspector begins to ponder the case he remarks to his sergeant "What kind of life are we really offering our young people? This British homeowner's democracy that we're so proud of, it's really a form of slavery." He acknowledges that youths may view their existence as being pre-programmed and controlled, with a limited range of values and tastes that are deemed acceptable. But on the other hand they are socially active, never seemingly in want of companionship, with sympathetic parents and disposable income, which allow them to be free to "be themselves." Later the investigation reveals that, searching for a feeling of fulfillment in an empty and

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<sup>52</sup> Mick Mercer, personal E-mail, 25 March 2005.

<sup>53</sup> *Inspector Morse: Cherubim & Seraphim*, (1995), VHS, BFS Video 98069.

oppressive life, the victims had taken an experimental drug that ultimately led them to commit suicide.

The inspector has a difficult time coping with his forgivable error; he spent so much time looking for problems and abuse in the lives of the participants, when in reality they simply felt there was nothing worthwhile to live for. The greatest tragedy of all was that the youths considered their future to be so sterile and predictable, with few opportunities to express passion of any sort, that they did not value their lives and were easily convinced to give them up. It was the banality of the society that killed them and not personal unhappiness. The youths were fatally poisoned by an illusion of utopia, just as society decays under the illusion that capitalist bourgeois system is a utopia. The film clearly accentuates the sad ambivalence that these young people felt about their existence and that they were not imbibing simply for carefree recreation.

The detectives compare the youths' participation in a subculture to the Pied Piper of Hamelin, but in this case the children are separated from their parents because they foresee no viable future. The detective finds the intensity and eclecticism of their music, along with the computer generated artwork that adorns the walls of the victims' rooms, to be appropriate for teens who felt that they had seen everything and knew all that there was to know.<sup>54</sup>

The film accurately portrays the music enjoyed by the ravers as functioning very much like the metaphorical drugs in *Cherubim and Seraphim*, creating an energy that makes them feel complete, consoled, and alive. But it is doubtful that the participants would enjoy basking in the emotional intensity of the music if it did not contain a message that touched a nerve, identified an issue that needed addressing. Arguably any type of music could provide a measure of emotional intensity if this was the only goal, but members of a subculture are attracted to music that conveys a specific message and sensibility; not just any music will do. Identifying with the message behind the music is part of what makes styles like punk, goth, and heavy metal so enjoyable.

Another counter to Muggleton's argument that members of a subculture are motivated by a desire to express uniqueness or individuality, and not refusal or rebellion,

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<sup>54</sup> Jean Baudrillard makes a similar point about contemporary drug abuse in *Screened Out*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2002) 96-101. Baudrillard believes that the postmodern obsession with drugs is caused by society trying too hard to sterilize all abnormality.



is that members are aware that they are more often than not provoking fear, disgust, and the entire spectrum of negative emotions when they interact with members of the adult mainstream and even among their age group. The negative reactions and sense of refusal generated by the style is part of the pleasure of belonging to a subculture.

Music often plays a large role in generating negative responses, since participants will often associate themselves with bands that have a reputation for bashing the establishment or literally causing social or political problems in society. What is of particular interest in this process is how easy it is to associate oneself with a subculture through music without seeming contrived or artificial, and this speaks to the sincerity and directness of the music itself. When fans are able to appropriate the signified of a particular group, it has been my experience that their authenticity is rarely questioned, the overall ethos of the band's music is taken to be part of the individual's personality. As Bruce Springsteen put it, "looking up onstage and seeing yourself in the performer, and the performer looking into the crowd and seeing themselves is what the rock n' roll experience is all about."<sup>55</sup>

Muggleton's insistence that subcultures express individualism and not resistance stems from his belief that these movements (as well as postmodern consumer culture) are part of the persistence of romanticism. He states that counter-culture and booms in consumer/mass culture are directly related because romantic idealism unintentionally creates periods of self-searching.<sup>56</sup> The obvious way that musicology could contribute to the debate over the merits of the author's hypothesis is by looking at how music associated with the subculture expresses or fails to adhere to romantic ideals.

What appears misguided is that Muggleton uses his beliefs about romanticism to support his argument that subcultures do not express feelings of resistance, for social and political activism was a key component of the movement. Nineteenth-century composers also felt that the arts contributed to making listeners more emotionally self-aware, wiser,

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<sup>55</sup> This quote was taken from a broadcast of *Nightline* in December of 2005. The author has been unable to pinpoint the specific date.

<sup>56</sup> Muggleton, *Inside Subculture*, 50.

more compassionate, and empathetic; superior individuals, in other words.<sup>57</sup> Popular musicians often appropriate these aesthetic values. In fact, bands associated with certain subcultures often feel that their artistry is superior to mainstream pop, because it contains these attributes to a higher degree. Even punk rock, with all its anger and vulgarity, ultimately succeeded because it generated a sense of empathy in the listener and communicated the artist's desire to document social problems.

On the other hand, much of the rock music associated with subcultures does share traits of the individualism that Muggleton emphasizes. For example, most successful rock musicians try to develop styles of considerable originality, often drawing inspiration from music they feel their audience will probably not be familiar with, or backgrounding their influence as much as possible in their composing/performing. Just as in the nineteenth century, developing a recognizable individual style serves the two-fold purpose of making it possible for artists to support themselves as entrepreneurs and celebrating the value of the individual, whose feelings and imagination are worthy of consideration and expression. Popular music often appropriates this characteristic, as well, but the impact is no longer the same, since audiences living in a post-romantic environment often take it for granted that the music would express personal emotions that become universal through artistic expression. Muggleton does not seem to recognize that feelings of resistance and oppression were often responsible for the emotionalism of much romantic art, from Chopin's Revolutionary Etude, to Liszt's Hungarian nationalism, to the metaphorical social commentary in Wagner's *Ring*. Such works were not simply about a personal vision; there is an activist element to romantic individualism that Muggleton curiously does not feel is a part of the romanticism he finds in subcultures.

The aesthetics of freedom and spontaneity were also valued during the 1800s (the age of revolutions) for reasons of both celebrating individuality/authenticity, and resistance to social constraints. Similarly, the authenticity of rock music is also often judged by its "off the cuff" qualities, and more often than not the recordings are engineered to sound as live and effortless as possible. Popular music (such as rap, punk and metal), which is particularly known for signifying refusal, values instinct and

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<sup>57</sup> Leonard B. Meyer, *Style and Music: Theory, History and Ideology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 162-65.

improvisation as part of its aesthetic, for examples the guitar virtuosity of heavy metal or the elaborate verbal improvisations of rap. Popular music frequently possesses the same improvisory character and the same foregrounding of the personal emotions of the song's lyric persona as romantic music. Expressions of resistance and individualism are not mutually exclusive, as the music of romantic composers demonstrated.

Returning to the issue of whether or not class struggle plays a role in the formation and maintenance of subcultures, (a point strongly contested by Muggleton, based on the results of his fieldwork that indicated membership in subcultures often straddles class boundaries), we must note that class is a factor that is almost always taken into consideration in any sociological observation of England. Even popular travel guides such as *The Lonely Planet* list class consciousness among the most significant traits of the British national character.<sup>58</sup> As I will discuss in Chapter 3, the economic statistics from Britain during the 1980s show that participants who did come from middle-class backgrounds were not necessarily any more financially secure than the lower classes were in the economy of the period, and styles of resistance that appealed primarily to the lower classes resonated with some members from more affluent backgrounds. For example, many of the goth participants whom I interviewed did not grow up in households that were living hand-to-mouth; many came from the middle-class but still found the message in punk and goth music to be true to reality as they experienced it. Also, many of the serious topics discussed in the song lyrics of groups associated with subcultures struck a chord with the participants, because they heard class-conscious adults discussing contemporary issues both in the media and within their families. For instance, as a former heavy metal guitarist, I frequently co-wrote songs about issues I heard adults in my life discussing, which often included questions of social justice and oppression. From age 16 to 20 I spent my summers earning money by working in sawmills and canneries, where the unionized workforce had just come off a series of unsuccessful strikes, and labor/management relations were at very low ebb. The group I played with often performed covers of songs by Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, and others, about greed, political corruption, environmental desecration, and poverty-stricken

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<sup>58</sup> David Else, and others, *The Lonely Planet: Great Britain* [2007], 7<sup>th</sup> ed., (London: Lonely Planet Publications, 2007), 60.

citizens being forced to participate in wars against their will. These experiences were certainly not uncommon to any of my peers or the fans who saw my group perform. Music was a vital way that we dealt with issues that weighed on our minds, and they frequently did include a class dynamic.

Hebdige and Muggleton have been criticized in Paul Hodkinson's study of goth, because he feels that subcultures are simply aesthetic play with little or no critical edge. Although this debate will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, musicology is in a position to address this author's criticism. Hodkinson believes that Muggleton relied too heavily on statements by informants, and states that according to his research goth is merely a style with neither psychological nor political goals.<sup>59</sup> Of course, a musicologist would carefully analyze the music, since a great number of people consider it "their voice," as well. This way one can not only understand the sensibility of the subculture but also gain greater appreciation for the style on purely aesthetic grounds. But Hodkinson has no training in music and therefore did not carefully consider what the music has to say. He also joined the goth culture long after its heyday had passed and did not seem to consider that the style might not have meant the same thing in 1995 as it did in 1979.

Another scholar whose work should be addressed when considering the relationship between subculture and class is John Stratton, whose article "On the Importance of Subcultural Origins" presents a theory of these post-war youth movements that falls somewhere between the ideas of Hebdige and those of his critics.<sup>60</sup> Stratton believes that subcultures can be divided into two distinct categories: "spectacular" and "commodity." Spectacular subcultures reinforce and celebrate working-class values in the face of bourgeois hegemony, in a dramatic, spectacular way; their flamboyant styles are a direct result of the influence of consumerism, the mass media, and postmodernism. Spectacular subcultures, Stratton states, are consumer-oriented group cultures that live the American dream as outsiders, through niche marketing. The fact that they dramatize and symbolize social problems through "lived" culture makes them more enduring and

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<sup>59</sup> Hodkinson, *Goth*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> John Stratton, "On the Importance of Subcultural Origins," in *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1977), 181-90.

transferable from one society to another (i.e., England to America).<sup>61</sup> The example Stratton gives to illustrate spectacular subcultures are the Skinheads, who were concerned that bourgeois commercialism was destroying family-owned corner pubs, taking football away from the working classes (also through commercialism), and failing to acknowledge the value and worth of the lower classes to the nation.<sup>62</sup>

Commodity subcultures on the other hand, are also concerned with warding off the hegemonic cultural control of the bourgeoisie, but instead of dramatizing social concerns, this variety celebrates and fetishizes the freedom and individualism that members of the middle class wish they had. The author cites the post-war American surf culture and biker gangs as examples of commodity subcultures, because a single commodity (surfboard or Harley Davidson motorcycle) becomes the focal point of the movement as a symbol of their freedom and non-conformity.

Stratton's observations can be interpreted as supporting portions of the viewpoints of both Hebdige and Thornton/Muggleton. Disrupting signifier/signified relationships is how spectacular subcultures generate their resistance through "living culture." The celebration of individualism in commodity subcultures supports the view that youth movements are more about asserting personal identity than expressing political oppression (Muggleton was actually referring to spectacular subcultures in his argument, however.) In the final analysis, Stratton's views are probably closest to Thornton's because he feels that subcultures, for all their signification of resistance, ultimately re-enforce bourgeois values with their consumerism. The difference between the views of Stratton and Thornton is that the former feels the participants are consciously trying to express rebellion, but end up becoming a part of the culture that they are trying to resist by default, while the latter feels that subcultures do not necessarily represent rebellion and that the dominant culture is too fragmented and diverse to be characterized as a binary opposition to subcultures.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 182. Skinheads were involved in violence against oppressed people, as well, but their motivation was primarily economic. Skinheads were concerned that immigrants were taking jobs and opportunities away from native British citizens.

Stratton is correct when he says that music plays a large part in the construction and maintenance of both spectacular and commodity subcultures. Musicology could therefore certainly add more depth to his theories. The author himself tries, with limited success, to use music to support his arguments. For example, Stratton feels that commodity subcultures rally around music that lacks musical content and contains lyrics that actually reinforce mainstream ideals and stereotypes concerning race, class, gender, etc. rather than subverting them. Nevertheless, for superficial reasons of style, Stratton feels that spectacular subcultures ultimately do not interact well with the dominant ideologies. The author cites the biker gang's love of heavy metal to support his argument. In contrast, Stratton believes that spectacular subcultures are more successful in creating a discourse with the dominant ideologies, because the music encourages conversation and debate through its richness in contradictions. The appropriation of black, West-Indian music by Skinheads illustrates the author's point. Stratton also believes that the lyrics of the songs associated with spectacular subculture have more depth and substance.<sup>63</sup>

Stratton's musical observations could be critiqued on several counts; the lyrics of heavy metal songs are not always conservative and frequently attack the structures of power with ferocity. As Robert Walser has documented in *Running with the Devil*, heavy metal is seldom crude and actually requires considerable virtuosity.<sup>64</sup> Stratton's mischaracterizations are a perfect example of why musicology needs to be more involved in subculture theory, for without musical analysis the sensibility of a subculture can never be understood with any depth.

Nevertheless, Stratton's observations can be used as a point of departure for music historians. For example, does an analysis of the lyrics and music together support or undermine the theory that spectacular subcultures generate more discourse through their lived culture and subversion of signifiers? Stratton himself does not explicitly state which type of subculture he feels is more subversive. He seems to indicate that spectacular subcultures are perhaps more likely to spark social change, because their style, customs, and discourse are more likely to be of interest to the mainstream, but Stratton feels that commodity subcultures are more amicable to the dominant ideologies

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<sup>63</sup> Stratton, "Subcultural Origins," 188.

<sup>64</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 57-107.

due to their consumption practices' and values' being closer to the bourgeoisie. Additionally, commodity subcultures also provide mainstream society with a yardstick with which to measure itself, because even though they may resist the routine of mainstream life, their values are more conservative than those of spectacular subcultures.

Musicologists can help verify whether these distinctions stand up to scrutiny with evidence from the music. Examining how bands appropriate music of other groups and styles should be of particular interest. Is there a difference between the borrowing practices of the two different kinds of subcultures, and if so what does this tell us about the values and dynamics of each subculture.

From reading Stratton's chapter, one could come away with the idea that subculture participants are striving for a life of eternal leisure, rather than viewing subculture as the coping strategy that it is. Members are not lazy or scared of work, they simply want greater security and fulfillment, as the music bears out. Seldom does music associated with subcultures advocate a complete lack of personal responsibility or the idea that life should always be care-free and easy. Subculture participation is not simply for young adults; people often remain actively involved for many years, maintaining the values and sensibility of the group. Music often helps the members sustain their beliefs by keeping the ideas in the public consciousness.

Examining the differences between commodity and spectacular subcultures raises other musical issues; for example, do musicians from the different types of subcultures learn to understand music the same way? For instance, heavy metal guitarists and drummers often approach their instruments very much as Stratton describes the relationship between bikers and their Harley Davidsons; the instrument is a commodity that symbolizes freedom and individualism. Players are constantly experimenting with effects and amplifiers, trying out different cymbals or sticks, much like the way gangs care for their cycles. Their consumption practices shape how players express themselves (virtuosity, experiments with timbre and tone, etc.). In other words, the consumption habits of the musicians are a factor musicologists need to consider.

An obvious question that arises when considering Stratton's work is the issue of subculture and commercialism in music. Stratton does not talk about the phenomenon of commodity subcultures becoming spectacular, of which heavy metal could be considered

an example. In some ways the goth and punk movements started out as spectacular but currently have much in common with Stratton's definition of the commodity type. A survey of a subculture's music over a period of time is thus another area of interest for scholars. Another important question is whether commodity and spectacular subcultures have different criteria for considering whether or not a band is a "sell out," that is, writing music that betrays the subculture's core values simply for the sake of making more money, violating the participant's claim to authenticity.<sup>65</sup> Spectacular subcultures' participants are often more critical of mass culture than those of the commodity type, expressing a more flagrant dissatisfaction with the "American Dream Syndrome." Often the bands the members favor cannot become too popular with the mainstream, or this aspect of the subculture's sensibility will be violated. It is more than just a matter of a band "going commercial" by simplifying its approach or taking a less aggressive posture to gain broader appeal, the artists will often become suspect if they simply gain too large a following.

The greatest point of contention that I have with the theorists we have encountered so far is that the creative expression in subcultural art is not as one-dimensional as these studies suggest. The music covers a great number of topics and expresses a wide range of emotions regardless of the group's consumption habits or how spectacular their sense of style is.

### Subcultures as Aesthetic Play

One of the primary reasons why authors such as Thornton, Muggleton, and Hodgkinson disagree with the conclusions reached by Hebdige and other scholars of the Birmingham Center for Subcultural Studies is that they view subculture as "aesthetic play" rather than a serious attempt at social commentary. However, some social theorists, such as Rodger Silverstone, believe that one can effectively engage in social critique through "play." He writes: "Play enables the exploration of that boundary between fantasy and reality, between the self and other. In play we have a license to explore both

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<sup>65</sup> My research into goth, and experience in heavy metal indicates that subculture participants seldom mind when a band achieves success if they remain true to their style and presentation. However, these fans become upset when an artist that they admire begins to dilute the subversive elements of the music in order to gain greater commercial appeal.



society and ourselves. In play we investigate culture but we also create it.”<sup>66</sup> Music is the principal way that members of a subculture engage in a dialogue with their environment, and Silverstone’s definition of play is compelling. However, I do not feel that the other scholars mentioned above are using the word in a way that is sympathetic to the participants, which is probing and creating culture.

In Hodkinson’s study of goth, the author insists, as an insider, that the subculture holds neither a political ideology nor a cultural sensibility, and consists of little more than fashion. This leaves one wondering if the author truly reflected upon the signification practices and the musical content of goth bands. Hodkinson’s conclusions are contradicted by my own extensive fieldwork in Great Britain. However, my interviews focused on participants and musicians who were involved in goth during the 1980s, while Hodkinson’s study focused on current participants.<sup>67</sup> Simon Frith also believes that music associated with subcultures, such as punk and heavy metal, is not a serious expression of angst but constitute “panic as play.” He writes: “Rock is a leisure activity which represents the fantasies and possibilities of a life constituted entirely around leisure.”<sup>68</sup> Frith does not support claims such as this with any evidence, with an analysis of the music, or from fieldwork with fans, or interviews with the artists.

Lawrence Grossberg, in his article “Another Boring Day in Paradise,” states that rock celebrates play as the only possibility for survival in a postmodern world. Fans are “repelled and angered by the boredom, meaninglessness, and dehumanization of the contemporary world [so] youths celebrate these very conditions in their leisure (technology, noise, commodity fetish, repetition, fragmentation, and superficiality).”<sup>69</sup> Grossberg’s statement seems contradictory, but he was presumably making reference to psychoanalytic theories that postulate that the brain will often attach positive connotations to negative thoughts or feelings as a coping strategy. He calls rock

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in *Matt Hills, Fan Cultures* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 90.

<sup>67</sup> However, even my interviews with current goth participants contradict Hodkinson’s thesis.

<sup>68</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock ‘n’ Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 477.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

“resistance for those with no faith in revolution” because the music does not completely reject the dominant culture or attempt to subvert traditional structures of power.<sup>70</sup> At times the author’s writing resembles the semiotic work of Hebdige, however Grossberg’s analysis is concerned with musical signifiers rather than clothing or other physical objects. Grossberg believes that rock tears ideas, signs, and sounds out of their original context in the parent society, and recontextualizes them into symbols of defiance to create what he calls an “affective alliance,” which expresses resistance and individualism. Grossberg describes an affective alliance as an expression of the feelings of living in the world, what one might call an outlook, or sensibility, and the feelings that accompany it.<sup>71</sup> What differentiates Grossberg’s semiotic analysis from that of Hebdige is that the former feels that subcultural style (including music) cannot be read as a representation or text but only an empowering emotional atmosphere, while the latter believes that subcultures are a clear, coherent, polemical attack on the dominant social order. Grossberg feels that because “play” is the only strategy that rock offers people for coping with life “it can never take itself too seriously, it must always deny its own significance and confine itself to surface effects, for rock can only produce meaning affectively.”<sup>72</sup>

Grossberg’s model has been critiqued by Matt Hills, who works outside the field of musicology. In his book *Fan Cultures*, Hills questions the way in which Grossberg only describes affect in terms of cultural constructions. Grossberg feels that the strong attachment fans feel for the “texts” that they relate to is simply a by-product of their surroundings.<sup>73</sup> In other words, Hills is skeptical that the emotional connection fans feel for popular culture is something that cultural studies can quantify. I would add that, like Simon Frith, Grossberg does not back up his theories with an example of any kind, and he does not consider how his affective alliances might draw their power from experiences related to class. The author does not explain why a given “affective alliance” would strike

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 482-85. What differentiates Grossberg’s ideas from those of scholars like Hodkinson is that Grossberg feels that rock is still, at least in part, an expression of the class experience, while Hodkinson believes that art associated with subcultures contains no element of refusal.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 92.

a chord with audiences at a specific point in time, nor the continuing popularity of many styles and bands. Additionally, in contrast to Grossberg's assertion that rock is a form of "play," most rock artists take their creative work seriously and want their message to resonate with many others. Later in his article, Grossberg states that most contemporary bands dream of having the same impact on society as The Beatles, and the statement does seem to contradict the author's claims of rock as simply aesthetic play.<sup>74</sup> It seems evident that the points raised by Grossberg and Hebdige could both be valid to some degree, since music that engages in social commentary can also be entertaining.

Sarah Thornton is also skeptical of the ability of musicians and subculture participants to offer a credible social critique, because she feels that they simply provide social space for young people and are not born of protest. Based on her fieldwork in London dance clubs, she believes that subcultures do not adhere to a clear and distinct ideology but simply represent, in the most general sense, a shared taste in music and consumer goods between members of a select group.<sup>75</sup> Again, Thornton fails to account for the sensibility that runs through the creative work of the members and does not seem to recognize that not every subculture functions the same way as the electronic dance scene that the author used as her model.

Subculture theorists constantly question the sincerity of fans and artists because they are also consumers. Matt Hills also examined Thornton's work and sensibly believes that we must simply accept the contradiction that subculture participants are in fact, "ideal consumers," since their buying habits are unwaveringly predictable but they can also resist the norms of capitalist society and claim anti-commercial (and anti-establishment) beliefs. In other words, play is only one aspect of subcultural expression.<sup>76</sup> John Clark and his colleagues' study of subculture and class, which predates the work of Hebdige, does not criticize subcultures as simply consisting of aesthetic play but does view their expression as solving problems only on a symbolic level. They write,

Though not 'ideological,' subcultures have an ideological dimension, and in the

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<sup>74</sup> Grossberg, "Another Boring Day," 483.

<sup>75</sup> Thornton, "The Logic of Subcultural Capital," 200-203.

<sup>76</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 30-35.

problematic situation of the post-war period this ideological component became more prominent. In addressing the class problematic of the particular strata from which subcultures are drawn, the different subcultures provided for a section of working class youth one strategy for negotiating their collective resistance. But their highly ritualized and stylized form suggests that they were also attempts at a solution to that problematic experience, a resolution which, because pitched largely at the symbolic level, was fated to fail.

Continuing, the authors' state: "There is no subcultural solution to working-class unemployment, educational disadvantage, compulsory mis-education, dead-end jobs, the routinization and specialization of labor, low pay, and the loss of skills."<sup>77</sup> In other words, these youth movements do espouse a loose set of collective beliefs and articulate problems common to the lower classes of society. Their solutions to these problems however, are not clearly defined because they are voiced through style. The quotation makes it clear why it is still necessary to understand the semiotics at work in a given subculture, both in terms of music and image. But subcultural expression is about expressing transcendence,<sup>78</sup> empathy in the face of shared fears, making others aware of problems or expressing the feelings of those who are at risk in some way, and critiquing the dominant culture. Art does not solve social problems, but popular culture is consistently reproached for this supposed shortcoming. It is unrealistic to expect popular music single-handedly to set in motion elaborate changes in contemporary society.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Clarke *et al.*, "Subcultures, Cultures, and Class," 104.

<sup>78</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 57-107.

<sup>79</sup> Members of the Frankfurt School have been the leading critics of popular culture, rebuking it for promoting passivity and discouraging emancipatory social thought. For more recent examples, Simon Frith constantly reproaches punk rock for not promoting change in British society, for example, see "Formalism, Realism and Leisure: The Case of Punk," in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1977), 163-74.

### Originals vs. the “Hangers-On”

One of the most strongly debated topics in subculture social theory deals with the question of identifying and quantifying the differences between the original participants and those who joined the subculture after its style and values had been disseminated by the media. In other words, there is a fundamental question of whether scholars should distinguish between the “originals,” and the loosely committed or “Johnny-come-latelys” when discussing subcultures. As one might expect, the writings of Dick Hebdige are at the center of the debate.

To paraphrase his argument on this topic, Hebdige feels that subcultures begin as a movement of resistance to one or more aspects of the dominant culture. In his opinion, the original participants are the only authentic members of the subculture because they are a direct product of the social conditions and problems that are at the root of the group’s central concerns. He believes that later the mass media picks up on and exploits the sincere creative work of the original members, and markets it as a fad or fashion.<sup>80</sup> Hebdige never accuses the “latecomers” of being insincere in their beliefs, or of having no understanding of the issues that concerned the original members, but he does feel that the expression of the “first wave” of participants is more authentic and untainted by the influence of the media and commercialism; hence they are the individuals who must be studied when one tries to understand the concerns of a particular subculture.

McRobbie, Muggleton, and Thornton have disagreed with Hebdige’s theories for a number of reasons. Sarah Thornton feels that in postmodern society subcultures are “born into” the media, so it is futile to try to distinguish any real differences between the innovative participants and the latecomers since the style never has a chance for its meanings to solidify into a coherent “text”<sup>81</sup> In Thornton’s view, any given style will

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<sup>80</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 122.

<sup>81</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 39.

proliferate through the media only to have its signs and meanings appropriated and recontextualized so rapidly that no clear meaning can form. Hebdige, however, never really claimed that subcultures were grass-roots folk movements, he simply observed that the meaning of style can change when it is adopted by individuals who were not part of its original context or social milieu, and when creative decisions are taken out of the hands of the musical artists themselves.<sup>82</sup>

In order to understand a genre of popular music, musicologists need to consider what sort of media a subculture is “born into”—mass media, independent labels, small fanzines, etc., and the changes a style undergoes as it gains or loses popularity. The way media coverage may affect the development of a style, differences and similarities between artists recording for major labels and those working for independent labels should also be considered, as this may have a profound impact on how the music was created. Understanding the potential influence of music videos on the sound of the music is also important, particularly when dealing with music from the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars should look for changes in the themes and sensibility expressed by the artists over a significant period in order to understand a genre and any subculture to which it may be affiliated.

David Muggleton feels that because involvement in a subculture is an expression of hyper-individualism rather than the voice of the proletariat, any differences between the originals and the latecomers is immaterial. The author bases his conclusions partly on Jean Baudrillard’s notion of “the end of the social,” where the public is only familiar with signifiers as fashion statements but never the ideas behind them.<sup>83</sup> Based on his fieldwork, Muggleton concludes that subcultures are self-made minority groups where members share some cultural connections. He apparently feels that expressing individuality within the structure of the group is the most important part of the subcultural experience. In speaking of British youth subcultures, he writes: “each

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<sup>82</sup> For example, current American punk rock has little in common with the British bands of the 1970s and 1980s. Another example would be American record company producers commercializing the British heavy metal style.

<sup>83</sup> Muggleton, *Inside Subculture*, 48.

[member] brings their own experiences and expectations to bear on each garment in the production and exchange of meaning.”<sup>84</sup>

Muggleton’s conclusions certainly have implications for musicologists, as well, since individuals are free to associate songs and bands with their own personal meanings. However, music is not the same as hairstyles or fashion accessories; the artists guide the listener’s interpretation to some degree through the song’s text setting. The participants, regardless of when they joined the subculture, typically know something about the signifiers that they use to represent themselves. They do not completely disregard the ideas that have come to define a particular subculture in favor of personal meanings.

Signification practices may fluctuate in postmodern society, but the media also saturates the culture with so much information that it is nearly impossible for participants not to know something about the history of the symbols they appropriate. For example, when a contemporary group uses sounds or images from Bob Marley or The Velvet Underground they probably understand some of the ideas and concerns that those artists are associated with. Musicologists should be sensitive to the symbolic language at work at various levels in the music and images, and why the members of a subculture could consider the various sounds and timbres authentic or inauthentic. For example, in 1983, the band Judas Priest released an album laden with synthesized guitar timbres that members of the metal subculture considered tacky, tasteless, pathetic, and quite literally a betrayal of the genre’s principles. In summary, the music of subcultures is an expression of shared values but still leaves room for individual interpretation and meanings. Muggleton’s point is valid musically, but what might be added to his observation is that the participants typically do understand the history behind the visual and musical symbols at work in their subculture.

Sarah Thornton, on the other hand, believes that if one is to understand a subculture, the social hierarchies present within the group must be taken into account. This she believes will answer questions concerning how the culture defines who is “cool” and who is not, how the culture decides who is a “real” member or just a part-timer, and

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 69.

so forth. Building upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>85</sup> Thornton characterizes participants as economically privileged youths who are temporarily shielded from the harsh economic realities of the “real” world but express dissatisfaction with the parent culture because they cannot relate to it at this point in their lives.<sup>86</sup> As a result, the members retreat into aesthetic play and it is through this aestheticism that the social “pecking order” with the subculture is to be understood.

Music is a part of what Thornton calls “subcultural capital,” which defines the social hierarchies within a subculture. Having knowledge of the latest music, underground bands, etc. is a part of how the members define “cool,” and this is similar to the way academics try to keep abreast of the latest trends and discourse within their field. In most subcultures being a member of a band is a source of credibility, and so is the ability to play music on an amateur level. Thornton states that “trying too hard” in image, mannerisms, and dress is a major *faux pas* in the world of subcultures.<sup>87</sup> Bands associated with the various movements are taken to be a credible model of authenticity (after all, they have “made it big”), which is why those wishing to understand a subculture should observe how the members are emulating their favorite artists.

I do not agree with some of the comments made by Bourdieu that Thornton used in her article; for many individuals there is more to subcultures than aestheticism.<sup>88</sup> Many participants are not privileged in any way, and neither are their parents, who often do play a role in the member’s attraction to the ideals of a certain subculture. Academics sometimes unintentionally put down the aesthetics and values of the participants when they discuss subcultures instead of recognizing that young people have a distinct vantage point from which to offer commentary on society. Participants often draw attention to oppressive social circumstances that members of the dominant society have become

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<sup>85</sup> Bourdieu is a French sociologist who investigates how tastes and aesthetic values are influenced by education, class, and culture.

<sup>86</sup> Thornton, “Subcultural Capital,” 204-206.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>88</sup> The writings of Bourdieu that Thornton found particularly influential are found in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1979). Bourdieu espouses the idea that tastes are the product of one’s education and culture. He feels that people are deliberately conditioned to see art and aesthetics as apolitical, ignoring any social critique that they may possess. The Marxist element of Bourdieu’s writing seems not to have influenced Thornton.



accustomed to, and as Hebdige states, they destroy the myth of consensus and political hegemony. The members' reactions to social problems are often honest and instinctual, which imbues the improvisory nature (or at least the appearance of it) of their music with a sincerity that is attractive and compelling.

There is no reason why the ideas presented by both Hebdige and his critics must be mutually exclusive. After examining Hebdige's arguments from a musical perspective, there do seem to be some tangible differences that one could point to between the original bands associated with a subculture and those who formed later. Using heavy metal as a case in point, one of the groups who came to define the genre was Black Sabbath of Birmingham. Appropriating the name from the 1963 film starring Boris Karloff to enhance the foreboding message of their music (and create controversy), the band wrote extensively about their bleak economic prospects, pollution, the specter of nuclear catastrophe, urban alienation, and the effect of these conditions on personal relationships. The members were subjected to abuse by their peers (as many artists have experienced when they present a new perspective), often lived on the street, had minor brushes with the law, and worked in factories (the band's guitarist plays with steel caps on the fingers of his right hand after suffering amputations as the result of an industrial accident). One could then be confident in saying that the members were close to the themes they sang about. However, during much of the 1980s, the sinister intensity, jarring riffs constructed from diminished intervals, and blunt social commentary had largely disappeared from the work of bands who were commercially successful, as the record companies encouraged groups in the genre to take a less confrontational approach and gain broader appeal. As Hebdige might say, the style became a fashion statement as the years passed. But one could also argue that the new Los Angeles-based metal groups such as Van Halen and Quiet Riot were indeed offering a variation on the style influenced by the glamour and atmosphere of affluence endemic to their Hollywood surroundings but nevertheless remaining true to the central themes of the genre. The members of these American heavy metal groups did not come from affluent backgrounds themselves but were simply a product of their culture. As documented by Walser, many of the themes of power and control remain constant in the work of all bands in the genre so in that sense there is no

difference between the originals and the followers.<sup>89</sup> However, the earlier English bands such as Black Sabbath and Judas Priest came across as a much stronger expression of “refusal,” which is of paramount importance to Hebdige. One aspect of subcultural musical style that Thornton does not consider is that within a genre the nature of the musical expression of various bands in a genre is also subject to cycles of fashion. By the late 1980s audiences had grown weary of the more commercialized Los Angeles style of heavy metal, and groups such as Metallica rose in popularity with songs much closer in spirit to that of the original English groups and in many ways much more aggressive, both in their lyrics, and in terms of tempo and timbre (often called “thrash metal”). Nevertheless, Hebdige could credibly argue that the original bands were still much more closely rooted to a specific set of oppressive social circumstances than any of the bands who followed in their footsteps, and that a style is at its peak of subversiveness and intensity when it is a new and original.

### Subcultures and the Mass Media

For Dick Hebdige, subcultures have a love/hate relationship with the media. On one hand he feels that the media turns the genuine expression of “refusal” on the part of the original participants into fashion, but on the other hand musical groups want to touch a wide audience, and the participants enjoy seeing their values and music receiving recognition in print and on the screen. Most realize that the media helps make their subculture possible, from record labels, to MTV, to magazines and fanzines. The way current events are portrayed in the media also inspires the music enjoyed by the participants.

Coming from a Marxist perspective, Hebdige is, of course, interested in issues of how different classes are portrayed in the media, and how this coverage has influenced subcultures. He believes that participants (especially punks) were dramatizing England’s “decline,” having both experienced the poor economic conditions themselves and witnessed how the decay became highly publicized in print, and on television and radio. The punks, for example, then found a way to “say the right things at the right time,

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<sup>89</sup> See Walser, *Running with the Devil*.

encapsulating the mood and embodying a defiant sensibility”<sup>90</sup> Needless to say, music plays a large role in this process with its rhythms, timbres, lyrics, etc., and through its specific appropriations. In Hebdige’s view, the media also influences subcultural style in the way it “by degrees overstates, denies, and reduces to caricature the class experience,” and participants must find ways to cope with and refuse the way their class is portrayed in society’s most influential medium.<sup>91</sup> In turn, musicologists should be sensitive to how songs by bands associated with a given subculture treat class issues, and to what effect. Typically the artists will respond to class stereotypes in the media in one of the following ways: First, they may romanticize the hardships facing working-class people, and the effect those hardships have on relationships, scream messages of defiance against these stereotypes while ridiculing the dominant culture, disprove common stereotypes about the stupidity and lack of talent among the lower classes by demonstrating a superior ability on their instruments (guitar virtuosity from the 70s and 80s, also much of the blues guitar tradition), appropriate signifiers from “high” art to engage in various types of social commentary (David Bowie), or exaggerate class stereotypes to mock the attitudes of the upper classes (punk). Groups may also resign themselves to the fact that there is little they can do to change class stereotypes and so reinvent themselves on their own terms (1960s counterculture). Sometimes, as a result of this attitude of resignation, participants will (at least in their minds) reinvent themselves as an extraordinary type of outcast, appearing more loathsome, threatening, and “other” than they ever would as simply a working-class person, as if to say to the world “it’s your fault that I became this way.”

Few scholars have written more about the media and subcultures than Sarah Thornton, whose primary focus is investigating the role of the media in the development of subcultures. Thornton is concerned with the participants’ attitude toward the media, and the role of micro, niche, and mass media on the development and maintenance of youth subcultures.<sup>92</sup> She is also interested in how the media mediates between subcultures and the dominant society, the effect of negative media coverage on the values

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<sup>90</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 122.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-87.

<sup>92</sup> See Thornton, *Club Cultures*.

and attitudes of the groups, and the various ways media stereotypes of what constitutes “the mainstream” influence the values of the participants. Of course these issues are also of importance to musicologists, who should be sensitive to how ideas concerning the media and technology are reflected in the music. Scholars could also investigate how the musical style of a subculture varies, comparing groups who record for small vs. large record labels. Since subcultures do live in the media to a large degree, the way the music describes mainstream values is also something musicologists must take into account. Post-war subcultures often express emotions repressed or marginalized by the dominant society, revealing, so to speak, its “dark underbelly.” It is true that the mass media does dwell on negative events, and it is rarely as critical of the parent society as the art produced by subcultures.

Thornton is critical of Hebdige’s work and that of the Birmingham Center for Subcultural Studies because she feels they often treat the media as a binary opposition to the “authentic expression” of the original participants, making subcultures out to be “untainted” folk-movements. Again, her criticisms are based on the writings of Bourdieu, who believes that the media plays a vital part in the development of a subculture, and does not simply discuss them, or label them after the fact; the presence of the media is there from the beginning. Thornton also expresses disagreement with Hebdige about the role played by the media in the spread and maintenance of these youth movements. She believes the media does not taint or “water down” the values (and music) of the original participants. In other words, for Thornton “selling out” would mean (in the case of music) that a band associated with a subculture would deliberately try to market and cater to the tastes of outsiders, and not that a band had toned down its subversive qualities.<sup>93</sup> In her view, subversiveness is not always a necessary component of authenticity, as it is for Hebdige.

To someone outside the discipline of subculture social theory, debates between scholars like Hebdige and Thornton can seem like “much ado about nothing;” of course the media plays a role in the music and style of subcultures. In the postmodern era there is virtually no other way to draw together with other like-minded individuals. But the question at the center of the debate is whether or not the media distorts or somehow

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<sup>93</sup> Thornton, “Subcultural Capital,” 204-5.

interferes with the expression of sincere sentiments concerning specific social conditions or problems. If not initially, does the media eventually turn sentiments of refusal into fashion and trivia? These are questions worthy of consideration for those engaged in analyzing popular music. Having been both a rock and classical musician, I can attest that music can be meaningful to others outside of its original social/geographic milieu (which is why it is surprising that musicologists have not been actively involved in the discourse concerning music-based subcultures). The band that I played with wrote songs with the same themes and addressed the same issues as those written by the original heavy metal groups in England, and although we did not grow up in similar social circumstances, our economic backgrounds were not that much different. Our songs may not have been as original or as skillfully composed as those of the celebrated English bands, but they were no less sincere or “authentic” in style. The issues important to the progenitors were kept alive through our music and image. People are moved by specific styles of music for any number of reasons. For example, Alexi Laiho of the Finnish heavy metal group Children of Bodom is currently (2007) one of the most celebrated musicians in the genre. He claims that he became attracted to the style after suffering severe physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his peers. Playing music and participating in a subculture provided an emotional sanctuary.<sup>94</sup> Can one truly say that his music is “watered down” because he became acquainted with the genre through the media? In regard to the idea of musical styles becoming a fad or fashion, it is not as though people cease to care about the issues raised by artists who were the progenitors of a given style, but in the media-saturated postmodern world audiences become weary if the same themes are presented continuously in a similar musical setting. The stylistic fluctuations that occur within a genre do not necessarily mean that the music is losing its potency or relevance; the variations and mutations are a guard against the music’s becoming banal and static. Still, in defense of Hebdige, the original bands that defined the sound of the genre do hold a certain fascination, and although it may also be a media construction, over time the originals tend to be celebrated far more than any groups who composed in the style years later. Although it cannot be quantified, the music of the progenitors is almost always

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<sup>94</sup> Brian Stillman, “Childs Play,” *Guitar World* ( April 2005), 68.

considered by fans to be among the most “sincere” and “pure” of the music that they feel speaks for them.

Addressing the issue of subcultures and the recording industry, Paul Hodkinson points out that companies do not always commercialize a genre, since they are often content to cater to a predictable niche audience, and that “indie” labels often serve as the talent spotters for the larger labels in addition to maintaining their own cadres of artists.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, Matt Hills calls attention to the possibility that participants may actually engage in subversive behavior through their alternative consumption practices.<sup>96</sup>

Although he is discussing television programming and not subcultures, the author writes:

Tension between the fans’s enduring devotion and rapid turnover in TV production is one way in which the cult fan can be said to act against the expectations of the industry. The fan’s emotional investment also results in an attention to detail and program continuity, which is often at odds with a producer’s need to tell new stories over the duration of the series. Fans expect adherence to established tenets, characterizations, and narrative back stories, which production teams revise at their peril, disrupting the trust which is placed in the continuity of a detailed narrative world by these “textually conservationist” fans.<sup>97</sup>

One could argue that Hills’s point is also true for subculture participants because the products they consume, such as recordings or garments, are symbols of their particular worldview. A cynic could argue that the fans’ ideology is constructed by their music, but typically one is not attracted to culture that contradicts one’s beliefs, feelings, and life experiences. This is precisely why fans have extremely negative reactions when bands alter their sound or image in a way that violates their expectations.

Subculture social theory and musicology are fields that have an excellent potential for interdisciplinary cooperation. Musicology has the ability to provide a greater

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<sup>95</sup> Hodkinson, *Goth*, 110.

<sup>96</sup> This is an unusual interpretation of subversiveness, but Hills apparently feels that even modest gestures that work against cultural hegemony are better than nothing at this advanced stage of postmodern capitalism.

<sup>97</sup> Hills, *Fan Cultures*, 36.

understanding of how members of a given subculture view themselves and society, since music often serves as the focal point of the movement. Subculture social theory, on the other hand, can provide insight into the sociological dimension of the musical creativity that takes place within the subculture. A study of the music produced or preferred by a given subculture is also an excellent way for theorists to gauge the merits of their hypotheses and the validity of their conclusions about the group or groups that they are studying.

The work of Dick Hebdige provides a working model for the study of subcultures, but the writings of his critics like Thornton and Muggleton ensure that scholars who employ the Marxist and semiotic methodology of Hebdige do not become complacent and must constantly scrutinize their conclusions about the relationship between subcultures and their parent societies. Clearly musicology can play an active role in this process. In his book *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida argues that Marxist criticism is not passé and is still one of the best tools for guarding against the excesses of the political right in western democracies.<sup>98</sup> Many feel that subcultures help serve a similar function, however modestly, and perhaps the time is right for Hebdige's work to undergo a re-evaluation by musicologists. In all, subculture participants (including musicians) are looking for ways to express individuality and identity, and for ways to gain acceptance or recognition in an increasingly fragmented postmodern society. The creative work of these youth movements should be of interest to scholars working in any of the humanities, including musicology.

I disagree fundamentally with scholars such as Hodkinson, Muggleton, Grossberg, and others who feel that subcultures, and the music associated with them constitute nothing more than aesthetic play, fashion, and consumerism. From a musicological perspective, it seems improbable that the style of a musical genre could be completely unrelated to its social milieu, since studying how music and its parent culture are interconnected is an essential part of the discipline. Examining music through various types of socio-critical interpretation is also an essential aspect, just as it is for the other humanities. My research supports the supposition that goth was a reflection of British society during the 1980s, as my informants were emphatic in their belief that subculture

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<sup>98</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1-30.

in England was connected intimately with economic, social, and political forces. Like Hodkinson and Muggleton, I too engaged in extensive fieldwork in the U.K., interviewing DJs, musicians, and past participants from London to Bristol to Inverness, and I even attended the same festival that Hodkinson used as the basis for his study—the Whitby Gothic Weekend.<sup>99</sup> My conclusions are based on beliefs articulated by a more diverse or larger group of informants than those considered in the publications by Muggleton and Hodkinson.<sup>100</sup> My contacts expressed opinions that were much more in line with those of Dick Hebdige, in that they believed punk and goth to be a reflection of social problems that went far beyond simple consumerism or teen rebellion.

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<sup>99</sup> Hodkinson attended the Whitby Gothic Weekend in 1998, while I attended the festival in 2006.

<sup>100</sup> See Chapter 1 for my summary and discussion of the ideas of these authors.



CHAPTER 2  
GOTH AND ENGLISH SOCIETY DURING THE 1980S

As Hebdige has documented in *Subculture*, the style, fashion, and music of these British youth groups was inexorably linked to social and economic conditions in England. The subcultures discussed by Hebdige primarily flourished from the late 1960s through the late 1970s. Goth, however, was at its peak of popularity through the 1980s, so this chapter largely begins where Hebdige left off. Young people growing up in Britain during the 1980s faced many challenges as well. The Thatcher era was a time of considerable economic and social upheaval in Britain, and popular culture necessarily reflected a certain amount of tension and anxiety.<sup>101</sup> This chapter explores possible reasons why gothic themes and aesthetics appealed to some British youths during the 1980s, and why the goth subculture and its music were both subversive and an expression of British national identity.

Before discussing how the music of the goth subculture demonstrated a distinctly English sensibility, however, it is worth considering the ways in which this movement reflected the culture of the 1980s in general. In his book *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America*, Philip Jenkins describes the Reagan era as characterized by an elegiac fading of idealism and an absence of any real cultural creativity.<sup>102</sup> The author was, of course, referring to the United States when he made those statements, but President Reagan and Margaret Thatcher shared a similar ideology, and most of Jenkins's observations could equally be applied to Great Britain, since the two leaders achieved the same economic and social objectives, using similar rhetoric and political strategies.<sup>103</sup> The pessimistic nature of goth's artistic expression (as well as punk and heavy metal) and its inventive approach to fashion and songwriting were a symptom of the prevailing attitudes chronicled by Jenkins; if society is no longer interested in a

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<sup>101</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*. 62-70.

<sup>102</sup> Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>103</sup> See Nicholas Wapshott, *Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher: A Political Marriage* (New York: Sentinel, 2007).

creative approach to solving social problems, the gap will be filled by the artistic expression of subcultures.

Another characteristic that defined the 1980s was, according to Jenkins, a tendency for political leaders and the public to discuss social issues with a rigid, uncompromising, black and white, “us” vs. “them” mentality. Jenkins felt that Reagan and Thatcher set the tone for all discourse in their respective countries by characterizing not only the Cold War as a struggle between good and evil, but social problems like drug abuse, crime, and poverty, as well.<sup>104</sup> Subcultures like goth could be seen as a backlash, or counterpoint, to this type of thinking by so self-consciously casting themselves in the role of an extreme Other with their exaggerated make-up and discordant music. The gothic themes in the music and image of the subculture (with frequent references to the supernatural) are perhaps understandable, since political leaders were continuously describing social problems in equally fantastical, metaphysical terms.

If the bleakness of goth music could be potentially criticized for not presenting a mature vision of reality, it should be recognized that young people during the 1980s were constantly assailed by apocalyptic imagery and discourse from films such as *The Day After*, to the sermons of Evangelical pastors (who were a primary target of the goth group Christian Death), to the rhetoric of politicians. In 1981, a survey conducted by NBC and the Associated Press found that 75 percent of adults polled expected a nuclear war.<sup>105</sup> Jenkins explains at length in *Decade of Nightmares* that the fantastical nature of depictions of nuclear war in popular culture perhaps were not as far-fetched as some might believe, since, according to Russian defectors, the Soviet government initially believed NATO’s Able/Archer exercises were a real attack against Warsaw Pact nations and came perilously close to launching a preemptive nuclear strike.<sup>106</sup> In light of the real dangers that existed, the anxiety and fear expressed in the creative work of subcultures is wholly understandable and represents much more than just postmodern aesthetic play. Heavy metal artists such as Black Sabbath, Ozzy Osbourne, and Megadeth composed

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<sup>104</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 10.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 221-23.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

songs about nuclear war more frequently than goth bands (“Black Planet” by The Sisters of Mercy is the best known goth song to deal directly with nuclear holocaust), but the anxiety expressed in their music clearly reflects the pervasive mood of the 1980s. I frequently asked former goths, or goths in their thirties, if Cold War anxieties were a factor in determining their choice of music and dress, and most answered affirmatively. One of my interviewees, Simon, from Newcastle, stated, “I grew up not far from a military base rumored to house American nuclear warheads. If we were walking to school and looked up and saw a single missile we knew it was a test, but if we saw more than one we knew we had about six minutes to live. I found the situation very terrifying and I suppose that the music of goth bands helped me deal with it, I knew I was not the only one feeling uneasy.” William Graebner, in an article titled “The Erotic and Destructive in 1980s Rock Music,” states that songs like “99 Red Balloons” by the German pop singer Nena managed to “package Armageddon and good times” and were using fun as an antidote to being dominated by fear.<sup>107</sup> Goth could also be considered part of this trend towards using pleasure itself as a counter-cultural signifier. Mick Mercer states that “I’d rather be playing when the bomb drops” was a common expression used by goth bands at that time.<sup>108</sup>

The anxiety expressed in goth music was also, plausibly, a reflection of the sensational and dramatic use of media-covered tragedies of all sorts, and there was a feeling among some musicians that British audiences were not as desensitized to violence and trauma as Americans were. As Dave from the band Dominion related, “26 people get killed in McDonalds wouldn’t shock in America the way it would in England.”<sup>109</sup> For goth musicians, sensitivity to the collective moods and feelings in British society (as propagated by the media) was one of their primary criteria for determining authenticity.

There is one final social trend from the 1980s mentioned by Jenkins that could explain why gothic symbols and values were adopted by British punk bands. Goth artists rarely sang about supernatural or fantastical subjects; rather they usually dwelt on topics

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<sup>107</sup> William Graebner, “The Erotic and the Destructive in 1980s Rock Music,” [http://www.javascript:history.oo\(-1\)](http://www.javascript:history.oo(-1)) (1988), accessed 4 June 2006.

<sup>108</sup> Mick Mercer *Gothic History*, Vol. 1, 39.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

covering cruelty from everyday life, anxiety, neurosis, seduction, failed relationships, and various types of social commentary. It is probably not coincidental that bands frequently sang about insanity and adopted an exaggerated angst-stricken image (appropriated from films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) at a time when views on the mentally ill were rapidly changing. Jenkins explains, “Radical sociologists saw mental illness as a label arising from unjust power relations rather than any objective condition. From this perspective, mentally ill patients were dissidents rather than victims of pernicious illness, and hospitals in practice differed little from Soviet-bloc institutions that similarly tried to impose official ideologies on their particular deviants.”<sup>110</sup> With attitudes such as these in circulation, musical and visual depictions of insanity could easily be interpreted as counter-culture symbols.

### Goth and Englishness

In his informal musings on British popular culture, Michael Bracewell observes that “from the eighteenth century onwards, mysticism in England can be seen to flourish at times of sudden scientific advancement” (during the Thatcher era however, it was more a case of sweeping economic changes being touted as “progress”).<sup>111</sup> He goes on to say that throughout English history there has been a tendency to link mysticism to fashionability, such as the cult of orientalism during the Victorian era, and that mysticism occasionally “lends itself to popular protest.”<sup>112</sup> The author cites the album covers of Led Zeppelin and the songs of Marc Bolan as contemporary manifestations of these impulses, and the gothic aesthetic values that were adopted by British punk bands could also be seen as a part of this. Tony Pettite, bassist for the band Fields of the Nephilim, stated in an interview that the band’s interest in the occult and mythology was “something of an English tradition.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 45-46.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Bracewell, *England is Mine: Pop Life in Albion from Wilde to Goldie* (London: Flamingo, 1998), 30-31.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

One band associated with the goth scene, All About Eve, even managed to make the traditional British preoccupation with pastoralism and arcadia a part of their style, with melodies that resembled English folksongs and the extensive use of acoustic rather than electric timbres. This touch of English nationalism was not lost on its audience. For example, a reviewer on Amazon.com/uk wrote of the reissue of the group's albums, "This is storytelling in the finest tradition of English goth music. All About Eve no longer sounds quite as dated as it might have done not so long ago; so for those that loved them the first time around, give them another try and don't ever lose that innocence."<sup>114</sup>

Michael Bracewell identifies "the need within the psyche of Englishness to look back to an idealized past," an attitude that continues to influence rock musicians to the present day.<sup>115</sup> This interest in folk art, the occult mythology, and other esoterica actually was part of a trend that began during the counter-culture of the 1960s and continued during the 1980s, manifesting itself in everything from Star Wars to Nancy Reagan's reliance on astrology.<sup>116</sup> Even though the interest that English rock musicians showed in gothic aesthetics and symbols, and for some artists a fascination with myths and folk music, may be a symptom of British nostalgia, it is how goth artists expressed life in contemporary England that really mattered to most fans.

Goth could in many respects be seen as an offshoot or sub-type of punk rock, and for David Muggleton, Laurence Grossberg, Simon Frith, and other critics of Dick Hebdige, punk's reflection of the poor economic conditions in England was pure hyperbole. For such writers, popular music's position as a commodity neutralizes its subversive potential. But Hebdige was hardly the only scholar to believe that popular music can serve as a reflection of society's concerns. Robert Walser, for example, believes that in America during the 1980s heavy metal's pessimism and aggression appealed to young people because their future prospects were so bleak economically.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Tony Pettitt, personal interview, 28 October 2006.

<sup>114</sup> <http://www.Amazon.com/uk>, accessed 12 March 2004.

<sup>115</sup> Bracewell, *England Is Mine*, 5.

<sup>116</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 36.

<sup>117</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 75-78.

In her article, “Youth, Culture, and Age,” Jo Croft endorses Hebdige’s analysis and conclusions and affirms that subcultures like punk and goth do present a challenge to traditional British values and “confound mainstream expectations about people’s positions in the social structure.”<sup>118</sup>

Many non-academic writers also feel that the expression of punk and goth artists is linked to the depressed economic and social conditions faced by the lower classes. Michael Bracewell, in speaking of British subcultures, asks, “Where and what was this bright new Britain that youth were being prepared to inherit?” and states that young people did not want to be told they had it so good, because they never did.<sup>119</sup> Music journalists often expressed that they were not surprised that popular music was composed the way it was under the circumstances. For example, in a review of Nick Cave’s album *From Her to Eternity* (a recording much loved in the goth community), Don Watson declares, “Nick captured the mood of modern Britain with an accurate perception of the desperate depressing worthiness. He encapsulated the masochism of a nation that seems to be yielding any notion of individual power to a higher authority.”<sup>120</sup> Clearly the review saw this music as a reaction against Thatcher’s conservatism.

Non-academic writers within the goth community consistently express the opinion that goth was a reaction to British social circumstances. Dave Thompson, for example, feels that the mood of albums like *Seventeen Seconds* by The Cure is reflective of British attitudes during the 1980s where “every new pronouncement [from Thatcher’s government] took on the portents of the darkest repression and fear.”<sup>121</sup> Mick Mercer strongly asserts, “Punk was a statement—and one couched in righteous [sic] indignation about what a shit life we had here! For writers like Simon Frith not to appreciate this is bizarre. Punk and goth were not media events. They were covered with the utmost suspicion. Most albums were made on shoestring budgets and sold through independent

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<sup>118</sup> Jo Croft, “Youth, Culture, and Age,” in *British Cultural Identities*, ed. Mike Storry and Peter Childs (London: Routledge, 1997), 172.

<sup>119</sup> Bracewell, *England Is Mine*, 67.

<sup>120</sup> Don Watson, “If This Is Heaven I’m Bailing Out,” *New Musical Express*, May 1984, 28.

<sup>121</sup> Dave Thompson, *The Dark Reign of Gothic Rock* (London: Helter Skelter, 2002), 70.

distributors such as Rough Trade.”<sup>122</sup> Mercer explained that the goth scene was dominated by the lower classes but others joined later as the style grew. Going to gigs and clubs and following their favorite bands around (and sleeping rough as a result) is what made these working-class kids happy.<sup>123</sup>

Individuals from the goth movement involved in the music industry predictably felt that the music they created expressed something more than teen rebellion. For example, Andy Kendle, a graphic artist by profession, who has been playing bass in goth bands since the mid 1980s, echoes Mercer’s sentiments, “Goth definitely was a working class culture when it started but people from other groups began to dress up and support bands when the music became better known.”<sup>124</sup> A DJ known as “Bats,” who has been involved in the scene since 1986, affirms, “unemployment was horrific, strikes and riots were going on all the time, debris was all over the streets. Many of the colleges I wanted to attend closed their doors, the government made higher education unaffordable to most people, things seemed very uncertain.”<sup>125</sup> Sean, one of the longest serving employees of Rough Trade states, “Many of the strikes were extremely violent, city workers went on strike and there was garbage all over the streets. Police brutality was common. There were a lot of racial tensions. We were in a war [the Falkland Islands conflict] and the IRA were bombing a lot of pubs, everything was really shitty around that time. Of course bands were in touch with all that.”<sup>126</sup> Phil, from the band Play Dead, reports that he feels goth served an important role during the 1980s, “If we’re talking about punk attitudes they’re more relevant now, there’s twice as many on the dole. The social scene that spurred punk is still alive, in fact it’s worse than it was back then.”<sup>127</sup> Nik Fiend, vocalist and principal songwriter for the iconic group Alien Sex Fiend, also considers his decision to go into music a transgression against class structures: “I am from a working class

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<sup>122</sup> Mick Mercer, Personal e-mail, November 1, 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Andy Kendle, personal interview September 30, 2006.

<sup>125</sup> Bats, personal interview October 19, 2006.

<sup>126</sup> Sean, personal interview September 21 2006.

<sup>127</sup> Mercer, *Gothic History*, 127.

background. My father was an older man and he was from a time when life was very tough in Hackney in London, basically it was a slum area. Somehow I managed to get into art and music, although that was rare, people just didn't do that in the 80s."<sup>128</sup>

Such statements bolster Hebdige's position that the realities of working class life are bound to find some echo in the signifying practices of the various subcultures, and that punk (and goth) is a response and a dramatization of poor socio-economic conditions.<sup>129</sup> There is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that the situation artists were reacting to was not subject to hyperbole in their music.

In his article on British class and politics, Frank McDonough asserts that "'Hurricane Thatcher" has seemingly blown class off the face of British society. But proving the death of class consciousness is premature. A recent wide-ranging survey of public opinion found 90 percent of people still place themselves in a particular class; 73 percent agreed that class was still an integral part of British society, and 52 percent felt that there were still sharp class divisions.<sup>130</sup> The author explains that ingrained class prejudices are, and were, still alive, and that it is worth asking, "Can it be a mere coincidence that British people reserve their most negative comments for accents associated with areas containing large groups of working class people?"<sup>131</sup> Like their punk forbears, goth groups often sing with a pronounced lower class accent. Some of the statistics cited by McDonough are also very telling of what social conditions were like during the 1980s. Membership in trade unions had dropped from thirteen million to eight million largely as a result of Thatcher's reforms, which resulted in the decimation of many docks, and centers for steel production and mining. Since 1979 unemployment has been as high as 3.5 million, triple the levels before the 1980s. As Robert Walser notes in his study of heavy metal in America, the primary victims of these conditions were young men, whom McDonough asserts "have fallen down a black hole of despair with no job,

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<sup>128</sup> Nik Fiend, personal e-mail October 4, 2005.

<sup>129</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 113-23.

<sup>130</sup> Frank McDonough, "Class and Politics," in *British Cultural Identities*, ed. Mike Storry and Peter Childs (London: Routledge, 1997), 205.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.



no hope, little or no future.”<sup>132</sup> The author also reports that before 1979 only 6 percent of the population lived as an underclass, while since 1980 the number has jumped to 19 percent. Poor urban areas in London, Manchester, Birmingham, and Liverpool (all major centers of subculture activity) have seen many riots, with nearly 60 percent unemployment and levels of drug addiction that resembled American cities.<sup>133</sup> Music for young people could hardly be completely unaffected by these conditions. The final statistic reported by the author that is worthy of note is that even when the working classes are maintaining a livable standard they never feel middle class and believe that their working-class stature is seriously detrimental to their lives.<sup>134</sup>

The class consciousness that dominates English attitudes is part of the reason why subcultures like goth and punk are subversive and why the symbols that they used resonated so strongly in the U.K. For example, goth’s emphasis on the seductive and glamorous, while writing numerous songs about urban decay and insanity, is in line with Bracewell’s statements regarding British sensibilities: “The English Arcadian education demands the subordination of individualism to the demands of team spirit, to withdraw, question, or rebel is a sure sign of illness insanity, and immorality.”<sup>135</sup>

Youth subcultures, particularly goth with its preoccupation with melancholy (also an English tradition from Elizabethan times) and death symbolism, cast doubt upon the whole future of English society in the eyes of the mainstream to a degree that would probably not exist in other countries. Croft writes, “It is almost as if young people in this country are consciously—or unconsciously—regarded as guarantors of the nation’s soul, for whatever anxieties surface about moral or social decline, the first target of concern is British youth,” and he later adds “because of British conservatism young people are regarded as both threatening and vulnerable.”<sup>136</sup> It is probably no coincidence that those are the characteristics that goth dramatizes to the highest degree.

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>135</sup> Bracewell, *England Is Mine*, 27.

<sup>136</sup> Jo Croft, “Youth, Culture and Age,” 166.

Michael Bracewell believes that “successful articulations” of Englishness are always born from suburbia. He asserts that “the violence of English talent inculcates in the frustrations of suburbia or the blind edges of indifferent conurbations. What turns a spotty mod into a glorious pop hero is not the glamour of London but the confines of his dismal bedroom in the suburbs.”<sup>137</sup> Most of the goths and former goths that I spoke with concurred with Bracewell’s statement. They said, in many different ways, that they viewed their musical tastes and fashion as a reflection of dissatisfaction with many aspects of life but that their participation in the subculture also made them feel more alive and sensitive to their surroundings. Bracewell notes that singing about the dull conformity of suburban life has been a part of English culture since the 1960s, but what makes goth and punk unique in this tradition is that they were singing songs of discontent at a time when, according to McDonough, a boring suburban lifestyle was fashionable; because of the acceptance of Thatcherism, “everyone aspired to own a dull semi-detached house in the suburbs and go to work in a dull job.”<sup>138</sup>

Bracewell writes extensively on the relationship between suburban life in England and the popular music of the 1980s, but it is difficult to access his position on the music’s subversive potential, because many of his opinions seem contradictory. Initially he seems supportive of the music, writing, “Suburban life, particularly for teenagers, can be a vicious cocktail of boredom, compromise, and frustration deeply sympathetic to pop culture and to punk culture especially.”<sup>139</sup> But then he adds that suburbia produced punks who were devotees of a finely-honed amateurism (a great description of goth music as well), turning themselves into their own comic victims, like walking satires of their own conditions. “Suburban punks wound up running pig farms or working for the post office.”<sup>140</sup> The author clearly sees subcultural expression as an important challenge to the system (in the short term anyway), and it is for this reason that his dismissal of the music and its message is confusing.

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<sup>137</sup> Bracewell, *England Is Mine*, 25.

<sup>138</sup> McDonough, “Class and Politics,” 211.

<sup>139</sup> Bracewell, *England is Mine*, 126.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

Bracewell considers the music of The Cure to be most representative of the attitudes of suburban youths during the 1980s. After all, the author notes, the band is from Crawley, a colorless, respectable, undistinguished community in Surrey (even the name of the town clearly has onomatopoeic significance here). He describes The Cure's music as melodramatic and monolithic, where "an eerie monotony gives service to morbidity."<sup>141</sup> Describing the music in this manner, Bracewell makes it sound like a sincere expression of serious social problems. As he himself says, "English suburbia in many ways has become synonymous with the sinister and the sad—the very opposites of its founding intentions."<sup>142</sup> But, at the same time, he suggests that the music of The Cure (and his criticisms could be equally applied to any goth band) did not live up to its potential, labeling it "Swishy pop with a dash of film soundtrack, an exercise in emotional tourism with lyrics that implied being on the edge but in little danger of actually falling, hinting at drama but leading nowhere"—a suburban soundtrack if there ever was one.<sup>143</sup>

Bracewell is correct in his descriptions of the overall mood of The Cure's (and most goth) music as monotonous but also disturbing in its extreme sentimentality and depressiveness. But one need not call into question its sincerity, when so many find the sentiments expressed in the songs to be wholly valid: If one is trapped in dull social circumstances, perhaps excessive drama and sentimentality are important. Bracewell says the music led nowhere but gave no indication as to where he thought it should have led. It is not for Bracewell to decide if the music is only staged emotion because one's livelihood and position in society are not so guaranteed that one is "never in any danger of actually falling." With a little imagination one could apply Bracewell's criticisms to Chicago blues in the 1940s and 1950s, arguing that the music's extreme emotion is unwarranted, it's all about dance and show, and blacks had plenty of employment opportunities in the city. Bracewell fails to acknowledge that every era has its own challenges for living. Nik Fiend of Alien Sex Fiend relates that his decision to form a

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 115-17.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

band was solidified after he was kidnapped, doused in gasoline, and his life threatened, while he was working as a delivery lorry driver.<sup>144</sup> Other singers associated with goth music, Ian Curtis of Joy Division and Rozz Williams of Christian Death, committed suicide. Banshee's guitarist John McGeoch was committed to an asylum. In my interviews with informants in the U.K., fear of the future, unemployment, abuse by peers, illness, and abandonment by family members, were cited as common motivations for joining the goth movement.

In internet chat rooms, user suggestion lists on Amazon.com, and album reviews, fans of goth music invariably point to the 1982 album *Pornography* by The Cure as one of the genre's greatest achievements. I have never attended a goth festival or goth night in either the U.S. or the U.K. where one or more songs from this album were not played. Many fans that I spoke to stated that the album was favored by goth DJs during the 1980s, as well, so those who love this music attach more importance to it than Bracewell does. One cannot help but wonder if Bracewell failed to see the gothic values at play in the music of *Pornography* and did not appreciate the perspectives the genre presents in social critique. Personal observation suggests that the track from *Pornography* that resonated the strongest with goth fans was "100 Years." The song is about the same attitudes, feelings, and states of mind described by Bracewell, but these are articulated with a greater sense of urgency and depth than Bracewell feels is warranted. The lyric persona is an unidentified narrator who is sensitive to the feelings and happenings going on around him, and who speaks of individual and public flaws and tragedies in a fragmented and fast-paced manner.<sup>145</sup> The lyrics present a kaleidoscope of disturbing pictures. The fragmented nature of the imagery helps relay a gothic sense of disintegration that sharpens the impact of each individual image. What remains constant is the tension created by the contrasts between the public and private events depicted—the poem, the sensitive observer/narrator, and his survivorship all cover hallmarks of gothic literature and film.

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<sup>144</sup> Mercer, *Gothic History*, 15.

<sup>145</sup> For the lyrics see the liner notes that accompany the CD. The Cure, *Pornography*, (1982) Elektra/Asylum, 6078.

The first verse depicts the emptiness of daily work routines and the futility of power (It doesn't matter if we all die.), while the second describes the predictable nature of human interaction and how most relationships are unfulfilling with phrases such as "Something small falls out of your mouth and we laugh." Verse 3 captures the cold intensity and never ending conflict depicted in the media. The two final verses are filled with descriptions of personal anguish, feelings of desperation, and the sterility of society ("just a piece of new meat in a clean room"). In spite of the fact that we know nothing about the characters and the nature of their experiences, we sense that they could easily be anyone of us, so we relate. Robert Smith, the group's principal songwriter and lyricist, takes care to maintain a compassionate tone throughout the narrative. He avoids excessive rhyming, colloquial diction, or a creative play of rhythm that might distract from the gravity and directness of his statements. One of the most noteworthy features of his writing is how he achieves a strong emotional response with a use of language that is very dry, just like the society he describes. Smith's approach to lyric writing is consistent with punk and goth values that define authenticity by how well one can create something profound with banal materials.

Bracewell characterizes "suburban" music, like that of The Cure, as refined amateurism,<sup>146</sup> and "100 Years" (and most goth music) reflects this. Every element of the music is designed to create a strong emotional impact on the listener, but nothing about the music is virtuosic except for the vividness of the way the mood is depicted. Like most gothic arts, it is a study in ambience and the creation of a sustained atmosphere of foreboding. The piece begins with a mechanical rhythmic ostinato on a drum machine, which as a result of its mechanical static monotony sounds more artificial and lifeless than a human drummer. The ostinato never varies and acts as an electronic heartbeat hanging over every note as a mortality symbol, enticing and mesmeric.

The timbre of the guitars is lush, open, and ringing, probably one of the semi-hollow model instruments Robert Smith was known to play. As could be expected, the guitar's signal is heavily processed with a tomb-like reverberation and a modulation chorus effect that give the tones a surreal, otherworldly shimmering quality. But the ethereal tone of the guitar is overdriven rather than fully distorted, allowing the arpeggios

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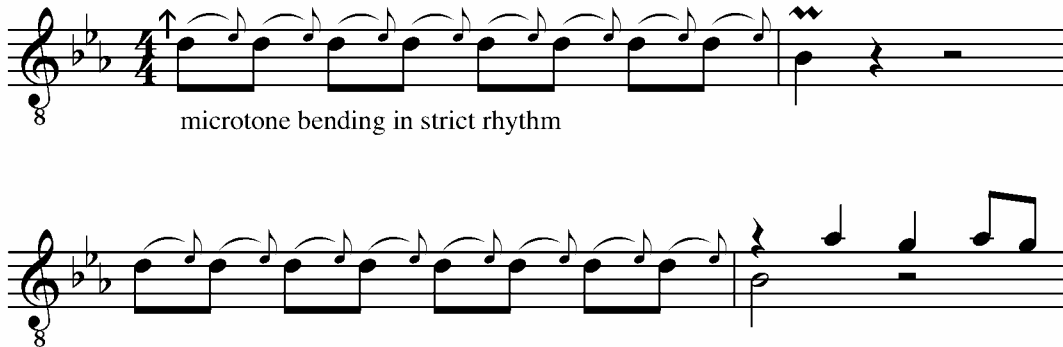
<sup>146</sup> Bracewell, *England is Mine*, 126.

that accompany the verses to retain their transparency while still imparting an edgy, metallic articulation to the tones. The arpeggiated chords on the guitar unfold sporadically, imparting a sense of disintegration to the accompaniments. The guitar harmonics are often doubled by sustained chords on the synthesizer, providing a stronger fundamental, which enhances the music and imparts a surging dynamic to the accompaniment through changes in density. Harmonically the whole song consists of the alternation between C-minor and B-major chords. A great deal of tension is generated by these two harmonies, because they are both bar-chords on the guitar. The absence of open strings gives tightness to the sound, illustrating how goth musicians are very sensitive to the nuances of their instruments. Also, the relationship between B major and C minor suggests the motion of a leading tone to a tonic but without the same sense of direction or resolution that one would get from a traditional diminished VII resolving to i. The harmonies leave the listener constantly unfulfilled and uneasy.

Fans consistently rate Robert Smith's distinctive vocal timbre and emphatic, affected singing style as the primary reason why they have such a strong emotional response to The Cure's music. Like those of his influences Jimi Hendrix and The Beatles, Smith's vocal lines are often narrow and static but are delivered with a considerable amount of expressive nuance: vibrato, exaggerated pronunciations of key words, and wide-ranging dynamics. He rarely delivers his lines in an overtly dramatic or aggressive manner, but one could not say his singing resembles whimpering or weeping; sentimental, mournful, youthful and plaintive would be more appropriate adjectives. It is also worth noting that, like punk singers, Smith's working-class accent is foregrounded in his music.

Like many other songs of the goth genre, "100 Years" deviates from the typical verse-chorus structure of most pop and rock songs. Each verse is a lengthy narration while a haunting instrumental interlude, heard first in the song's introduction takes the place of the chorus. This interlude, shown in Example 2.1, consists primarily of a repetition of blue notes on the pitch "d" achieved through the bending of strings. These bends in no way resemble those found in blues riffs for they could best be described as a grotesque wavering of the notes which clash harshly with the C-minor sonority of the ostinato.

Guitar with heavy reverb, chorus, and overdrive



Example 2.1: The Cure, “100 Years”

Smith has cited the poetry of Emily Dickinson as one of his primary influences in radio interviews, and the intense physicality of this musical interlude is similar to the way the forceful phases of Dickinson’s poems can cause a physical sensation in the body of the reader.<sup>147</sup> The riff terminates with a melancholic alternation of major and minor sixths, and it moves to a higher register on the guitar after each successive verse in order to build the tension to an excruciating level. These guitar lines certainly do not have the transcendent quality that Robert Walser describes as characteristic of heavy metal playing.<sup>148</sup>

Another important topic that Bracewell discusses extensively in his book is the state of gender relations during the time when the goth subculture began to emerge, which is not easy to characterize. However, the 1980s was a period when some gender stereotypes continued to be dissolved while other sexual prejudices remained firmly entrenched; the goth subculture reflects this dichotomy in its signification practices.

Michael Bracewell describes the male experience in Britain during the 1970s-80s as “a quest for identity and sincerity” (the two characteristics that form the basis of

<sup>147</sup> Emily Dickinson, *Selected Poems*, ed. Billy Collins (New York: The Modern Library, 2004), xviii-xix.

<sup>148</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 57-107.

subcultural expression), and goes on to say that for men life was a literal and inner journey to stake out their identity and sexuality in a society where male authority and strength were celebrated as they had been prior to the 1960s.<sup>149</sup> But what might be added to Bracewell's observations was that a nostalgia for traditional conceptions of masculinity was a hallmark of conservative thinking at the time, which was reflected, for example, in the veneration of the military during the Falkland's war, the renewed interest in James Bond movies and the seemingly endless British obsession with American police films as evidence of a nostalgic fascination with masculine chic and power (such films typically reinforce conservative political values as well). This celebration of masculinity was naturally difficult for the countless numbers of men who worked in mining, shipping, and other physical, blue-collar occupations who saw their livelihoods disappear during the decade.

Bracewell believes that bisexual icons were the quintessential manifestation of male anxieties during the 1980s, and goth, with its heavy use of androgyny and the extreme emotionalism of its music, was clearly a good representation of the cultural response to which he refers.<sup>150</sup> There are a number of reasons why androgyny was still subversive (particularly in the U.K.) during the 1980s. First, as Roberta Garrett points out, "The British are famous for their prudishness and sexual reserve, a stereotype which derives less from contemporary cultural attitudes than from England's former role in the global imposition of repressive middle class norms and values."<sup>151</sup> Second, in the eyes of mainstream society, androgyny is associated with homosexuality. Robert Walser believes that gender-bending in the Los Angeles heavy metal scene was actually a sign that males were secure in their sexuality (being man enough to wear make-up), but as Phillip Jenkins notes, the gay subcultures in large urban areas such as New York and San Francisco (and London) also attracted a diverse group of people considered sexual deviants such as "transvestites, transsexuals and sado-masochists," and the connection

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<sup>149</sup> Bracewell, *England is Mine*, 91.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-106.

<sup>151</sup> Roberta Garrett, "Gender, Sex and the Family," in *British Cultural Identities*, ed. Mike Storry and Peter Childs (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 129-60.



was still strong in the eyes of most audiences.<sup>152</sup> The music of Iggy Pop, The Velvet Underground, David Bowie, and Lou Reed—the biggest influences on goth artists (in addition to Weimar Cabaret)- drew their inspiration from underground sexual subcultures, particularly in New York.

It should be noted that homosexuality was far less accepted during the 1980s than it is today despite the successful work of many gay activists during the period. It took until 1973 for gay individuals to be no longer considered mentally ill by the medical community, and as Jenkins points out, newspapers like *The Los Angeles Times* were still routinely referring to gays as “faggots” as late as 1975. Portrayals of homosexuals on TV and in films were typically as perverts, molesters, or serial killers, although some progress had been made in depicting gays as more human in the media by this time.<sup>153</sup> In this light, the juxtaposition of androgyny, and music centering on hysteria and insanity, seems more cohesive. Anti-gay hysteria was at a particularly high level during the 1980s because of the hyper-reality of the AIDS epidemic,<sup>154</sup> and attempts by Thatcher’s conservative government to prosecute gays under ancient laws of blasphemy.<sup>155</sup>

In addition to the modest gains that homosexuals had made in destroying sexual stereotypes, feminists similarly achieved mixed results. According to Phillip Jenkins, many feminist ideas from the 1960s remained in play throughout the 1970s-80s and represented perhaps the only strain of liberal thought that conservatives were unable to undermine significantly. Feminist ideologies influenced the media culture in Britain and America in three significant ways. First, depictions of masculinity as gentle and sensitive became more prominent, and Jenkins cites TV shows such as *Mash* and films like *All the President’s Men* as examples of this.<sup>156</sup> A gradual acceptance of the sensitive side of masculinity no doubt also paved the way for androgynous glam rockers like David Bowie and Marc Bolan to enjoy successful careers and subsequently become major influences

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<sup>152</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 31.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Garrett, “Gender, Sex and the Family,” 150.

<sup>155</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 17.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 20.

on early goth musicians. The sentiments of extreme melancholy, hysteria, and insanity expressed in goth songs would not have been possible without the belief (championed by feminists) that emotionalism was compatible with masculinity. Later in the 1980s more traditional notions of macho-masculinity began to be celebrated in the media; the sentimentality and gender-bending of goth artists again violated prevailing norms.

Second, authors, filmmakers, and journalists continued to depict relations between men and women as adversarial, and Jenkins offers the books *The Women's Room* and *The Stepford Wives* as examples.<sup>157</sup> It is doubtful if Siouxsie and the Banshees could have successfully appropriated femininity as a fatally seductive, subversive sign, or created a subculture that celebrated femininity through gothic aesthetics, if a measure of antagonism had not already been present in society's perceptions of gender relations. The use of the feminine as a death symbol would not have resonated with audiences if the media had not portrayed the sexes as adversaries.

Third, the preoccupation with child abuse, painful childhood memories, and the sexual abuse of women found in the music of Siouxsie and the Banshees and other goth bands could also be seen as a product of the social milieu from the late 1970s to early 1980s, or, at the very least, the social conditions made such expression more acceptable. Jenkins explains that "feminist writing stressed the linkage between masculine ideologies and sexual exploitation, rape and child abuse."<sup>158</sup> In his view, such writings led directly or indirectly into hysterical child protection campaigns and to media characterizations of perpetrators as demonic or evil monsters rather than human criminals.<sup>159</sup>

Perhaps the goth album that most strongly reflects this new concern with the protection of women and children is the album *Tinderbox* by Siouxsie and the Banshees. The band and their music will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, but for the purposes of the present discussion, it should be noted that the group's singer Susan Ballion was, by her own account, sexually molested by a family friend at the age of

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares*, 12-13.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 20-21.

nine.<sup>160</sup> Ballion has never, to my knowledge, directly stated that *Tinderbox* was inspired by her personal experiences, but the recording is a “concept” album or song cycle about the trauma of being sexually molested, with each song detailing a different aspect of the experience: “Candyman” is a scathing condemnation of sexual predators; “This Unrest” expresses feelings of festering anger; “Cannons” offers a moment of calm repose; “Cities in Dust” and “Party’s Fall” represent fantasies of vengeance and justice; “The Sweetest Chill” demonstrates the effect that a sexual violation can have on future relationships; while “Umbrella” and “92 degrees” are expressions of self-examination and reflection accompanied by jarring rhythms that were perhaps intended to symbolize phallic energy as an ominous threatening presence. Most of the songs on *Tinderbox* rely heavily on gothic aesthetics to convey the intensity of the emotions; the language was consistent with the values of the 1980s. The album’s opening track “Candyman” provides an example for analysis.

“Candyman” was one of two singles from *Tinderbox*. It is difficult to imagine how graphic songs about child molestation could have been released in this format a decade earlier. Even in a media atmosphere saturated with messages calling for the increased protection of women and children, reviewers for *Melody Maker* labeled the songs “perhaps a bit too intense for the airwaves” but praised the music for its startling twists. The songs were also referred to as “hypnotic pop.”<sup>161</sup> The writers obviously recognized that Siouxsie and the Banshees’ music was atypical but did not recognize the gothic values present in *Tinderbox*. The lyrics of “Candyman” are written in the style of a horrific fairy tale warning children about the enticements of the candyman. Consistent with the media environment of the 1980s, the molester is portrayed as demonic, a mysterious monster, and like the majority of songs in the goth genre, the destructive potential of seduction is one of the song’s primary themes.

The musical structure of “Candyman,” essentially constitutes a verse-chorus structure with an introduction and interludes.<sup>162</sup> The words to the song throw into relief

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<sup>160</sup> Paytress, *Siouxie and the Banshees*, 20.

<sup>161</sup> Carol Clerk, “Review of Candyman,” *Melody Maker*, (March 1986), 31. Also David Quantick, “Cities in Dust Review,” *Melody Maker* (June 1985), 27.

<sup>162</sup> For the lyrics see the album’s liner notes. Siouxsie and the Banshees, *Tinderbox*, (1986) Geffen, 24092.

the contrast between childhood innocence and the vile impulses of a male perpetrator with his destructive phallic energies. Likewise, the persona's tone and Ballion's manner of singing often contain dramatic contrasts in tonality, dynamics, and density between sections atypical for popular music but very much in line with gothic values; the contrasts are employed to heighten a single, strong affect and not to express different points of view or emotions. In verses 1 and 2 the tone of the lyrics and Ballion's singing imitates the suave, lustful enticements of the candyman, while the third verse is a frantic warning. The chorus is a cry of terror and pain, while the interludes express pity for the molester in a mocking, humiliating way. Mocking power is an important aim of gothic arts and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

The lyrics rely heavily on metaphors designed to disgust by juxtaposing images of candy with body fluids (sickly sweet his poison seeks). In order to foreground the revolting adjectives, all other descriptive language in the poem is kept to a minimum. The rawness of the lyrics stands in stark contrast to the refinement of the music and the virtuoso production and engineering of the recording. The lyrics also contain vile quotations from the candyman to increase the listener's sense of disgust. James Hannaham in his study of gothic music, and Richard Davenport-Hines's writings on the history of gothic art both state that Susan Ballion ironically adopted the molester as the lyric persona of this song, but that is clearly not the case since the song is sung from the perspective of a narrator, and it is by no means the source of the music's gothic qualities, as they seem to suggest.<sup>163</sup> The numerous rhymes draw attention to the revolting qualities of the candyman ("with a jaundiced wink, see his cunning slink"), and when the rhymes are combined with the constant duple rhythms, the language is stylized to resemble that of a children's storybook.

No aspect of the timbre or production of "Candyman" or any other song on *Tinderbox* that sounds live or natural. The balance between the instruments and their transparency in the mix is startlingly unnatural even by the recording and engineering standards of 2007. In other words, the album's production is self-consciously cutting edge in the extreme, and the artificiality of the sound plays a large role in the emotional

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<sup>163</sup> James Hannaham, "Bela Lugosi's Dead and I Don't Feel So Good Either: Goth and the Glorification of Suffering in Rock Music," in *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Twentieth Century Art*, ed. Christopher Grunenberg (Bolton: MIT Press, 1997), 113. See also Davenport-Hines, *Gothic*, 364.

impact of the song. The unnatural and disturbingly perfect way the instruments were recorded and the heavy use of guitar pedals and studio effects make the music sound as saccharine and phony as the candyman. The processed, synthetic sound of the music (including the way Ballion's voice stands out prominently in the mix and the theatrical exaggerations of her mannered singing), sounds deliberately and startlingly artificial. The sense of hollowness and lifelessness conveyed by the timbres is made even stronger by the music's sparse polyphony, which makes the song's density seem skeletal rather than thick. The neurotically busy contrapuntal lines of the guitar and bass in "Candyman" give the song an unrelenting urgency and disturbing, nervousness. When the guitarist does use his instrument to create harmonies during the introduction, chorus, and interludes, they invariably lack the third, which, given the guitar's percussive timbre, adds to the sense of emptiness in the music, as shown in Example 2.2 a. The arpeggiated fifths (with no third) during the interludes sound particularly delicate and fragile, which complements the content of the lyrics at that moment in the song that speaks of the candyman's own vulnerabilities.<sup>164</sup>

The absence of harmonic richness and density foregrounds the lyrics and the melodic lines. The most memorable melody in the song is played by the guitar throughout the verses, and is presented in Example 2.2 b. Its tunefulness, simplicity, arpeggiated triadic character is clearly intended to mimic a music box, wind-up doll, or other toy that plays music. Its use as a haunting leitmotiv for lingering trauma, the specter of the past or lost innocence, is generic but effective. The melody is in B-flat major, an unusual key for the guitar, and it is fretted in such a way as to avoid the notes ringing over one another. Instead, the line slinks and slithers across the neck of the instrument to caricature the candyman. During the interludes, the bass line similarly creeps and crawls across the fret board with exaggerated glissandos between the notes giving the song a revolting, palpable physicalness (Example 2.2 c).

The second melodic phrase that Ballion sings during each verse is borrowed from the music box guitar line, a feature that suggests an inability to escape the past. Vocally, the most impressive parts of the song are the interludes, where Ballion's tone rapidly

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<sup>164</sup> Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Imagination: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982), 40.

fluctuates between pity, anger, or sorrow through her vocal inflections and the way she repeats the name “candyman” sternly, then with a sob. The singer delivers her lines with drama and authority but also with a certain emotional detachment, remaining dignified in the face of an immensely painful experience, as if attempting to appear resilient and triumphant over the predator. Ballion was probably aware that audiences would assume



Example 2.2 Siouxsie and the Banshees, “Candyman” a. missing thirds



b. music box melody



c. bridge bass line



guitar accompaniment to the bass line.

The album had auto-biographical connotations considering her history as a victim of molestation, since she never tried to hide her experience.<sup>165</sup> The rapid tempo of the song contributes to the sense of danger and urgency as do the syncopations on the cymbals, which build intensity before the cry of terror that is the chorus. What is perhaps

<sup>165</sup> This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

most unsettling about the drum parts is the way the steady eighth-note pulse pounds the listener like a hammer, which intensifies the terror and violence of the lyrics.

Many of the themes that preoccupied the media during the 1980s lend themselves to expression through gothic aesthetics, and the terrors of childhood are no exception. An obsession with repressed feelings, past traumas haunting the present, the desire to expose the evil hidden beneath the surface, bringing a sense of fear and dread to even the most everyday situation, and exposing the potential for horror and tragedy in the home and in daily life, have been motives in gothic writings and films since the 1950s,<sup>166</sup> and *Tinderbox* belongs to that tradition.

The dramatic contrasts between sections in the song, particularly the abrupt changes in pitch center, create intensity worthy of the gothic label. Linda Bayer-Berenbaum points out that rape and the destructive potential of sexual excess are common gothic motives because they allow for dramatic contrasts between innocence, helplessness, and evil. Yet, in “Candyman” and the other songs on *Tinderbox*, Ballion sings with emotional detachment and even a surprising amount of ambivalence because she wants to express strength and resilience. Perhaps the most important gothic characteristic in “Candyman” is the reduction of fear and terror into a work of pop culture that relies on studio artifice and timbre for its impact. Siouxsie and the Banshees were able to reduce the horror of child abuse into aestheticism, which neutralizes the power of aggressive phallic energy. Considering the media-saturated atmosphere of the 1980s, it seems natural that Siouxsie and the Banshees would express the strong emotions found on *Tinderbox* in a way that relied on a visceral sense of color and artifice. That the group inserted such a difficult and horrific topic into a mass market single is consistent with the gothic love of bringing a sense of fear and dread to everyday situations.

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<sup>166</sup> Bayer-Berenbaum, *Gothic Imagination*, 4.

## Gothicism as Subversive Strategy

A final topic that needs to be explored in this chapter concerning cultural context deals with the question of why British artists and fans would find gothic aesthetics and the imagery from old horror films so appealing during the 1980s. There is reason to think that English beliefs about gothic films were a major reason why artists used gothic aesthetics as a way to expand, sharpen, and continue punk's aesthetic terrorism. First, British censors have traditionally been extremely hostile toward horror films, and *Nosferatu*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Dracula*, and the films of Alfred Hitchcock (all major stylistic influences or goth) were either banned outright or heavily edited.<sup>167</sup> Second, British society has always tended to consider those with an interest in gothic or horror films to be foolish.<sup>168</sup> Embracing gothic aesthetics was therefore a way for punks to confront and anticipate prejudice and intensify their attack on mainstream British values since the gothic style was considered an assault on the rationality of the English sensibility.

British culture subjects young people to an inordinate amount of scrutiny and often treats them with great suspicion. The appropriation of gothic values in fashion and music was considered subversive because of this prejudice, intensifying already existing fears. Since horror films are typically considered an especially dangerous type of escapism that disrupts family structures and renders young people unfit for real life,<sup>169</sup> openly displaying gothic symbols would have appeared to confirm the worst fears of mainstream society. It is perhaps not surprising that young women were drawn to the goth subculture, since it has been customary in Britain for horror films to be considered a particularly bad influence on girls.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Mark Kermode, "The British Censors and Horror Cinema," in *British Horror Cinema*, ed. Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 11.

<sup>168</sup> Peter Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester: University Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>169</sup> Julian Petley, "A Crude Sort of Entertainment in a Crude Sort of Audience: The British Critics and Horror Cinema," in *British Horror Cinema*, ed. Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 26.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.



English critics had a special hatred for horror films where the director was seen as inserting too much of his own personal expression in the films, providing little emotional distance between himself and his work.<sup>171</sup> This is perhaps a reason why the extreme emotionalism, sentimentality, and intimacy of goth music was received poorly by mainstream society but celebrated by goths. However, in some respects musicians associated with the goth subculture held beliefs about horror films that were in line with the mainstream. For example, British critics and audiences enjoyed horror films when they were more silly than scary.<sup>172</sup> The “Batcave” groups like Alien Sex Fiend, Specimen, and others played upon the English interest in the camp horror produced by the Hammer studios. Even Susan Ballion cites the work of Vincent Price as a stylistic influence, expressing an admiration for the way his exaggerated, mannered acting style was both silly and effective at the same time.<sup>173</sup> Also, as Petley points out, British audiences and critics had begun to express a grudging admiration for the mystical, atmospheric quality of early expressionist horror films, while still berating recent contributions to the horror genre.<sup>174</sup> The interest shown by punk musicians in these early horror films could be considered an offshoot of this critical re-evaluation, since, as Dick Hebdige makes clear, subcultures always have some of the same values as mainstream culture, otherwise they could not be subversive.

British authors such as Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker used the gothic genre to engage in critiques of English society in a language that relied heavily on artifice and surface effects, and goth artists considered themselves a part of this tradition.<sup>175</sup> Richard Davenport Hines feels that the gothic spirit in the arts is a response to a world where individuals are always at risk and nothing is protected.<sup>176</sup> In an atmosphere of media

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>172</sup> Kermode, “The British Censors,” 3.

<sup>173</sup> Thompson, *Dark Reign*, 43.

<sup>174</sup> Petley, “A Crude Sort of Entertainment,” 34.

<sup>175</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 107. Also see the liner notes to the goth compilation album *A Life Less Lived*, Rhino, R2 73374.

<sup>176</sup> Davenport-Hines, *Gothic*, 10.

hysteria, Cold War threats, conflicts in Northern Ireland, and sweeping economic changes that devastated large portions of the working population, the appropriation of gothic values by English musicians and their fans was an understandable artistic response.

If the goth subculture and the music associated with it were a distinctly British phenomenon, then it seems unusual that British goths would name the American group Christian Death as one of the most exemplary bands of the genre, particularly since the group specialized in attacking American fundamentalist views of Christianity and the influence of evangelicals on politics. The most plausible explanation is that Christian Death's music was rooted in the punk style and was often very atmospheric. The group's image was both androgynous and sinister, and perhaps most importantly, because evangelical Christianity, right-wing politics, and the veneration of capitalism and traditional gender roles are typically interconnected.

### Conclusion

The 1980s was a decade of considerable social and economic change in the U.K. Based on my interviews with current and former members of the goth subculture who grew up during this time, and bands who were active during the decade, goth was a cultural response to the hardships and anxieties of that era. Goth music exhibited a preoccupation with Cold War nuclear fears, racial tensions, and social problems (such as domestic abuse and child abuse) that received considerable media attention. Like punk, goth sprang from the working-class, but eventually lower and upper middle-class youths also participated.

The musicians embraced gothic aesthetic values as a way to sharpen and continue the punk movement's interest in social commentary and to provide an artistic response to problems in British society. Gothicism had subversive connotations in British culture because horror films and gothic literature have traditionally been viewed as a malignant influence on young people leading to moral decay. This was precisely why musicians embraced gothic aesthetics. In this way, goth could also be viewed as a response to the revival of English nationalism that characterized the Thatcher era.

### CHAPTER 3

#### GOTH APPROPRIATIONS OF GLAM ROCK AND PUNK

Contemporary, retrospective descriptions of goth music by Baddeley, Kilpatrick, and many anonymous fans on websites characterize the genre as a mixture of elements from punk rock and 1970s glam rock but seldom discuss exactly what goth appropriated from these styles or why.<sup>177</sup> Often authors will explain why they feel goth is indebted to either punk or glam, but not both. Mick Mercer, for example, often stresses goth's punk roots but says little about the influence of David Bowie and T-Rex, while James Hannaham downplays the genre's punk elements in his writing.<sup>178</sup> How goth artists appropriated elements from both styles, skillfully balancing the beautiful with the harsh and ugly—both musically and visually, is one of the most interesting aspects of the genre, and in this section I will discuss goth's disparate elements and why they are so effective when combined.

During the 1980s it almost became something of a ritual for an artist associated with goth to have their work dismissed by journalists as an unoriginal imitation of glam rock as soon as they began to achieve a measure of success. Most often this was a tactic to trivialize and marginalize the sentiments the groups were trying to convey.<sup>179</sup>

Although difficult to define, “glam rock” was a genre of popular music that came into being during the 1970s. Essentially, it was a cynical, tongue-in-cheek celebration of the music industry as show business, and artists typically associated with the style were David Bowie, Marc Bolan, Roxy Music, and Alice Cooper. It relied on elaborate costumes, staging, and media hype in its image, while musically it used blues-based conventions in an ironic way, and embraced eclecticism to a greater degree than most bands did at the time.

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<sup>177</sup> Gavin Baddeley, *Goth Chic: A Connoisseur's Guide to Dark Culture*. London: Plexus, 2002). Nancy Kilpatrick, *The Goth Bible* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2004).

<sup>178</sup> James Hannaham, “Bela Lagosi's Dead and I Don't Feel So Good Either: Goth and the Glorification of Suffering in Rock Music,” in *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Twentieth Century Art*, ed. Christopher Grunenberg (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), 92-118

<sup>179</sup> The reception of goth music in the popular press is discussed in Chapter 4.

Goth artists have never denied the influence of glam on their music and image; Peter Murphy, vocalist of Bauhaus, claims that as a youth he would spend hours looking at pictures of David Bowie fascinated by his beautiful costumes and androgyny. He found Nico's collaborations with Brian Eno to be as musically fascinating as Bowie's image, asserting that the album *The End* was rock's first gothic recording—"she was Mary Shelly to everyone else's Hammer horror."<sup>180</sup> Siouxsie and the Banshees reportedly used the album *The Idiot* by Bowie's protégé Iggy Pop as their model when they first entered the recording studio.<sup>181</sup> Nik Fiend, vocalist and director of Alien Sex Fiend admits that his primary influence was Alice Cooper.<sup>182</sup>

Obviously one of the most important aspects of glam rock that goth artists appropriated was the premium placed on theatricality in performance, which was quite unlike the theatricality of heavy metal, with its laser light shows, elaborate props, and stage sets of operatic proportions. In contrast, glam artists placed importance on the ability to captivate the audience in the manner of a cabaret singer through gesture and affected mannerisms using an elaborate style of dress and exaggerated make-up as the only special effect.<sup>183</sup> Considering the emotionalism, sentimentality and ambient nature of gothic music, developing a high level of intimacy with one's audience in this manner was a vital part of the goth experience—dramatic effects had to come from the performer and not outside sources, props or stage sets.

Musically speaking, goth artists borrowed many key characteristics of the work of David Bowie, Lou Reed, Iggy Pop and Marc Bolan. All of these performers sang in an intimate manner without the quasi-operatic power and vibrato of heavy metal singers. They did not scream or recite their lines over the music but actually sang distinct melodic lines with dynamic nuances and sensitivity to the meaning of the words. Such techniques were necessary for goth artists to draw their listeners into the mood they were trying to create. David Bowie was a particular favorite with goth musicians because his lyrics

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<sup>180</sup> Dave Thompson, *The Dark Reign of Gothic Rock* (London: Helter Skelter, 2002), 51, 107.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>182</sup> Nik Fiend, Personal Interview, 27 March 2005.

<sup>183</sup> Bowie often used elaborate stage sets as well, but that was not why his performances were celebrated.

were sophisticated, often dwelling on negative feelings. He was a great storyteller able to dramatically alternate between different lyric personas in the course of a single song (“Space Oddity” for example) a device often used in goth songs such as “Candyman” by Siouxsie and the Banshees. Bowie also sang with a strong unabashed English accent that perhaps appealed to the sense of national identity shared by the artists (and fans). Vocalists in the glam rock genre were often able to generate a strong sense of empathy in their listeners. Ellen Willis in a piece on glam artists for *The New Yorker*, wrote of Lou Reed, “His voice had an unaccustomed deadpan quality, but it still conveyed that sense of cosmic sadness. It occurred to me that one reason why I liked Reed was that he didn’t invite us to share his pain he simply shared ours.”<sup>184</sup> Goth fans often expressed similar sentiments about their most-loved artists. For example, Robyn, the current proprietor of London’s Devonshire Arms goth pub and a longtime participant in the scene stated, “The deep vocals and understated way about the old goth music created a stronger bond between the artist and the audience. Metal bands, with their screamers and guitarists seemed so self-absorbed. I can’t relate to it really.”<sup>185</sup>

One of the most insightful interviews of a glam artist, from an analytical standpoint, was Joe Gore’s conversation with David Bowie in the June 1997 issue of *Guitar Player*. The vocalist/songwriter stated “Ever since I was young I see music in visual terms, I see textures and colors and smoothness in painter’s terms.” He explained how a lack of technical virtuosity was a vital element of his music asserting that “My music needs to have a sense of awkwardness, there must be vulnerability in the playing for it to be enduring.” Of particular interest was Bowie’s explanation of how traditional music theater influenced his music and image: “I want to portray emotions symbolically, play love or anger through stylistic gesture. You want to draw your audience into the emotional content of what you are doing so they create their own dialogue.”<sup>186</sup> Joe Gore characterizes the style of Bowie’s former guitarist Mick Ronson as “soulful, with few

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<sup>184</sup> Ellen Willis, “Bowie’s Limitations,” in *The Bowie Companion*, eds. Elizabeth Thomson and David Guttman (New York: DaCapo perss, 1993), 85-86.

<sup>185</sup> Robyn Stevenson, personal interview, 5 November 2006. See also the documentary *The Cure, Music in Review: Essential Music of the Eighties* (2005), DVD, Classic Rock Production Services, CRP 1906.

<sup>186</sup> Joe Gore, “Changes 2.1: New Digital Stimulation from David Bowie and Reeves Gabrels,” *Guitar Player*, June 1997, 46-7.

notes, a wide vibrato and a raunchy tone, unrefined riffs, feel over fineness but filtered through an artsy sensibility that still sounds modern.”<sup>187</sup>

All of these quotations could easily be applied to the work of goth bands as well. Bowie’s statement about conceiving music in terms of colors and textures is reflected in the way goth bands were continuously experimenting with different sonorities on the guitar, guitar effect pedals, extended techniques, contrapuntal textures and harmonies with dissonant suspensions or chord progressions atypical for blues-based music. Such devices were required in order to convincingly create the sustained foreboding atmosphere, visceral, palpable emotional strain, extreme contrasts, depth and spaciousness, and the blurring of the tragic and the comic that is necessary in a gothic approach to expression.

The work of goth artists also shares with Bowie the “awkwardness” and “vulnerability” that stems from composing with the instrumental technique of the amateur. Most goth songs are based on guitar riffs or a series of motives that are in some way asymmetrical in length, or a grotesque combination of startling dissonances and bland consonances. Goth artists often generated an overwhelming affect of despair or anxiety through the timbres they coaxed from their instruments and recording technology, with a minimal number of notes. As a result the songs do have an unrefined, gestural, sketchy quality about them. And while some guitarists associated with the goth subculture, such as Dan Ash of Bauhaus and the players in The Mission, appear to have complete technical command of their instruments, even if they choose not to employ their talents in elaborate solo playing, most guitarists in goth like Robert Smith of The Cure, Rik Agnew of Christian Death and John McKay of Siouxsie and the Banshees do strike the listener as possessing amateur abilities as a result of the lack of smoothness and flow in their execution. This “vulnerability” (as Bowie puts it) does impart a fragility and sincerity to the music, as if the strength of their feelings enabled them to pull such expressive tones from the strings in spite of their weaknesses as players.

One album that goth artists found extremely influential was *The Idiot*, a collaboration between David Bowie and Iggy Pop. Siouxsie and the Banshees found the

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

recording particularly inspiring and reportedly told the engineer and producer of their first album to use *The Idiot* as a model.<sup>188</sup> Susan Ballion enthused, “The man was a genius, and what a voice! The sound and production is so direct and uncompromised.”<sup>189</sup> Joe Ambrose, in his biography of Iggy Pop calls the album “more unprecedented than it is enjoyable” (possibly due to the wide range of styles present on the album) and describes the music as “a series of souped up dirges.”<sup>190</sup> The author does an admirable job of pointing out what makes the songs so grotesque. He notes, for example, that “Nightclubbing” is a Berlin cabaret tune sung at a slow tempo and with the accompaniment played out of sync with the melody, while “Baby” was intended as an outlandish, distorted parody of Frank Sinatra.<sup>191</sup>

For artists wishing to bring the gothic aesthetic to popular music it is perhaps not surprising that they were drawn to an album that parodies and disfigures its original influences. Also like most albums in the goth genre, the melancholic affect of the music only hits the listener with its full impact when the album is experienced in total. In other words, *The Idiot* may have served as a model for goth bands in how to sustain a mood over the course of an album but still provide contrast and variety in the songs. Ambrose also asserts that the background vocals and keyboards that David Bowie contributed to *The Idiot* “showed just how expert he was at expanding upon and watering down the grungy nature of Iggy’s hits.”<sup>192</sup> Also Barry Hoskyns in his history of glam rock reports that Bowie was envious of Iggy Pop’s authenticity because the latter was “Detroit white trash from the gutter” while the former was a “wimpy British art student.”<sup>193</sup> These points offer perhaps the most compelling reason why goth artists were inspired by *The Idiot*; they felt that the sentiments they wanted to express deserved to be cast in a musical

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<sup>188</sup> Thompson, *Dark Reign*, 26.

<sup>189</sup> Joe Ambrose, *Gimme Danger: The Story of Iggy Pop* (New York and London: Omnibus Press, 2004), 175-78.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Barney Hoskyns, *Glam!* (London: Faber, 1998), 30.

language that sounded fresh and cutting edge rather than clichéd or hackneyed, but also reflected a working-class harshness. *The Idiot* provided a model for how to create elaborate arrangements from simple crude ideas or fragments through studio effects, the juxtaposition of elements from contrasting styles and genres, and the play of timbre. Also, the decadent lifestyle that Iggy sings about on the recording is not celebrated in the accompanying music, with its grotesque contrasts, monotone singing style, static vocal lines, and a lack of energetic drive. It strikes the listener as the expression of a person faking their happiness and not doing a very good job of it. Ambrose's description of *The Idiot* as a succession of "souped up dirges," is a characterization that also describes most of the goth genre perfectly.

The work of artists associated with the goth subculture also has many important differences from glam rock both musically and visually. Dick Hebdige states that "the lyrics and lifestyles of these [glam] groups became progressively more disengaged from the mundane concerns of everyday life and adolescence."<sup>194</sup> Goth bands brought true concerns back to the foreground and dwelt on the fact that everyday life frequently contains difficult experiences.

Barney Hoskyns feels that the essential purpose of glam rock was to "give pop music back to the kids yanking it back from the Marshall stacked overlords and droopy acoustic introverts" and that the style's basic message was "if you have it flaunt it. If you don't have it, fake it and reinvent yourself."<sup>195</sup> In many respects goth bands appropriated the drama of the "Marshall stacked overlords" in order to give their "droopy, introverted" sentiments intensity and forcefulness. But goth was about more than just re-inventing oneself; the somber, gloomy nature of the subculture's image and music added another layer of social critique to glam's challenge to Britain's work ethic and gender stereotypes. A majority of informants characterized the goth style as a sign of depression rather than oppression. This statement, however does not contradict the conclusions of Hebdige and others who interpret British subcultures from the Marxist perspective, as the individuals that I interviewed expressed sentiments that were in full agreement with Hebdige. They

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<sup>194</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York and London: Routledge, 1979), 62.

<sup>195</sup> Hoskyns, *Glam!*, 6. The "Marshall stacks" that the author refers to are the large Marshall amplifiers that produce the powerful but musical distortion that is associated with heavy British rock music.



simply meant that goth music was not as overtly political or directly confrontational as punk rock.

Simon Frith, whose proclamations and characterizations concerning popular music are hit-and-miss in their accuracy, describes David Bowie as “a blank canvas on which consumers wrote their dreams, a media-made icon to whom art happened.”<sup>196</sup> Goth artists never really played the role of media star (most were never famous enough) but instead emphasized their “averageness,” and this served to make their costumes, theatrical performances and even their music’s reliance on timbre all the more ironic, fake, hollow and disturbing. And the fans themselves did not have many dreams to “write on” the artists they admired.

Musically, goth has little in common with glam rock, which used the language of blues-based rock, albeit in an ironic way. Goth groups did not parody other artists the way, for example, David Bowie parodied T-Rex with “Black Country Rock” or The Rolling Stones with “Rebel Rebel.” Their original music was about appropriately capturing the tone or mood of their lyrics (or creating lyrics that matched a specific musical gesture) in a style that had little in common with most rock music.<sup>197</sup> When they covered the work of another artist, goth bands typically remained faithful to the melodies and harmonies of the original. However, they added electric effects or turned the work into a study in coloristic effects destroying its authenticity and transforming it into a synthetic lifeless object, for example Siouxsie and the Banshees’ cover of “Dear Prudence” by The Beatles, on their album *Hyena* from 1983. Most often goth bands re-interpreted the original, intensifying any subversive or grim aspects already present in the work to a grotesque extreme.

A good example of this is the track “Telegram Sam” originally by glam rockers T-Rex, but covered by the group Bauhaus on *In the Flat Field* recorded in 1980. In its original form “Telegram Sam” is a study in the ridiculous with nonsensical lyrics describing a cast of colorful characters with humorous rhymes. The accompanying music (A pentatonic) represents R & B stripped down to its most basic elements, with a catchy,

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<sup>196</sup> Elizabeth Thomson and David Guttman, “Introduction,” in *The Bowie Companion*, eds. Elizabeth Thomson and David Guttman (New York: DaCapo Press, 1993), xxviii.

<sup>197</sup> Chapter 4 contains an analysis of several goth songs illustrating their approach to songwriting.

tuneful melody, an infectious rhythmic drive in the verses, and an absurdly sentimental chorus based on the harmonies VII and minor i. The song became a popular single in 1972, but many critics picked up on the fact that underneath the superficial comic and cheerful affect that the track projects, it was a sad self parody, an “artistic collapse” in the words of the *New Musical Express* reviewer.<sup>198</sup> “Telegram Sam” is a cynical exercise in trash culture with Marc Bolan perhaps testing boundaries to determine just how nonsensically he could compose and still be accepted by fans and the industry.

In the version recorded by Bauhaus, the group demonstrated that they recognized the cynical nature of the song and carried this quality to disturbing extremes. The group’s interpretation also plays upon Marc Bolan’s tragic death in an automobile accident only three years earlier by using the ephemerality and deliberate trashiness of his music as a death symbol. Based on the success of the song, most audiences seem to have uncritically accepted “Telegram Sam” as an unpretentious, lighthearted and enjoyable piece of rock music, or perhaps even a guilty pleasure. The Bauhaus interpretation assaults such beliefs about the song, defacing every aspect of the music in typical gothic fashion, leaving the listener no sense of sanctuary. The band was clearly demonstrating that they had the artistic prowess to transform even the most innocent and lighthearted composition- a piece of humorous nonsense- into an experience of overwhelming anxiety.

On the Bauhaus cover, the all important groove and “hook” of the original song is completely destroyed as vocalist Peter Murphy (whose thin, pale, blond appearance and vocal timbre drew constant comparisons to David Bowie) delivers his lines in erratic free time and startlingly off key. The band punctuates his phases with the guitar riff from the original, played with power chords a major 6<sup>th</sup> lower and with a neurotically brisk tempo that strike the listener with the sensation of frantic anxiety. The distortion and fundamental sound of the guitar is tightly focused rather than open and resonant. This gives the guitar riffs, even in their low register a disturbing, physical slashing quality reminiscent of the violin parts in the soundtrack to the famous shower scene in *Psycho*.

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<sup>198</sup> Charles Shaar Murray, “Review of T. Rex: The Slider,” *New Musical Express*, 22 July 1972, 8. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Glam*, Vol. 1, Issue 15, 2004, 54.

Murphy's declamatory singing on "Telegram Sam" is just as disturbing. The lyrics describe a series of colorful people, and the vocalist seems to interpret this aspect of the song as a metaphor for schizophrenia. The phases are sung with an unpredictable stress given to random syllables. Murphy sings forcefully, then leisurely, sometimes shrieking, or with clenched-teeth anger, or sometimes in the manner of a silly child. During the chorus, in contrast to the verses, Murphy sounds lifeless, ambivalent. As one might imagine all of the deliberately schmaltzy, saccharine elements of Marc Bolan's original song such as the string arrangements and backing chorus are absent in the Bauhaus version; replaced with jarring dissonant feedback.

Tricia Henry in her book *Break All Rules* asserts that glam rock was "about putting catastrophe in listenable song structures," and was for "rebels who wanted commercial success."<sup>199</sup> But this is an oversimplification that ignores a large part of what the artists were trying to show—the hollowness of success and the style over substance mentality of the music industry. Chapter 4 will describe more extensively how goth artists used ephemerality and glamour as a death metaphor, which constituted a large part of the genre's subversiveness. This is why James Hannanham mischaracterized goth when he wrote that the style over substance aesthetic that groups like Bauhaus appropriated from glam was "an albatross" around the neck of the goth subculture.<sup>200</sup>

### Goth and Punk

In this section it is not my intention to revisit all of the various points that scholars have made about England's punk rock movement. I make constant comparisons between punk and goth throughout this dissertation. It is sufficient that goth appropriated punk's celebration of amateur musical aesthetics, it expressed disapproval of much of what was happening in the country economically and politically, and it is important to the working classes. The fans and musicians interviewed for this project stated that, at the time, they felt they were part of the punk movement, or at least building upon what punk bands started. Mick Mercer agrees saying, "Goth was people, the fans and the performers who

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<sup>199</sup> Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules: Punk Rock and the Making of a Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), 33.

<sup>200</sup> Hanannaham, "Bela Lugosi," 113.

wanted more emotional depth to what punk had provided while maintaining its energy level.”<sup>201</sup> On most fan websites the music is often referred to as an introspective form of punk. Tricia Henry goes as far as to say that punk rock had aesthetic similarities to German expressionism stating, “Punk is assertive, assaultive and seeks an emphatic response through sensory attack and emotional overload.”<sup>202</sup> It is my conclusion that goth focuses more on creating emotional overload (all gothic arts do) and that it is occasionally assaultive but also sensual. Peter Wicke believed that punk rock was related to economic conditions; “unemployment created a subculture, which gave difficult experiences a cultural form. Punk was a part of this but not a direct expression of the experience.”<sup>203</sup> Goth could be considered a critical response to Wicke’s observation, with its sentimentality, and the importance the genre places on generating a strong melancholic affect, it does seem to be an expression of hardship. It is unclear how Wicke can assert that a style could give cultural form to unpleasant experiences without being an expression *of* those experiences.

What is often lost in academic discussions of punk is what the music meant to the fans, who to this day defend their music with a quasi-religious furor. In my interviews with the employees of Rough Trade, the independent record shops that were instrumental in the spread of punk and goth, I asked what punk meant to them. They replied that it sent a message to young people that “you can do anything,” and that was what people needed to be reminded of during the late 1970s and 1980s in England. The music’s amateur aesthetics were themselves symbols of consolation and resilience and remained firmly in place in goth music. The punk sensibility gave artists the confidence and permission to experiment with instrumentation, tone, sonority, technology, and lyric composition. The remarkable ability of goth bands to evoke the tone and mood of their lyrics could not have come about without the support that the punk movement provided. Artists could be creative on their own terms without having to worry that their music would not be taken seriously because they did not possess the rhetorical skill of Eric Clapton or the ability to

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<sup>201</sup> Mick Mercer, Personal E-mail, 27 March 2005.

<sup>202</sup> Henry, *Break All Rules*, 6.

<sup>203</sup> Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 142.

create complex arrangements like Jimmy Page or the members of Genesis. The creativity of goth bands also appeared even more impressive within the boundaries of punk's creative aesthetic as well.

It should be noted that many of the punk bands that most influenced the work of goth artists were not tremendously famous acts like The Clash or The Sex Pistols even though goth bands admired the dark humor and anti-establishment message of these groups. Siouxsie and the Banshees, for example, in a gesture worthy of the Sex Pistols made it a point to be the first English group to tour Argentina after the Falklands War in order to irritate Thatcher. According to Mick Mercer and the staff at Rough Trade, both of whom were involved in London's punk scene since its inception, the punk group that most influenced goth artists was Adam and the Ants, an underground band that never achieved widespread commercial success, and for many, this accounted for a significant amount of their appeal. Mercer states, "Adam and the Ants were the biggest underground band in Britain by a huge distance, with predominantly dark and brooding themes and nifty lyrics tied to a furiously stark form of punk. It was everything goths wanted to be."<sup>204</sup>

One can detect many musical similarities between an album like *Dirk Wears White Sox* by Adam and the Ants and the first albums by Siouxsie and the Banshees (*The Scream*) and Bauhaus (*In the Flat Field*). The lyrics of the songs often deal with painful experiences from everyday life or present small snapshots of how ordinary people behave in ways that are stupid, silly, or ridiculous, and they often use dark humor. The harmonies and motives evoke the mood of the lyrics with sonorities that sound almost nothing like blues-based rock music. The songs are marked by unexpected and unsettling modulations, changes in density, abrupt tempo fluctuations and fragmentary vocal lines. The music is often based upon ominous bass lines with many half steps or dissonant disjunct leaps. Much of the jarring, startling, very physical effect of the songs is based on guitar parts with an unnaturally metallic harshness and mixed with an abundance of presence, producing a tight cutting sound like a transistor radio played at high volume. The guitar riffs are often just as unnerving as the instrument's timbre, frequently based on cluster chords, major or minor chords with dissonant suspensions, full and half

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<sup>204</sup> Mick Mercer, Personal E-mail, 27 March 2005.

diminished seventh chords that slide all over the neck, and dissonant double stop bends which sound like grotesque, disfigured renditions of T-Bone Walker or Chuck Berry licks. Adam Ant also possessed a theatrical vocal style that goth singers emulated; rapidly changing from whispered tones to loud shrieks, striking glissandos, declamatory passages, followed by lyrical melodicism, all designed to make a dramatic impact on the listener. Like the lyrics composed by Nico or Lou Reed for The Velvet Underground, the poetry of Adam Ant was more thoughtful, reflective and sophisticated than most rock or pop. His lyrics do not simply dwell on unrequited love, but the inability of people to relate and connect with one another, and the general lack of empathy in society as a whole. Goth artists would build upon the style of Adam and the Ants taking these devices to extremes in order to create the atmosphere of dread and the balance of beauty and ugliness that gothic aesthetics require.

### Conclusion

Goth artists were influenced and inspired by their punk and glam rock predecessors. Goth intensified the irony and pessimism that glam rock concealed under its colorful image. Glam's celebration of ephemerality and trash culture was appropriated as a death symbol in the music and image of goth. The musical eclecticism and sensualism of glam was admired by Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, and others. Glam's use of androgyny to challenge Britain's gender stereotypes and work ethics (the masculine logic of production) were appropriated by goth bands.

Sympathetic music journalists such as Mick Mercer and goth fans have been unanimous in their assertion that the genre began as an offshoot of England's punk movement. However, many individuals came to view punk's aggression and social commentary as one-dimensional. As an alternative, goth expanded the scope of punk's social critique to include issues concerning personal relationships and cruelty in daily life. Punk's veneration of musical amateurism was maintained in goth but with a more experimental approach to harmony and timbre. The work of Adam and the Ants was particularly influential in that respect. Goth artists did not simply mimic their influences passively, but used them to actively create a new and distinct genre of popular music.

CHAPTER 4  
EXAMINING THE GOTHIC ELEMENTS OF GOTH MUSIC

Writers who have been involved with the goth subculture have determined, that journalists for magazines such as *New Musical Express*, and *Melody Maker* were ultimately responsible for the “Gothic” or “goth” adjective being applied to a particularly introspective and morose type of rock music being composed by a select group of British punk bands during the early 1980s. From reading the reviews of, and articles concerning, bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, The Cure, The Sisters of Mercy, and others, it becomes clear that the adjective gothic was used by writers as a way of ridiculing the music of these artists.<sup>205</sup> Perhaps journalists were startled by the unusual sounds created by these groups and lacked the experience and vocabulary to describe such music. It is also probable that the writers could not help but notice the overwhelming foreboding quality of the music.<sup>206</sup> The obvious question that arises when analyzing this music is whether there is anything truly “gothic” about this genre. Was the label simply the result of journalistic sensationalism and hyperbole, or is “goth” simply a misnomer propagated through the media?

There are many reasons why the appropriations of gothic aesthetics were an ideal way to build upon and intensify British punk rock. Dick Hebdige states that “Dread in particular was an enviable commodity. It was the means with which to menace, and the elaborate free-masonry through which it was sustained and communicated on the street—the colors, the locks, the patois—was awesome and forbidding, suggesting as it did an impregnable solidarity, an asceticism born of suffering.”<sup>207</sup> The fashion of goths was even more menacing, consisting of ragged black garments. The style also retained the piercings, and spiked, or Mohawk hair styles worn by punks according to my informants.

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<sup>205</sup> For example, Steven Wells’s review of “This Corrosion” by The Sisters of Mercy consisted of nothing more than the following: “Yes the king of the goths is back, and it’s the lamest thing to crawl out of Leeds since Norman Hunter’s last sparring partner quit town.” *New Musical Express*, September 1987, 19.

<sup>206</sup> For examples of the ridicule that goth bands were subjected to by Britain’s music press, see *NME Originals: Goth*, vol.1 issue 17. This special issue is a compendium of reprints of articles about goth groups and reviews of many of their albums, which were originally written during the 1980s.

<sup>207</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 63.

In addition, they stated that the androgyny and elaborateness of the fashion was far more extreme during the 1980s than what one would encounter in goth clubs today. The music performed by bands considered to be goth was certainly consistent with Hebdige's ideal of dread as a commodity.

The gothic in the arts inevitably carries an anti-establishment tone, and in England it has been associated with capitalist critique (Stoker's *Dracula* for example), a fact that British art students were no doubt aware of.<sup>208</sup> This corresponds in an indirect way with punk's political terror. Gothic aesthetics rely heavily on pointed contrasts, which harmonize with the "us vs. them" mentality of subculture thinking. The gothic spirit in the arts seeks to permeate and disrupt all that is commonplace, making everyday life seem unsafe. As Linda Bayer-Berenbaum points out, in modern horror stories gothic writers always set their tales in the familiar.<sup>209</sup> This aesthetic complements the punk goal of dramatizing the urban decay which was all pervasive.

Many literary scholars, and writers outside the academy have weighed in on what they feel makes a work "gothic" in style. Dave Thompson feels that artworks that are gothic are those obsessed with the harshest realities of life, but are simultaneously escapist.<sup>210</sup> Richard Davenport-Hines, in his survey of gothic art, describes an aesthetic based on defacement that seeks to provoke strong reactions largely through shock and surface effects. He characterizes the genre as possessing a theatrical intensity, an atmosphere that expresses a distrust of all enduring power structures and traditions. Gothic settings typically portray a world where nothing is sacred, or a society where individuals are in a constant state of risk or peril.<sup>211</sup> Vijay Mishra characterizes gothic as being obsessed with trauma, excessive nostalgia, and apocalyptic narratives.<sup>212</sup> Horner

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<sup>208</sup> Frank Grady "Vampire Culture" in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffery Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 225.

<sup>209</sup> Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Imagination: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1982), 33.

<sup>210</sup> Dave Thompson, *The Dark Reign of Gothic Rock* (London: Helter Skelter, 2002), 13.

<sup>211</sup> Richard Davenport-Hines, *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil, and Ruin* (New York: North Point, 1998), 1-11.

<sup>212</sup> Vijay Mishra, *Gothic Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 157-59.



and Zlosnik remind us that in order to be truly subversive and adequately grotesque there must always be comic moments within a gothic work in order to bring its morose or disturbing elements into strong relief.<sup>213</sup> One of the finest summaries of essential gothic characteristics is found in Linda Bayer-Berenbaum's book *The Gothic Imagination: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art*. For her, the primary hallmark of gothic art is the exploration of extreme negative emotions: cruelty and melancholy. Gothic works often deal with personal or national tragedies and horrors, and the inability to achieve transcendence from them. According to the author, the primary goal of such an artistic approach is the desire to increase the audience's capacity for empathy.<sup>214</sup> In order to stimulate this increased emotional sensitivity the artist must allow one to experience the world through the eyes of the victims, and therefore careful attention must be paid to atmosphere and setting. The best gothic literature is composed in a way that allows the audience to partake sensually in the scene being described. Gothic artworks typically have no real climax but instead possess a constant tension, an overwhelming intensity and a sustained sense of foreboding.<sup>215</sup>

Due to the inherent distrust of established institutions, conventions, and traditions, that are expressed in gothic artworks, restrictions of any kind- emotional, sexual, political or religious, are abhorred in the aesthetics of the genre. The gothic love of beauty and decay is a manifestation of this desire to push and expand the boundaries of what is considered good or acceptable. Therefore gothic artworks are typically cast in a language that uses drastic, extraordinary gestures with no real concern for symmetry, order or proportion. Gothic art also relies heavily on symbol and metaphor—the ruined castles and decaying buildings in gothic settings are signifiers of mental and spiritual ruin.<sup>216</sup>

The desire to expand consciousness and push boundaries often causes gothic art to have a great deal in common with decadent art, a style often associated with England during the 1890s. Both styles romanticize death, seek to beautify the grotesque, and

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<sup>213</sup> Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Gothic and the Comic Turn* (New York: Macmillan, 2005), 3-7.

<sup>214</sup> Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Imagination*, 20-29.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

simultaneously express both world-weariness and a love of the sensual. Both types of art view life as inherently boring and seek to remedy this feeling often by incorporating and juxtaposing many different elements and themes (orientalism is likewise associated with decadence in art).<sup>217</sup> But what both genres most strongly share is an interest in emotional ruin. James Willsher sums up this idea by stating “Delirium and shattered nerves offer new, unfamiliar sensations and ways of looking at the world. This is the kind of distorted view of things that appeals to the decadent.”<sup>218</sup> But whereas the decadent writer might embrace the perspectives offered by extreme emotional states for the quality of their experience in and of itself, the gothic writer’s primary motivation is their interest in the desire to produce the empathy that such artists feel is sorely lacking in society.

Willsher writes that British authors who often wrote in a decadent style “saw boredom and disaster” everywhere they looked and wanted to escape from it.<sup>219</sup> The same could be said for many of those who joined English subcultures. While most bands associated with the goth movement have not been pleased to be associated with such a limited audience, most admit that they self-consciously appropriated gothic aesthetic values from literature and film. This should not be surprising since virtually all art produced in the postmodern age is largely presumed to reflect a wide range of styles and influences. The musicians were on the whole, thoughtful, well-read artists who wished to bring something of the intensity and style from the films and literature that resonated with them into their songwriting. For example, Siouxsie and the Banshees admit that some of the songs on the albums *Join Hands* (1979) and *JuJu* (1981) were inspired by the work of E. A. Poe. *Join Hands* even contains a song called “Premature Burial,” but it seems to have little to do with the Poe original; the theme is being used as a metaphor in the song for losing one’s identity or losing one’s principles. Banshee’s bassist Steven Severen recalls “Siouxsie and I were really into Poe at the time and I wanted to try to recreate that suffocating motive he used so often.”<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup>James Willsher, *The Dedalus Book of English Decadence* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2004), 25.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>220</sup> Mark Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees: The Authorized Biography* (London: Sanctuary, 2003), 61.

Mick Mercer asserts that Poe's influence was crucial to the development of goth. He feels that the characteristics that goth music shares with Poe's poetry and short stories are its brevity and "sheer concentrated power." The reader/listener is instantly immersed in the atmosphere of the scene, and both genres relentlessly scrutinize the actions, motivations and desires of others.<sup>221</sup>

Gothic films were also a noteworthy influence on goth bands. Vocalist Susan Ballion (Siouxsie) recalls her first meeting with Banshee's guitarist John McKay, "I played him the soundtracks from *Psycho* and *The Omen* and told him that was the sound we wanted. I wanted music to be exciting but with a sense of fear, of uneasiness to it. We didn't want a guitar to sound like a guitar, it had to sound like stabbing violins and he seemed to be into that."<sup>222</sup> One of the most disturbing films of the silent era, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, was also a major influence on goth bands. Steven Severen has cited the film as an influence,<sup>223</sup> and Peter Murphy of the quintessential goth band Bauhaus declared "the *Dr. Caligari* movie was the basic aesthetic [for the band's sound and image]. I looked at stills from *Caligari* and said, "Yeah that's what I look like! It was not a mask or an emulation it's who we were."<sup>224</sup> The images of Robert Smith, frontman for The Cure, often resembled the *somnambulist* from *Dr. Caligari*, indeed a number of my informants claimed that the group's name was a reference to the final scenes from the film where the Doctor claims to have found "the cure" for his patients, but I have not found any corroborating evidence. The film continues to inspire goth artists; in 1996 the band In the Nursery composed an ambient soundtrack for the movie. Goth artists were possibly attracted to early expressionist films because of their ambience, starkness, the actor's use of exaggerated mannerisms, their sign value as art objects, and their nostalgic old world glamour.

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<sup>221</sup> Mick Mercer, *Gothic Rock: Everything You Ever Wanted to Know but Were Too Gormless to Ask* (Birmingham: Pegasus, 1991), 47.

<sup>222</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 58.

<sup>223</sup> Susan Ballion, notes to Siouxsie and the Banshees, *Downside Up* (2004), CD, Universal LC6444, 49.

<sup>224</sup> Thompson, *Dark Reign*, 59.

Roger Corman's adaptations of Edgar Allen Poe were equally influential for their strange mixture of atmosphere, morbidity, shock value, and humor. Susan Ballion, in speaking of her creative influences stated, "My favorite novels were paperback horror novels; favorite films were Hammer horror especially those with Vincent Price. He acts so corny and obvious but is still amazingly effective."<sup>225</sup> Nik Fiend, principal songwriter and vocalist for Alien Sex Fiend explained exactly what the appeal of these films was for young people growing up in England: "Over here TV actually shut down by around midnight! So we used to all go to late night cinemas and were totally into B-movies like *Freaks*, *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, Hammer horror movies, there were so many."<sup>226</sup> A DJ known as Loki from London's Slimelight goth club affirmed that teenagers were fascinated by such films, "I guess there was something about those films that struck a chord with us. Some of the characters looked like we felt (laughs)!"

Qualities of decadent literature were also self-consciously appropriated by goth artists. For example, Steven Severen in discussing a song he wrote with Siouxsie and the Banshees called "Voices" explained, "I started writing the lyrics to this after seeing the film *The Haunted Palace*, it reminded me of a book I'd just read called *Hashish, Wine and Opium* by Charles Baudelaire. I was intrigued by the idea of seeing sound and hearing color." Not surprisingly the Banshees place great importance on timbre when composing.<sup>227</sup> But perhaps the band who went to the greatest lengths to appropriate elements from decadent literature, for both its expressive potential, and subversive sign value, was Christian Death. Although an American band based in Los Angeles, Christian Death became more popular in England and has attained iconic status among British goths. Mick Mercer has referred to the band as the most deserving of the goth label.<sup>228</sup> Christian Death's album *Catastrophe Ballet* from 1984 has quotations from Baudelaire's *The Story of an Ether Drinker* in both French and in English translation spread out over the liner notes and cover. The quotations describe the sensual and terrifying experiences of a critically intoxicated man wandering through a crowd during Mardi Gras. The

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>226</sup> Nik Fiend, personal e-mail, October 29, 2005.

<sup>227</sup> Steven Severn, *Downside Up*, 12.

<sup>228</sup> Mercer, *Gothic Rock*, 36.

album's cover artwork is a horrific metaphor for the draining feelings of alienation, fear, and the loss of one's sense of identity. It features a screaming naked girl who is made to resemble a white statue. She possesses no eyes or clearly defined physical features. The lyrics of the songs, composed by the band's vocalist Rozz Williams (who did end up taking his own life) were written in the manner of late nineteenth-century decadent poetry, describing experiences both sensual and frightening, or unbearably melancholy. The metaphors, symbolism, and descriptive language are self indulgent, and the tone is elevated to a ridiculously high level of formality.<sup>229</sup>

The lyrics describe the end of a relationship, the inability of two people to connect emotionally, which is a common enough theme in popular music but seldom presented in this self-consciously artistic, pretentious lyric style. Songs such as this would not be instantly accessible to those used to hearing blues-based rock music only. There is no clearly defined vocal melody, the guitar parts are counter-melodies to the lines of the singer rather than the riffs or chordal accompaniment that are usually found in rock guitar playing. The song's abrupt and unpredictable tempo changes make it unsuitable for dancing; all one can do is revel in the sensuality of the music and focus on the words. There are many elements of "As Evening Falls" that are commonly found in decadent literature. The band combined elements of beauty and decay; the theme of the work is disintegration but the use of language and music was intended to be attractive and sensual, beautiful but unpleasant. What gives the music its despairing but sensual affect is first and foremost the timbre. Christian Death's vocalist Rozz Williams was an ardent admirer of David Bowie, and Williams's vocal timbre, declamatory singing style, and range were clearly a deliberate imitation. In goth music appropriating elements from Bowie appears to be a symbol of depth, sophistication, introspection and fatalism. The bass always unnervingly plays an active line in the lowest register of the instrument and occupies a central place in the mix. Judging from the richness and complexity of the guitar timbre, a Gibson Les Paul was probably used, along with distortion and modulation effects for added resonance and depth. When the guitar and organ timbres from the synthesizer are combined, the sound is both astringent and ethereal.

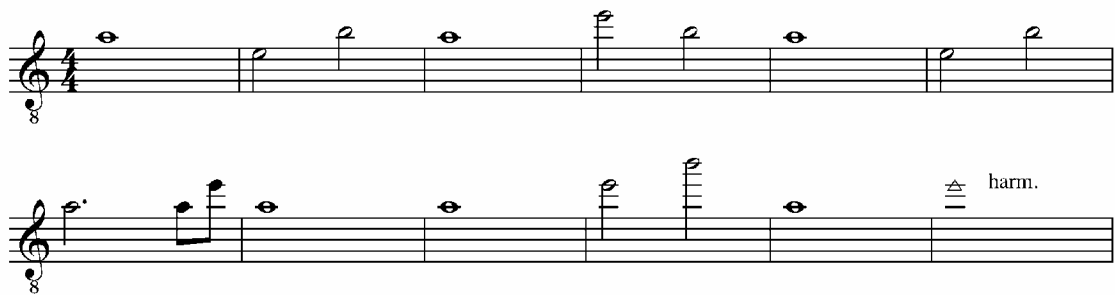
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<sup>229</sup> For the lyrics, see the liner notes to the CD. Christian Death, *Catastrophe Ballet* (1984), Candlelight, CANUS 0051CD.

There is a disjunctiveness about the way the lyrics fit with the accompaniment. The lengthy, wordy text is encased in a modified verse-chorus format with a bridge between the two sections, creating an A-B-C A-B-C structure. But each section of music does not necessarily correspond to a complete idea or thought expressed in the lyrics. For example, the chorus begins when the vocalist is in mid-sentence, creating a sensation of being rushed, anxious.

James Willsher states that one of the primary characteristics of decadent writing is a sense of world-weariness and a cynicism toward passion of any kind.<sup>230</sup> The music certainly is not passionate; the declamatory singing of Rozz Williams in a rather static monotone with narrow-ranged melodies makes the lyric persona sound uncaring, ambivalent toward the experiences described. The meandering guitar melody of the verses shown in Example 4.1a is similarly pretty, but lifeless, using a limited choice of notes from the E Phrygian mode. This deliberately lethargic music is made even less passionate by the drum parts with their plodding backbeat.

Willsher also states that decadent literature often reads as though it was written during a period of delirium or shattered nerves.<sup>231</sup> This aesthetic is clearly represented in the bridge passages, when the tempo dramatically increases (for no reason that is apparent from the text) and modulates to B Phrygian. The bass line becomes more active, and the guitar plays a new melody consisting of expressive half-steps and frantically repeated pitches (Example 4.1b). The chorus alternates between the slow



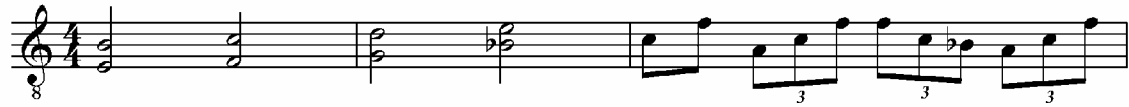
Example 4.1: Christian Death “As Evening Falls” a. guitar melody

<sup>230</sup> Willsher, *English Decadence*, 25.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.



Example 4.1 - Continued b. frantically repeated pitches in narrow range



c. modulation to F major

and fast tempi of the verses and bridges, respectively, with a peculiar modulation to F major that is again attractive but strikes the listener as unconventional (Example 4.1c). All the music on *Catastrophe Ballet* is markedly similar in terms of timbre, tempo, and ambivalent world-weary tone; the album cannot be fully appreciated without being heard in total. None of the goth fans that I interviewed in the U.K. found this type of music pretentious or campy; they found such recordings to be heartfelt and creative. They fully realized that *Catastrophe Ballet* was unlikely to be appreciated by a wide audience and they took pride in their sensitivity to this style of writing.

Goth artists also appropriated the titles or themes of famous decadent works for their songs. “Lucretia My Reflection” by The Sisters of Mercy was possibly influenced by *Lucretia*, a poem dealing with themes of horror and eroticism by the Georgian decadent writer James Elroy Flecker. Siouxsie and the Banshees played upon the fascination with the exoticism that was a hallmark of British decadent writers. But instead of celebrating eastern culture, their exoticism was used to attack the abuse of women in the Muslim world. This can be heard in the song “The Whole Price of Blood” a B-side from 1987, and the single “Arabian Nights,” clearly appropriated from the celebrated *The Thousand and One Nights*, a literary work that many critics have found to be decadent.<sup>232</sup> These songs also possess the decadent signature of combining the sensual and beautiful with the horrific. “The Whole Price of Blood” features lyrics that criticize Muslim “honor killings” of women accompanied by virtuosic, Phrygian lines played on a

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 14. This is in reference to Sir Richard Francis Burton’s English translation of 1885. *The Thousand and One Nights* was a major influence on the English decadent writers of the 1890s.

sitar, while “Arabian Nights” is characterized by lush, resonant guitar timbres, harmonies filled with expressive suspensions, and an impassioned vocal performance by Susan Ballion. While the music is some of the most sensual ever composed for a popular song, the lyrics deal with the seduction and killing of a woman by an Arab man. Listeners can perhaps decide for themselves if such an approach represents constructive feminist writing or destructive Eurocentric attitudes. But Susan Ballion admits to being assaulted frequently by Muslim men while growing up in Bromley, as a result of her colorful clothing and make-up.<sup>233</sup>

Goth artists typically claimed that their work was inspired by personal events, feelings, or reactions to specific film or literary works, and this also coincides with a decadent approach. Willsher explains for example, that “the peeled nerves of some of Coleridge’s poems and the horrors of his addiction are unmistakably decadent. He was an ill man in every respect, and when you consider the extraordinary writing he was producing at the time, this illness can seem no longer tragic but horribly interesting. A robust healthy condition produces robust healthy thought and writing and this holds no interest for the decadent.”<sup>234</sup> Goth musicians went out of their way to appear as “horribly interesting” as possible and made sure this music was neither “healthy” nor “robust.” Robert Smith of The Cure stated, for instance, that his music was a “release,” “I worry my words won’t interest people because they are mainly about me,” and that his songs were “about the horrors of everyday living and how deeply felt those horrors were.”<sup>235</sup> He continues “I don’t sit around wondering how people see the world or how I feel about things. I don’t try to express their feelings, I only write about the way I feel. I don’t have a group of people waiting for my next word; I hope I never have that kind of following.”<sup>236</sup> But clearly many fans felt The Cure were telling their stories with music.

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<sup>233</sup> Lucy O’Brien, “The Woman Punk Made Me,” in *Punk Rock: So What?* ed. Roger Sabin (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 95.

<sup>234</sup> Willsher, *English Decadence*, 17.

<sup>235</sup> Thompson, *Dark Reign*, 67, 118.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.



## Goth: Lyrics and Themes

Among the greatest misconceptions about goth music is the content of the lyrics. Ignorant assumptions have been propagated by music journalists in order to ridicule and discredit goth bands. For example, the November 1991 issue of *New Musical Express* contained a feature called “A Bluffer’s Guide to Goth,” a satirical piece, which stated “all goth music is about death, torture and being a bat.”<sup>237</sup> Academics have also played a role in transmitting inaccurate statements about goth music. Dave Laing, for instance, in his study of 1970s punk rock, erroneously concluded that goth bands (which he wrongly labeled “positive punk”) “turned their back on social realism and the shock tactics of their predecessors. Instead they dealt in mystery rather than history and delved into mysticism and metaphysics.”<sup>238</sup> None of this is true; goth did not turn its back on social realism, and it could be argued they used shock tactics (visually and musically) just as much as early punk rockers. Joy Press and Simon Reynolds made similar inaccurate statements in their paragraphs on goth, defining the genre as “a post-punk offshoot that abandoned politics for magick and mystique.”<sup>239</sup>

What unifies goth music is how the material is presented in a tone that is sinister, mysterious, or somber, and the artist’s ability to capture the mood of the lyrics in a style that is sophisticated but without betraying the accessibility inherent in punk. Many of the same themes appear in goth lyrics, but every band had one or more major areas of focus. Siouxsie and the Banshees made a specialty of composing songs about childhood traumas, domestic abuse, the mistreatment of women in other cultures or during different historical periods, British national tragedies such as World War I, the media as a tool in social control, sex and seduction as a source of terror, Poe-influenced expressions of entrapment, anxiety and mental illness, and tongue-in-cheek instrumentals inspired by horror film soundtracks (often to annoy critics who called their music “doomy”). The

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<sup>237</sup> Andrew Collins, “A Bluffer’s Guide to Goth,” *New Musical Express*, 30 November 1991, 23. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, vol.1 issue 17, 6.

<sup>238</sup> Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock*, (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985), 113.

<sup>239</sup> Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 292.

Sisters of Mercy, meanwhile, emphasized struggles to find love and acceptance in an uncaring world, environmental degradation, mistrust of the media, and unreciprocated love and failed relationships, often cast in industrial/mechanical metaphors. The music of Alien Sex Fiend dwelt on Cold War anxieties, mocked consumerism, and portrayed existence as a Foucault-ian nightmare of a society under constant surveillance. Some artists made a career of composing songs about the death of loved ones, or romanticized death as a beautiful form of release (*The Mission*), while others were extremely effective at expressing the heightened sense of awareness for the atmosphere of a place or situation during times of despair (*The March Violets*).

I asked journalist Mick Mercer what the major issues of concern were for goth artists, and exactly what they were trying to make audiences aware of. He responded by stating, “The focus was personal issues. Punk was about targets, and rage directed through vocal missiles, while goth turned inward; self depreciation, self-loathing. Punk was understandably more one- dimensional by being so direct. Punk came from the heart, goth came from the head and was a personal voyage of discovery.”<sup>240</sup> Peter Murphy of Bauhaus explained that his band was primarily about “tapping the subconscious” and used a considerable amount of abstract symbolism in his lyrics.<sup>241</sup> His approach was attacked by critics for its ambiguity, just as filmmaker David Lynch (another artist whose work is celebrated in the goth subculture) is often assailed for his surreal style of filmmaking. Murphy hoped that his audience would find his lyrics fascinating in spite of their ambiguity; “I’ll admit there’s a lot of mask there. I’ve still got these inhibitions and if I express them literally I’m afraid of the comeback.”<sup>242</sup> In other words, the abstract style of writing embraced by some bands was a way of minimizing their vulnerability.

Goth songs were never divorced from their social milieu regardless of how personal the sentiments were. The group Big Black explained that their lyrics were about their inability to understand “the violence inherent in a lot of things, the offhand cruelty

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<sup>240</sup> Mick Mercer, Personal E-mail, 23 October 2005.

<sup>241</sup> Steve Sutherland, “People in a Glass Haus,” *Melody Maker*, 30 October 1982, 24. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, vol.1 issue 17, 52.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

of things.”<sup>243</sup> However, unlike punk, goth artists did not feel the need to state their views on contemporary society explicitly, because they wanted it to be inherent in the atmosphere of their music. Andrew Eldritch of The Sisters of Mercy stated, “Our sound says a lot about me. People say things like, ‘What’s your attitude toward nuclear war?’ and I say, ‘Just listen to the sound—what the fuck do you think our attitude is?’” He goes on to say that his songs reflect “the sort of cynicism that comes out of disappointment with one’s environment rather than despair of it.”<sup>244</sup> Many of the goths and former goths whom I interviewed in the U.K. expressed similar sentiments, explaining that the subculture was more concerned with reflecting the depressive social circumstances in the U.K. rather than engaging in discourse over political oppression (the domain of punk). Still, the goth genre is dominated by bleak imagery, as I have shown in my previous musical examples and will continue to demonstrate with examples in this chapter.

One of the primary features of gothic literature is that it seeks to bring fear and terror nearer to the audience and therefore avoids fairytale or make-believe settings.<sup>245</sup> Similarly, goth music was almost always based on real experiences and for the most part avoids the elaborate fictional settings and storylines that are often a part of heavy metal, for example “The Sentinel” by Judas Priest or the *Abigail* album by King Diamond.<sup>246</sup> One of the most significant misconceptions about goth music, however, is that it was about self-pity, resignation, or sulkiness. Artists stressed that the music was about drawing strength from negative experiences, using the emotional energy of melancholy feelings as their guiding muse.

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<sup>243</sup> Mick Mercer, “Big Black Interview,” *Gothic History: Volume 1*, 38.

<sup>244</sup> Adam Sweeting, “The Devil’s Floorshow,” *Melody Maker*, 15 January 1983, 20. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, vol.1 issue 17, 57.

<sup>245</sup> Bayer Berenbaum, *Gothic Imagination*, 33.

<sup>246</sup> Walser calls heavy metal lyrics metaphorical fantasies of power and control.

## The Sound of Goth Music

British punk artists who came to be described as goth did not intend to create a new genre of popular music but drew influence from gothic films and literature as a means to create their own interpretation of the punk style in a way that would reflect social circumstances in England, help exorcise their personal demons, and mirror their passions. Gothic artworks (including those in popular culture) are characterized by a sustained mood of dread or foreboding, an extreme visceral intensity, and the blurring of the boundaries between comedy and tragedy. Extreme contrasts, the stimulation of empathy, and redefining the beautiful are also hallmarks. A self-conscious effort to appropriate these characteristics into punk is reflected in the instrumentation, harmonic language, production values, recording techniques and vocal style of goth artists.

Most goth bands consisted of a vocalist, guitarist, bassist, drummer, and a keyboard/synthesizer player. In this way, goth groups were not very different from other types of rock bands, but the way they used their instruments was often unusual when compared to other genres. Robert Smith, the primary songwriter and director of The Cure, stated, "I want to get far away from the conventional group sound, like it won't be a traditional rock band."<sup>247</sup> Siouxsie and the Banshees and Bauhaus have also expressed similar sentiments.<sup>248</sup> The attitudes of these artists may have sprung from the fact that they felt conventional blues-based rock had become banal and no longer functioned as a subversive symbol. Goth bands often used The Velvet Underground, David Bowie, and The Beatles' *White Album* as stylistic models. They admired experimentation rather than the ability to use a 12-bar blues format effectively and recording on independent labels possibly offered more creative freedom. In every goth band the vocalist was the focal point, and this was partially because the lyrics were considered of paramount importance in this genre. The singers were theatrical performers with a strong stage presence and were celebrated for their ability to captivate an audience with expressive gestures and body language (not unlike the silent film actors they admired, and Vincent Price as well).

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<sup>247</sup> Thompson, *Dark Reign*, 327.

<sup>248</sup> See Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 51-54. In every interview that *New Musical Express* or *Melody Maker* conducted with Bauhaus, the group made comments to this effect. For example, Steve Sutherland, "His Master's Voice," *Melody Maker*, 5 September 1987, 14. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, Vol. 1, Issue 17, 104-108.

The texts of most goth songs were often long and wordy, so vocalists had to be dramatic and dynamic narrators. In typical gothic fashion, the singer's sensitivity to the words was designed to create an empathetic response. It was necessary in this style for vocalists to sound angst-stricken, heartbroken, fearful, exhausted in other words, vulnerable in some way. Robert Smith of The Cure was particularly celebrated for the way his vocal timbre struck his listeners as belonging to an emotionally wounded or extremely sensitive person. Male vocalists did not sing in an extreme high range or scream, the way heavy metal singers typically did. Neither the singer's distinct timbre nor manner of singing could come across as misogynistic or traditionally masculine for reasons that will be explained in Chapter 5.

Many Goth singers, such as Peter Murphy of Bauhaus or Rozz Williams of Christian Death, possessed voices that sounded similar to David Bowie's. In this genre Bowie seems to serve as a symbol for intelligent cynicism, ephemerality, androgyny, "art rock" and the apocalypse, probably because so many of his songs were meditations on the end of human existence. Other celebrated goth vocalists, Carl McCoy of Fields of the Nephilim and Andrew Eldrich of The Sisters of Mercy, sang in a deep baritone monotone using their timbre as part of the melancholic tone or atmosphere of dread. Even in the case of McCoy and Eldrich the voice never conveys a sense of masculine strength or power, but instead sounds theatrical or stagy. McCoy in particular sounds demonic, or like an apparition from a horror film.

Female vocalists like Susan Ballion of Siouxsie and the Banshees emphasized the beauty of their voices by singing in a less declamatory manner than most male singers (again see Chapter 5). Drawing on inspiration from the Berlin cabaret repertoire, and the London music theater that she admired, Ballion sang in a similar manner, with a great deal of expressive nuance (vibrato, glissandos, etc.) and dynamics. Some groups, such as The March Violets employed both male and female lead vocalists for a wider range and dramatic contrasts. The Sisters of Mercy and Christian Death sometimes employed female backing vocalists to give some songs an ethereal quality. Horror film soundtracks often employ female singers in this way.

Goth music is most frequently described by fans and the musicians themselves as "atmospheric," moody, or ambient, and the guitar plays a major role in creating this

effect. Musicians in this genre had nothing but disdain for “guitar heroes” like Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page. For them creating an accompaniment that conveyed the mood of the text was the most important, or creating such an evocative atmosphere that it inspired a text.<sup>249</sup> Guitar players for goth bands were always very sensitive to the colors of different chord voicings and keys on the guitar. They often used extended techniques and controlled feedback to mimic the jarring effects created by an orchestra in horror films’ soundtracks. This could include everything from the extreme manipulation of the tremolo bar, to strumming the strings behind the nut or playing the guitar with a bow (Dan Ash of Bauhaus was particularly adept at this technique).

There was no single guitar associated with goth, but the players generally preferred the “classics.” Gibson Les Pauls were used when a thick, richly distorted sound was required. Gibson or Gretsch semi-hollow bodied instruments were widely favored for their spacious resonance, and the ominous textural effects they can create with feedback. Fender Stratocasters were also selected for their brilliant, glassy timbre and extreme clarity, which allowed for the major/minor quality of the chords and interesting suspensions to be easily heard, even when the signal was layered with effect pedals. Sometimes even twelve-string electric guitars were used for richness and depth. Goth players probably also used these “classic” guitars because, in addition to their superior sound, they looked old fashioned and signified “high art.” The modified Stratocaster-shaped guitars popularized by Edward Van Halen, V-shaped, batwing-shaped, and other instruments in odd geometric designs were shunned by goth bands, since they were associated with the heavy metal virtuosity of the period, which to them represented thoughtlessness, conformity, misogyny, and bad taste.

Guitarists of this genre primarily used British amplifiers like Orange and Marshall for their ability to create both shimmering, bell-like undistorted tones, and intense high gain distortion rich in harmonic overtones. In other words, they required instruments that were capable of extreme contrasts. Billy Duffy of The Cult, one of the most popular guitarists associated with goth, stated that he used to modify the appearance of his Marshall amplifiers when the band performed since those instruments were “so heavy

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<sup>249</sup> Examples of the goth approach to composition will be examined later in this chapter.

metal tacky.”<sup>250</sup> Goth groups generally did not use distortion as thick as that used by heavy metal players, since they wanted the quality of the chords and interesting non-harmonic tones to be clearly heard. But their distorted timbres were much deeper and richer than those used by punk bands, who preferred grating, metallic, ugly tones for their guitars. Goth players used a wide variety of effect pedals such as echo, chorus (which adds a shimmering luster, increased resonance, and an ethereal organ-like quality to the sound and flange (creates a cascading, swooshing quality), often in layers to produce ambience. Reverberation effects, artistically imparting the acoustics of large spaces to the signal, were particularly useful to goth groups for creating atmosphere. From recordings, one cannot determine for certain if these effects were created from analog pedals or from outboard effects in the studio itself. The spacious, ethereal shimmer that these pitch modulation effects add to the guitar’s timbre could be considered the aural equivalent of the flickering, ghostly, spectral appearance of early black and white horror films (or at least the way they appeared to contemporary audiences).<sup>251</sup>

The bass parts in goth music were often far more elaborate than they were in heavy metal and were usually featured prominently in the mix. Goth bassists typically provided a restless, busy foundation that added to the energy and momentum of the song. Often the timbre and register of the bass lines contributed to the ominous tone of the songs, particularly when they consisted of the commonly employed chromatic descent. Goth bands utilized both programmed drum machines and human drummers with large or small kits (usually a single bass drum). The players usually performed parts that were less virtuosic than in heavy metal, with fewer fills. Ostinato patterns were popular, and again, usually played a part in generating an atmosphere of dread. The drum parts frequently appeared to have symbolic significance, such as representing the destructive potential of phallic, masculine energy (again see Chapter 5). The drum machine, with its strikingly artificial timbre, often seems to have been used to create an unnerving heartbeat or to signify ephemerality and death. In many goth songs, the lyrics and atmospheric guitar parts seem of such importance that the driving rhythm of the bass and

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<sup>250</sup> Michael Modena, “Rock Riffs: Billy Duffy,” *Guitar Player*, March 2008, 18.

<sup>251</sup> Effects like chorus make the sound of the guitar less focused by combining the original signal with a slightly detuned and delayed copy. This results in a flickering, shimmering sensation that can be used to create a haunting and ethereal effect.

drums appear added as an afterthought, or at the very least seem generic, not relating to the other components in any significant way. All the beat patterns and tempi on Christian Death's *Catastrophe Ballet* album, for example, have a pronounced sameness.

The synthesizer parts of goth songs were usually not foregrounded unless they were intended to create a dramatic effect in the accompaniment. Usually they doubled the guitar harmonies to provide added depth and richness, and were set to resemble the timbre of strings. Like drum machines, the synthesizers were sometimes set to produce artificial, electronic-sounding timbres or noise effects, and in this case they signified fakery, insincerity, ephemerality, lifelessness, or trash culture. The use of electronic timbres was not an attempt to appear intellectual or sophisticated; quite the opposite in fact. Mrs. Fiend, of the iconic band Alien Sex Fiend explained that in 1982 drum machines and synthesizers had just started to become affordable to people with low incomes, and as a result she always preferred cheap analog gear. She also related that at various times her instruments had to fill in for drummers or guitarists who abruptly quit the band, and that her synthesizers eliminated the need for bass players in the ensemble.<sup>252</sup> Essentially the use of such technology was an extension of the amateur music making practices of punk rock. The piano was also used occasionally by artists such as Sex-Gang Children, when they wanted a particular song to resemble a cabaret number.

Goth bands were generally more chromatic in their use of harmony compared to other rock genres. Their approach to harmony was not intellectual but amateur in nature, with players constantly searching for novel juxtapositions of chords, and combinations of pitches that produced ear-catching sonorities.<sup>253</sup> Artists relied on the minor mode extensively, as one might expect. Like other forms of rock music, the chord progressions were sometimes loosely functional and other times not functional in the slightest. They generally avoided blues-based progressions except to parody rock's preoccupation with authenticity. Some progressions could be analyzed as modal, particularly Phrygian, when artists appropriated the exoticism of decadent writers. Like heavy metal artists, goth

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<sup>252</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Fiend, Personal Interview, conducted April 17, 2006.

<sup>253</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 54. My interviews with former members of Fields of the Nephilim also support this statement.



bands capitalized on the traditional demonic connotations of the tritone and used diminished chords and arpeggios frequently, often as a symbol of chaos, confusion, or mental instability, in addition to their ability to generate a sinister atmosphere. Unusual suspensions and tone-clusters were also used. For example, songs such as “Regal Zone” and “Placebo Effect” on the album *Join Hands* by Siouxsie and the Banshees are filled with jarring dissonant suspensions or harmonies created from stacks of intervals of a 2nd.

There is no single way to characterize the goth approach to dynamics, since it varies from song to song, but violent contrasts due to changes in density are common. Gradual dynamic changes were also used frequently, as songs would slowly build in intensity. Mick Mercer characterized the goth approach to dynamics in this way: “Goth moves around more (than punk). Even when really intense, which it was back then, being quite violent and explosive, it also threw you with changes of pace. Bands would have creepy intros or deadly slow songs, then intense, fractious bursts of mayhem. The vocals always had to be strong, as the singer was always a character. The sound would be warm and modern. Punk was all out aggression. Goth could usually be more explosive, but it was a very seductive sound.”<sup>254</sup>

Goth artists have had little to say about the creative process in magazine interviews, but one common theme seems to emerge from the available material, they valued spontaneity. In spite of the fact that the ambient music of goth might seem rigorously composed, it was often the result of improvisation or spontaneous decisions in the studio. Nik Fiend of Alien Sex Fiend explained, “There is no set pattern. Many things have come from jams, improvising, and having a good laugh in the studio. Some are accidents; we hear something good and follow it to its conclusion. What Alien Sex Fiend does is about feel.” Mrs. Fiend added, “A song only needs one starting point, whether it’s the lyrics, a rhythm, a guitar riff, a weird sound . . . we don’t know how a song will end up.”<sup>255</sup> Susan Ballion has described a similar process with the Banshees,

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<sup>254</sup> Happy Skull, “Interview with Mick Mercer,” <http://www.angelfive.com/goth/asphyxia> (2005), accessed November 23, 2005.

<sup>255</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Fiend, Personal Interview, conducted April 1, 2006.

and she added that she had a poor relationship with one of their guitarists because he was always trying to work things out.<sup>256</sup>

Tony Pettit, bassist for Fields of the Nephilim also discussed the composition process in his group. Pettitt's explanations were similar to the way Iggy Pop addressed the issue in *Guitar Player*: "I just mess around [with a guitar] until something appears, or until something puts me in a certain mood. You go to the beach, have a cup of coffee, whatever it is you come up with a little bit of music that invokes a mood and it's like 'Whoa'!"<sup>257</sup>

Simon Gallup, bassist for The Cure, states that most of their songs came from drumbeats and bass melodies.<sup>258</sup> Music journalist Joe Gore was one of the first to interview The Cure for a guitar-oriented magazine. He was quick to point out that "chaos was part of the bands' chemistry," and that their songs are mostly constructed from collections of short guitar phrases over the same bass line.<sup>259</sup> His observation is accurate; most songs in the goth genre are made up of layers of short guitar motives rather than just strummed chords or riffs. The songs typically do not strictly follow the typical verse-chorus format; groups either modified the structure in some way or avoided it altogether.

It should be noted that when I asked British goth fans to characterize their music, the adjective that they used the most was not scary, sad, or dark, but "beautiful." They were deeply affected by the ability of these artists to capture specific moods and to express sentiments that they could relate to. They did not find the sentimentality of the music to be a defect.

### Musical Examples

In this section I will analyze songs representative of the goth genre to show how the artists appropriated aesthetic values associated with the gothic. Since music by The Cure, Christian Death, and Siouxsie and the Banshees has been discussed in previous sections, I have selected songs by other iconic artists: The Sisters of Mercy, Bauhaus, and

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<sup>256</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 159.

<sup>257</sup> Joe Gore, "Iggy Pop: Chasing the Muse," *Guitar Player* 40/6 June 2006, 70-78.

<sup>258</sup> Joe Gore, "The Cure: Confessions of a Pop Mastermind." *Guitar Player*, September 1992, 42.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

Alien Sex Fiend. In order to illustrate the important differences between punk and goth, I will present an analysis of “Dark Entries” by Bauhaus, a track from the group’s first album, which is still very close to punk stylistically. The second example by Bauhaus “Hollow Hills,” is representative of how goth artists were inspired by gothic literature, or extra musical-sources. I have selected “Marianne” by The Sisters of Mercy to show how bands used gothic aesthetics to create an interpretation of sentimental rock and pop love songs that were more intense and dramatic. The tongue-in-cheek “Hurricane Fighter Plane” by Alien Sex Fiend is an exercise in the absurd, serving as a representative example of what is typically known in the subculture as “The Batcave sound,” a style that relied heavily on synthesizers, drum machines, satire, and humor, and was cultivated extensively by groups who performed at that club.

“Dark Entries” from the album *In the Flat Field* by Bauhaus (released in 1980), is one of the songs in the goth repertoire that most closely resembles punk rock in terms of sound and technique. The song could be called a grim, disturbing slice of life, such portraits being quite common in the punk rock of the 1970s’ for example, the song “Animal” by The Sex Pistols, which describes a gruesome “bathroom” abortion. “Dark Entries” also centers on the theme of sex as a source of degradation. The song is an articulation of cynical urban despair in the manner of The Velvet Underground, but far more abstract and fragmented.

The persona is an unknown figure relating a personal experience of the sort that would usually remain private or unsaid. He is speaking in a state of repugnance for himself and his surroundings. The song could be considered a popular music equivalent to Edvard Munch’s *Life Frieze* series of paintings, presenting sex as a source of shame, anxiety, and unfulfillment. The lyrics alternate between the first and third person point of view, and the level of diction is rather formal for such a personal revelation, making the words seem stylized and providing a measure of emotional detachment between the persona and the experience being described. This could be interpreted as reflecting the persona’s personal shame. An elevated diction level was common in the works of Bauhaus, lending both gravity and artificiality to their lyrics, which can also be said for most gothic literature. The choice of words focuses on dehumanization, describing people as “money checks with holes” and the persona’s sexual relations as “degrading

even the lice.” All the figurative language is visual; no other physical sensations are described, which complements the dehumanizing effect of the lyrics by limiting the scope of the experience.<sup>260</sup>

There is a startling and unsettling contrast created by the heavy rhyming in the first seven lines and their virtual absence in the rest of the song. The technique gives the listener the impression that a loss of control has taken place, a breakdown of structure. But the incessant rhyming of the opening lines seems just as neurotic and irrational as the abstract, fragmentary ramblings that comprise the rest of the song. The lack of poetic rhythm also contributes heavily to the angst generated by the piece. However, a considerable amount of energy is created by the inverse pyramid structure of the phrasing; one complete thought or fragment unfolds in the space of two to three lines, the first of considerable length, while the others get progressively shorter. This telescoping effect helps drive the momentum forward. Given the length and complexity of the text, the words are clearly of the utmost importance to the emotional impact of the song and were not simply used for their sound quality, as Theodore Gracky and others have claimed about the function of texts in rock and pop.<sup>261</sup>

The music of “Dark Entries” is designed to enhance the drama and intensity of the words, and it does so through an economy of means. True to the spirit of punk rock, the band sounds “raw” with minimal sound processing and studio enhancement, much like a garage band. The song has the same frantic drive and relentless energy as punk rock, but the music is connected to the text in a more intimate way, going beyond simply providing a foundation of power chords for shocking or penetrating political or social commentary.

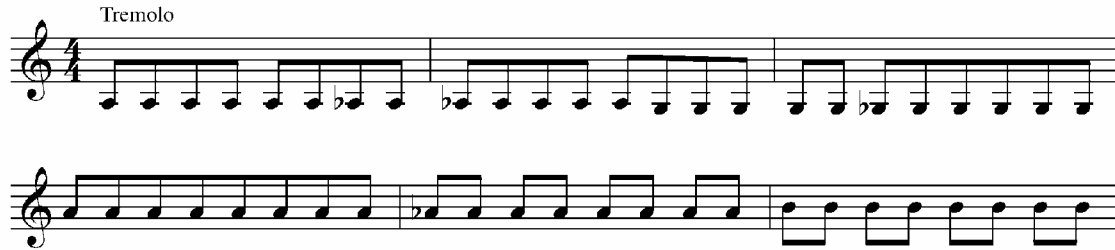
The structure of “Dark Entries” is a complex interpretation of the verse-chorus structure, combined with a through-composed text. The three distinct sections of music are presented in Example 4.2; examples a and b accompany the words (alternating after each caesura), while c functions as an interlude. The unusual structure appears chaotic, since the listener can’t anticipate what comes next, and reflects the gothic attraction to all

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<sup>260</sup> For the lyrics see the album’s liner notes. Bauhaus, *In the Flat Field* (1980), Beggar’s Banquet, 70013.

<sup>261</sup> Theodore Gracky, *Rhythm and Noise: The Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University, Press, 1996), 65.

that is irrational and unpredictable, which, as Haggerty suggests, symbolizes the dark underside of life.<sup>262</sup>



Example 4.2: Bauhaus “Dark Entries” a. opening riff



b. main riff during the verses



c. bridge

Example 4.2a consists of a slowly descending chromatic line repeated at different pitch levels, with each note picked rapidly in tremolo. The neurotic repetition intensifies the physical sinking sensation of the chromatic line, which suggests ruin, decay and disorientation. Example 4.2b is also a chromatically descending line interspersed with what blues and rock guitarists refer to as open-string upbeats. Example 4.2c consists of consonant power chords that provide a temporary relief from the dissonant chromaticism but without losing the energy and momentum.

Peter Murphy’s singing was dramatic and theatrical, employing an unpredictable variety of styles for each verse, from declamatory *Sprechstimme* to an ominous

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<sup>262</sup> George Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 23.

monotone, to frantic shrieking. As if this were not disconcerting enough, the vocalist puts an accent on nearly every syllable, which further strains the listener. The drummer's primary contributions to the atmosphere of angst and decay are the constant rolls on the snare, which illustrate how the smallest details are often responsible for a considerable amount of the impact in gothic works.

One of the most noteworthy features of goth music was that the songs were frequently based on extra-musical sources, particularly literature and film. The artists would try to capture visually the atmosphere or ambience of a scene that they saw or read. A good example of this approach to writing is "Hollow Hills" from the 1981 album *Mask* by Bauhaus, a song that was greatly admired in the goth subculture. Goth participants informed me that the song was possibly a tribute to Arthur Machen, a decadent Welsh author active during the 1890s. It is difficult to verify this assertion, as there is nothing suggestive in the liner notes, and the band did not answer my e-mails to their website. However, according to my informants, "Hollow Hills" was inspired by Machen's *The Novel of the Black Seal*, which was in turn based upon Welsh folk legends about a race of creatures that dwelt in the hills of the countryside and preyed upon unsuspecting travelers.<sup>263</sup> The novel does indeed dwell upon the danger and mysteriousness of the hill-dwellers; possibly such a story appealed to the band and their fans because it deals with subversive and mysterious outcasts and celebrates the English cultural heritage.<sup>264</sup> Machen was also known for his deep suspicion of technology and materialism, a common theme in punk and goth music.

Musically, "Hollow Hills" is a study in atmosphere. The song relies on a continuous ostinato in the bass mixed prominently in the recording. The timbre of the bass alone is responsible for a considerable amount of the music's ominousness. The line shown in Example 4.3 is based primarily on a C-minor arpeggio, but the dotted rhythms, long-held notes, and intervallic leaps make for a stark, mysterious, lovelorn melody when combined with the low register and timbre of the bass. Guitarist Dan Ash complements the desolate, eerie ambience of the ostinato figure with a line in the upper register, played with a violin bow on the guitar, and with the signal drenched in a cavernous reverb

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<sup>263</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Novel of the Black Seal* [1895] (Whitefish MT: Kessinger, 2004).

<sup>264</sup> For the lyrics see the album's liner notes. Bauhaus, *Mask* (1981), Beggars Banquet, 80029.

setting and lush chorus effects. He seems to be imitating the textural orchestral effects common in film scores, while also creating a sense of depth and space for Peter Murphy to recite the lyrics in a *Sprechstimme* style. This is a particularly effective approach because it enhances the rhyme-laden text and maintains the character of a folk-tale, which is in accordance with Machen’s story (Example 4.4).

Guitar: played with violin bow and reverb effects

Bass:

Example 4.3: Bauhaus “Hollow Hills”

An - cient earth - work fort and bar - row, \_\_\_\_\_

dis - creet - ly hide their sec - ret a - bodes \_

Example 4.4: “Hollow Hills” vocal line for the verses

Consistent with gothic aesthetic values and aims, the haunting, ominous sounding *ostinato* is designed to invoke a mysterious landscape, imbued with what Bayer-Berenbaum calls “the illusive and devious nature of life.”<sup>265</sup> Typical for gothic artworks, there is no peak or climax, only a constant foreboding presence. The group’s interpretation of the text captures both the sense of danger and melancholy present in Machen’s descriptions of the countryside.

“Hollow Hills” strikes the listener as self-consciously arty, as though the group were making a flagrant display of their art-school training. By embracing gothic aesthetic values, the group is able to draw upon a substantial artistic and English tradition that gives their music an authenticity beyond the boundaries of blues-based rock, and masculine logic and control.

Goth artists frequently used gothic aesthetic principles and values to give a fresh energy and power to the themes of love and romance common in popular music. “Marian” by The Sisters of Mercy is representative of this type of song. In spite of their limited output and their cavalier treatment of their fans, The Sisters of Mercy were, and are, one of the most popular and iconic bands associated with the goth subculture. Their reputation rests upon their ability to mock and parody rock’s misogyny and musical conventions,<sup>266</sup> and their talent for creating songs that paradoxically are beautiful musically and sincere in sentiment, but deliberately fashioned out of hackneyed musical gestures or clichés. “Marian” is an attractive example of the band’s approach to songwriting.

The lyrics center on an anonymous lover, a desperate person who appeals to the love of a woman to save him from his circumstances and surroundings. Clearly this is not a typical rock n’ roll love song since the woman holds all the power and the male does not attempt to attack her because of it. If this were a heavy metal song the woman would typically be a source of pain rather than salvation. Another possible interpretation is that

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<sup>265</sup> Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Sublime: Expansion in Gothic Literature and Art* (London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1982), 24.

<sup>266</sup> Just about any article on The Sisters of Mercy in the British popular press discusses their use of parody, but a good example is Steve Sutherland, “His Master’s Voice,” *Melody Maker* (5 September 1987), 14. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, Vol. 1, Issue 17, 104-108.



the band was using death as a metaphor for sex; a symbol common in English poetry, of which the band may have been aware.<sup>267</sup> In this case, the metaphor would have provided a witty alternative to rock misogyny.

The lyric persona wants to be considered significant or special, not a nameless, faceless individual, a common theme in goth, and most genres of popular music from the 1970s-1980s. The speaker's tone becomes increasingly desperate as the song unfolds. There is little descriptive language, since the idea is to get the listener to focus on the sinking, drowning sensation described in the text. Drowning is of course an archetype for desperation and terror. The lyrics do not have to carry by themselves the actual sensation of drowning, as this is also conveyed in the music. There is some bitterness in the speaker's tone, using terms like "ship of fools" to describe his surroundings and this is common in goth music as well.

The formal level of diction is the most noteworthy feature of the lyrics. This gives weight to the speaker's sentiments but also makes the song very artificial. There is a considerable amount of melodrama in the writing with phrases like "your voice above the maelstrom" and pleas to "save me from the grave." Goth fans greatly admire music filled with contradictions that imply that the musical language of rock is banal and insipid, while simultaneously using it to craft a piece that is moving.

The relentless descriptions of drowning and sinking are monotonous and appropriately suffocating, expressing no sense of transcendence, which is the exact opposite of the way Robert Walser describes heavy metal. This smothering, drowning sensation is intensified by the incessant repetitions of words: "In a," "save me," and "Marian," drawing attention to the speaker's hopeless surroundings and the female as the source of salvation. Each verse has lines of roughly the same length, but the number of syllables per line gets progressively shorter as the persona sinks deeper. The poetic rhythm adds to creating a sense of hopelessness because it has no energy, just a

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<sup>267</sup> An excellent summary of the relationship between sex and death in English poetry can be found in Regina Barreca, "Coming and Going in Victorian Literature," in *Sex and Death in Victorian Literature*, ed. Regina Barreca (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1-8. The author explores how sex and death are linked through conceptions of sin, the body vs. the spirit, physical pleasure, and the ability of sex and death to induce strong emotional responses.

monotonous trochaic meter with regular caesuras at the end of each line. The sound of the lyrics is extremely euphonious; the listener is in fact smothered with vowel sounds.<sup>268</sup>

The accompaniment shown in Example 4.5a-c is designed to strengthen and magnify the gothic elements of the text. The contrast between the persona and his desperate surroundings is reflected in the extreme contrast between the low register of the voice, the prominent bass, and the bright shimmering sound of the guitar. The music actually relies for its effectiveness primarily on its low register. The ostinato bass line is in a low register by the standards of the instrument, and Andrew Eldrich’s vocal part is in the lowest tessitura imaginable for a popular song. Eldrich’s vocal timbre could be considered the male counterpart to Nico of The Velvet Underground, whose deep



Example 4.5: The Sisters of Mercy “Marian” a. introduction



b. bass line



c. chorus

<sup>268</sup> For the lyrics see the album’s liner notes. The Sisters of Mercy, *First Last and Always* (1985), Elektra/Asylum, 60405.

In a sea of fa - ces in a sea of doubt

In the cruel place your voice a - cross the male - strom

Example 4.5 – Continued d. vocal melody

ominous alto was, to a considerable degree, responsible for the unsettling quality of the group’s music. The eerie monotone of Eldrich’s singing intensifies the descriptions of drowning in the text and the suffocating monotony of the melancholy affect, poetic rhythm, and euphony of the lyrics. Bayer-Berenbaum asserts that negative emotions, suffering, or even the attempt to just imagine the feeling, “is an instant cure for apathy passivity, insensitivity, and moderation, the enemies of the gothic spirit.”<sup>269</sup> In this case, the haunting and sentimental melody is primarily responsible for the generation of empathy, shown in Example 4.5d. Although it possesses a limited range, the expressive leaps in the line stand out in greater relief because other parts of the line are static and in a register unusually low for popular music.

The drum machines, synthesizers, refined studio production, and effect-heavy, unnatural guitar timbres give the song a deliberate lifeless artificiality, which ironically makes the melodramatic and stylized language of the lyrics more passionate and gives the persona’s affections and longing a supernatural overtone. The low, ominous timbres, theme of a lover being saved from the grave, and the highly stylized language employed in a pop context could all be considered gothic clichés, and indeed goth artists and their fans delighted in their creative use and affective power. The song also illustrates an important point raised by George Haggerty in *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form*, that gothic overstatement or euphemistic description can actually work for, rather than against, the gothicist when an ironic intention is clear.<sup>270</sup> For example, in speaking of Poe’s technique

<sup>269</sup> Bayer-Berenbaum, *The Gothic Imagination*, 24.

<sup>270</sup> Haggerty, *Gothic Fiction/Gothic Form*, 82.

of both simultaneously employing and mocking gothic effects in his poetry, Haggerty writes, “Poe’s technique carries us beyond the parodic into the realm of self-conscious Gothicism. The parody is not meant to distance us from gothic effects but make us more susceptible to them.”<sup>271</sup> When the reader is unclear of the writer’s desired effect, the writing becomes more seductive, intriguing, and makes the audience more vulnerable to the affective power of gothic techniques. The Sisters of Mercy made music that expressed a gentle mockery of rock’s musical conventions, with a powerful sense of mood, their specialty, but were not alone in this approach; Red Lorry Yellow Lorry and The Mission also used gothic devices to sharpen the impact of their love songs.

The music of Alien Sex Fiend is representative of music that was often performed at London’s Batcave club and is considerably more humorous than the work of Bauhaus and Siouxsie and the Banshees. The music of Alien Sex Fiend drew its power from the gothic love of boundary violation, consisting of a grotesque mixture of comedy and terror. In spite of the artists’ reliance on humor, their music was unquestionably pessimistic in nature and suggested that one must laugh at life in modern Britain in order to keep from crying. The music would have been difficult to classify at the time, combining the aggression of punk rock, with rockabilly guitar riffs, a heavy use of synthesizers, electronic sound effects, and sampled sounds, and at times it resembled electronic dance music. The songs of Alien Sex Fiend typically centered on themes of society under surveillance, class envy and greed, and the emptiness and monotony of daily life. The song “Hurricane Fighter Plane,” however, ridicules both the misogyny frequently found in blues-based rock, and the West’s preoccupation with technology and the military industrial complex during The Cold War. The song sarcastically celebrates the jet fighter as phallic symbol, mocking and caricaturing the masculine obsession with technology, military might, and power.<sup>272</sup> In rock music the words gun and toy are often used when misogynistically referring to a penis, but equating a phallus with a deadly technological marvel has different connotations entirely. If the song had been written by a heavy metal band, the destructive force of a jet fighter would probably not have been

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> To obtain the lyrics please consult one of the many websites that post the words to popular songs, for example, <http://www.elyrics.net>.

celebrated, but its power would have been dramatized. Metal bands would have wished to appropriate the sign value of a powerful object. I cannot recall an instance in heavy metal when technology was ridiculed through gender discourse. Humor is almost entirely absent from heavy metal, except when it is used at the expense of women (for example, “Ice Cream Man” by Van Halen). However, in the goth genre, phallic power is neutralized through the ridiculous. Goths did not attack power with power. The band’s mockery of masculine aggressiveness and phallic energy was augmented by their stage shows, with the songs often performed using a seven-foot tall inflatable banana as a stage prop.

Unlike the songs previously discussed, the bass does not play a prominent role in the music’s impact, as Alien Sex Fiend was possibly the only goth band not to employ a bassist. Typically the group consisted of a singer, guitarist, synthesizer player, and a programmed drum machine (a drummer was used for live performances), and timbre was an extremely important element of the music. The steady rapid pulse of the drum machine stands out prominently in the mix and hits the ear with violent force, sounding more like gunshots than an instrument. The notes played by the synthesizer are programmed to sound as inorganic as possible, with a cold, sterile, electronic buzzing timbre. The heavily distorted guitar sounds as though the bass frequencies have been turned off on the amplifier, resulting in a harsh grating quality. These elements, when combined with the sampled sounds of cartoon gunfire and ricocheting bullets create a whimsical but nightmarish world of industrial sounds. There is nothing sexual or sensual about this music. The human and the machine are presented with an extreme, gothic sense of contrast. Technology seems threatening, unnatural, a violation, or at the very least is presented as a double-edged sword capable of helping and harming human beings (a common gothic theme). The gothic aesthetic relies heavily on surface effects, and Alien Sex Fiend’s music strikes one as resulting from the skillful manipulation of timbre and little else—a grandiose celebration of ephemerality and trash.



Example 4.6: Alien Sex Fiend “Hurricane Fighter Plane,” guitar riff

The primary guitar riff of “Hurricane Fighter Plane” as shown in Example 4.6 is in G-Phrygian and sounds vaguely Middle Eastern. The song was written during a time when the west was beginning to come into conflict with Arab nations, with events such as the bombing of American peacekeepers in Beirut, the destruction of Pan-Am 103, and the Reagan administration’s bombing of Libya. The use of Middle Eastern sounds as a military signifier, or lyrics mocking the relationship between oil, power, and arms dealing between the West and the Arab countries was common during the 1980s (“Rock the Kasbah” by the Clash, and “Gods of War” by Def Leppard are two examples). The treble-heavy sound of the guitar imparts a biting, acerbic quality to the riff as well.

Vocalist Nik Fiend gives a very mannered performance here, and the wide dynamic range of his recitation is a prominent component of the song. He goes from speaking, to singing, to screaming in an unpredictable way throughout the music, raving like one on the verge of insanity. The singer’s pronounced working class accent gives the music a populist element and draws attention to the fact that the lower classes are typically the first to be used or abused by military technology. In typical gothic fashion, the song gives simple material a startling intensity and blends the comic with the horrific.

One adjective that the fans I spoke with used frequently to describe bands associated with The Batcave was “camp”. Some writers have either directly or implicitly applied the term to all goth music.<sup>273</sup> Camp is not usually defined in dictionaries, but the term is typically used to signify an aesthetic that embraces all that is simultaneously glamorous, ephemeral, trashy, silly, and tacky, or considered to be in bad taste by most of the public. Not surprisingly these adjectives have been used to describe gothic writing

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<sup>273</sup> Gavin Baddeley, *Goth Chic: A Connoisseurs Guide to Dark Culture* (London: Plexus, 2002), 5-12. See also the reviews of critics in the following section.

during all historical periods. According to Mark Booth, one of the most common characteristics of campy artworks is that they “make the best of a bad job by turning a disadvantage into an advantage.”<sup>274</sup> For example, the willful cultivation of amateurism that was a hallmark of punk was intensified and venerated in goth music. The appropriation of gothic aesthetics and drawing inspiration from gothic writers and films were perhaps part of a self-conscious effort to “make the best of a bad job.” Booth also states that camp pleasures are supposed to be more than just compensatory; they should be appreciated in and of themselves. Again, the use of gothic values and signifiers would be considered a strategy to more than make up for the deliberate lack of rock authenticity in the genre. Other characteristics that Booth identifies as being inherent in camp styles is an unabashed insincerity, the appearance of being too marginal to be taken seriously, a brutal, almost adolescent cynicism toward all aspects of life, and a delight in caricature. Camp people and their works express an over-eagerness to shine and draw attention to themselves, often so colorful and dramatic in their presentation that all subtlety and complexity is lost. He describes a style that is overly mannered, limited to a handful of stylized gestures, and a reliance on clichés. Camp works are also known for being crafted from elements that “jostle uneasily with one another,” for example Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, where horror and social realism are not balanced in proper proportion, or effectively combined.<sup>275</sup>

A camp approach to art has several advantages. Creating a work that many find attractive and expressive but with elements that are hackneyed or clichéd, or do not fit together coherently, could be seen as a sign of authenticity (as we have seen with *The Sisters of Mercy*). Camp artworks serve to validate the feelings and beliefs of people considered marginal or unworthy of being taken seriously (i.e. the hysteric is capable of feeling genuine pathos), and thus has the potential to be subversive. Camp aesthetics, with their emphasis on the ephemeral and the dramatic, are a flagrant violation of the values of utility and production.

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<sup>274</sup> Mark Booth, *Camp* (New York: Quartet, 1983), 97.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-99.

Critics took note of the camp characteristics in the work of goth artists, qualities that the writers considered trite, but were not considered so by goth fans themselves. Goth bands did not feel that confronting power with power was an effective strategy and preferred to attack obliquely in their social commentary. I will examine the critical reception of goth more thoroughly later in this chapter.

### The Visual Aspects of Goth

In contrast to new wave and heavy metal concerts, performances by goth artists were small-scale affairs, as one might expect for a style of music that appealed to a niche audience. There were no elaborate props or sets, and the performance venues were typically clubs or small auditoriums. Popular acts, like Siouxsie and the Banshees, were eventually able to play venues such as Royal Albert Hall and places of a similar size.

The artists typically performed stoically, with a minimal amount of movement, and with blank hollow expressions that complemented the somber, sentimental nature of their music. The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, The Sisters of Mercy, and Fields of the Nephilim exemplified this approach. Other artists were more theatrical, gesticulating wildly, making ghoulish grotesque facial expressions, or dancing along with the music. Such behavior was generally confined to the vocalist. Peter Murphy of Bauhaus was perhaps the most flamboyant of all goth singers. His hand and body gestures illustrated the imagery of the text; mimicking the mannerisms of Bela Lugosi in his interpretation of *Dracula* during the song “Bela Lugosi’s Dead,” or gesticulating violently during one of their many songs about madness or anxiety. Bauhaus and Siouxsie and the Banshees also frequently employed bright gas lights in front of the stage in order to cast ominous shadows over the band and give the concert the atmosphere of a Berlin cabaret performance. The lighting also gave the performers a ghostly, spectral appearance, and provided the stage with the flickering starkness of an old film. Fans told me that movies such as *Nosferatu*, *Metropolis*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *M* were sometimes projected on the stage during performances by some goth artists, but I have been unable to find documentation, and Mick Mercer states that he never witnessed this practice



during the years he covered the goth scene.<sup>276</sup> The intensity of the music performed by goth bands was further enhanced by the artificial lighting, exaggerated make-up, and spiked hair of the members. Their appearance was considered too disturbing to be seen by young viewers, and artists had a difficult time getting bookings on TV shows.<sup>277</sup>

One of the most popular venues for goth music during the early 1980s was London's Batcave club. According to Mick Mercer and several other participants, the club was decorated with synthetic cobwebs and old horror film memorabilia, which provided artists like Alien Sex Fiend, Specimen, and early incarnations of The Cure with an atmosphere that reflected the spirit of their music. The club was considered a place for punks who wanted an alternative to bands such as The Clash and The Sex Pistols, whose music was primarily concerned with political discourse and was aggressive in sound.<sup>278</sup> One of the Batcave's most celebrated features was that the patrons did not have to interact with American tourists. According to Sean, a long-time employee of Rough Trade, most punks avoided the Batcave because it was associated with "sleaze, and transvestitism."<sup>279</sup>

### Music Videos

The overwhelming majority of music videos by goth bands emphasized the underground status of the music by simply showing the artists performing live in small, intimate club settings. Another common approach was to show footage of the band performing alternately with images of industrial parks and urban decay, typically on rainy or foggy days, which was designed to give the video a film-noir look. There was no single approach or style that one could point to in the construction of the more high-budget videos, except that they typically smother the viewer with representations of decay, and/or death symbols, such as snakes, skulls, wrecked buildings and ancient ruins, clocks, hour-glasses, etc. For example, the video for "Moonchild" by Fields of the Nephilim

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<sup>276</sup> Mick Mercer, personal interview, 24 October 2005.

<sup>277</sup> Dave Thompson, *The Dark Reign of Gothic Rock* (London: Helter Skelter, 2002), 1960.

<sup>278</sup> Mick Mercer, personal e-mail, 13 March 2005.

<sup>279</sup> Personal interview, 22 October 2006.

(1988) is a collage of such images, juxtaposed with footage of caves or chasms, victims falling from cliffs into an abyss, and depictions of the band as ghosts or apparitions. One of the most grotesque and disturbing of all music videos produced during the 1980s was “Mask” by Bauhaus, showing scenes of shrouded, decomposing bodies in a way that resembled the medieval *memento mori* imagery on transi-tombs. Powerlessness and hopelessness were the themes that consistently guided the construction of the videos regardless of the setting. Surprisingly, videos making overt references to films or using footage of old horror films was uncommon, possibly due to copyright issues. Tony Pettitt, bassist for Fields of the Nephilim, relates that the record companies granted the director of their videos considerable autonomy in their creation, but admits that if they appear tacky or hackneyed it was due to their inexperience and lack of funding.<sup>280</sup>

Exactly who these videos were intended for is unclear, since very few people in England had access to MTV during the 1980s.<sup>281</sup> I know from my own experience that these videos were certainly not in rotation on MTV play lists. Alex, one of my American informants, claims that a special late-night show on MTV entitled *120 Minutes* would occasionally show a video by Bauhaus or Siouxsie and the Banshees, as the program specialized in presenting esoteric music.

### Album Covers

Cover artwork for goth albums was complementary to the spirit and aesthetics of the music. The gothic fascination with redefining standards of beauty or finding beauty in decay was common. For example, the album *JuJu* by Siouxsie and the Banshees features a picture of an African folk-art statue surrounded by a swarm of insects. The image is unsettling but visually fascinating and not unattractive. Photographs or drawings of Native Americans, or cowboys, on a desolate landscape were common with some artists, such as The Cult and Fields of the Nephilim. Such an approach was clearly intended to enhance the group’s perceived status as rebels or subversive figures by

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<sup>280</sup> Tony Pettitt, personal interview, 18 October 2006.

<sup>281</sup> Every one of my informants stressed this fact.

appropriating the sign value of people commonly considered loners or persecuted but resilient and defiant outcasts.

Covers frequently showed photos of the band in a setting designed to give the appearance of film-noir, or presented an image of the artists in a surreal, grotesque way, offering a horrific interpretation of psychedelic artwork from the 1960s. The album *Pornography* by The Cure, for example, was clearly inspired by the cover of *Aftermath* by The Rolling Stones or *Machine Head* by Deep Purple but with greater visual distortion.

Nik Fiend of Alien Sex Fiend relates that even though the idea may seem quaint in the age of digital music downloads, goth artists considered their albums' artworks to be an important part of the overall aesthetic experience. The vocalist recalled that carrying home a big vinyl LP with vivid artwork was exciting, making him feel like this was truly *his* music, and he wanted fans to feel similarly when they purchased Alien Sex Fiend recordings.<sup>282</sup>

Goth albums sometimes featured original artwork in the style of the impressionists or expressionists, such as *Faith* by The Cure, which featured a picture of a church rendered in an impressionistic style. These covers signified the "art rock" pretensions of the groups who were perhaps attempting to present themselves as the stylistic heirs of The Velvet Underground. Since the artists also wanted to be seen as modern decadent poets, some albums featured symbols from the East, such as the album *Vision Thing* by The Sisters of Mercy, displaying the eye of Horace from Egyptian hieroglyphics. Covers for recordings like "Lagartija Nick" by Bauhaus, showing depictions of Satan from previous centuries, were also a clear reference to decadents like Baudelaire.

Artwork mocking masculine phallic power and misogyny was also featured on Goth recordings. Sometimes the approach employed irony, such as the use of photographs of soldiers on *Boys Don't Cry* by The Cure, or via parody, such as the phony macho posturing of singer Andrew Eldrich on the single "This Corrosion" by The Sisters of Mercy.

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<sup>282</sup> Nik Fiend, personal e-mail, 8 May 2006.

Not surprisingly all the usual gothic themes and concepts make their appearance on the cover artwork of this genre. Violent disruptions of everyday life, for example, can be seen on the *Wizard of Oz*-inspired cover of *Tinderbox* by Siouxsie and the Banshees. Since the album details singer Susan Ballion's childhood molestation, the image was possibly intended as a metaphor for unseen dangers hidden under the mirage of domestic tranquility. Pictures of ancient ruins appeared on albums occasionally, as well as images from English national tragedies, such as *Join Hands* (also by Siouxsie and the Banshees), which features representations of memorials from the First World War. The cover of the single "Bela Lugosi's Dead" by Bauhaus shows a still from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, but photos from old horror movies were uncommon for album covers.

The album covers of punk albums usually reflected the amateurism of the music by appearing to be pasted together from scraps of paper, such as the famous, even infamous, *Never Mind the Bollocks* by The Sex Pistols. Goth albums continued this practice, showing drawings and sketches of monsters, or disfigured representations of the band, often drawn by the artists themselves. The colorful artwork of Alien Sex Fiend is an example. In typical gothic fashion, the cartoons are grotesque but not unattractive.

### The Critical Reception of Goth

Judging from the way that the music of goth bands was received by the popular press in Great Britain, music journalists clearly failed to appreciate the way the artists embraced gothic aesthetics. Few reviews of the albums much admired by fans of goth, in magazines such as *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express* were positive. The one band associated with the goth subculture that was occasionally praised by critics, was The Cure. Chris Baker, for example, in his review of the single "A Forest," commended the group for their ability to "construct fleetingly mysterious and highly evocative scenarios."<sup>283</sup> Adam Sweeting, in his appraisal of The Cure's *Faith* album, described the recording as "a sophisticated exercise in atmosphere and production, gloomy, but

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<sup>283</sup> Chris Bohn, "Review of the Cure: A Forest," *New Musical Express*, 5 April 1980, 4. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/ 17, 32.

frequently majestic.”<sup>284</sup> In addition to recognizing the group’s ability to evoke vividly the mood and tone of their lyrics, critics also felt that The Cure’s ambient approach to popular music was appropriate for the early 1980s. Dave Hill, for example, in his review of the album *Pornography*, stated, “The Cure have collected the very purest feelings endemic to their age, and held them right on the spot in their most unpleasantly real form.”<sup>285</sup>

The members of The Cure are unquestionably gifted songwriters; Robert Smith is an expressive singer, and the band possessed the ability to think outside the box in terms of instrumental technique, but it is unclear why critics would praise the band but criticize other groups that were equally creative and skilled at producing ambient music. Perhaps The Cure were more accepted because their music, while just as melancholy and emotionally intense as that of other bands considered “goth,” was generally less dissonant, less abstract in form, with lyrics that were not nearly as ambiguous. The group’s appearance was less theatrical and their fashion less extreme than that of other goth artists. The Cure were also a provocative band that was all male and were better looking than other bands with a similar approach to music.

The popular press in Britain criticized goth artists for a wide variety of reasons but their appropriation of signs and aesthetic values from E. A. Poe, Emily Dickinson, and expressionist films was a frequent target for ridicule. Paulo Hewitt, for example, accused Siouxsie and the Banshees of “hiding behind a pretentious smokescreen of art” in his critique of their music.<sup>286</sup> Allan Jones similarly characterized the band’s music as “menacing childhood memories dredged up and dressed up in tired old riffs,” and felt that their performances lacked passion.<sup>287</sup> Such writers did not understand that distancing themselves from conventional notions of rock authenticity was precisely what the group

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<sup>284</sup> Adam Sweeting, “Review of The Cure: Faith,” *Melody Maker*, 18 April 1981, 20. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/ 17, 35.

<sup>285</sup> Dave Hill, “Review of The Cure: Pornography,” *New Musical Express*, 8 May 1982, 31. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/ 17, 32.

<sup>286</sup> Paulo Hewitt, “Review of Siouxsie and the Banshees: Spellbound,” *Melody Maker*, 23 May 1981, 27. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/ 17, 40.

<sup>287</sup> Allan Jones, “Review of Siouxsie and the Banshees: Arabian Nights,” *Melody Maker*, 25 July 1981, 23. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/ 17, 40.

intended.<sup>288</sup> Nowhere was this more apparent than in Steve Sutherland's interview with Bauhaus in the October 1982 issue of *Melody Maker*. In the article the journalist challenged the group by stating, "The new album sounds much the same as your others—melodramatic, but pretty empty. It doesn't seem to say anything, it uses stark, crude images in a dilettante way with a bit of reggae, a little Bowie, a bit of Eno . . . I mean what are you saying? At the end you're left feeling as empty as when you started."<sup>289</sup> The interview continued on in this way for some time, with Sutherland berating the artists with questions such as "What is the point of being in the band?" or trying to pin down the precise meaning of the symbolism in specific songs, while the group deliberately avoided giving concrete answers. Sutherland was locked into a masculine mindset where all must be known and transparent, rational, clearly defined, and stylistically within the boundaries of blues-based rock. His negative reaction to the ambiguous but fascinating music of Bauhaus illustrates exactly why it was subversive to the mainstream and beloved by the subculture.

Goth artists also often received negative reviews because critics did not know how to describe or categorize the music. Tony Pettitt, bassist for Fields of the Nephilim explained that their music, and that of other goth bands, was condemned by the popular press for being too dark and aggressive but also dismissed by heavy metal magazines for not being aggressive or heavy enough.<sup>290</sup>

Goth artists received virtually no attention from the American popular music press. For example, a survey of issues of *Rolling Stone* from 1979 to 1985 (the years when goth artists were the most prolific, and producing their most enduring albums) reveals an occasional review, but not a single substantial article on Bauhaus, The Cure, Siouxsie and the Banshees, or The Sisters of Mercy. One band associated with goth that was consistently reviewed in *Rolling Stone* was Echo and the Bunnymen. The American journalists were initially impressed with the group's ability to evoke vividly distinct melancholic and reflective moods, and described their works as a British interpretation of

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<sup>288</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more detailed explanation of this point.

<sup>289</sup> Steve Sutherland, "People in a Glass Haus." *Melody Maker*, 30 October 1982, 24. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/17, 49-51.

<sup>290</sup> Tony Pettitt, personal interview, 25 October 2006.

American psychedelic music from the 1960s, possibly due to the importance of timbre in their music. However, American critics quickly tired of the group's approach, rebuking them for being a little too precious and soul-searching. Oddly, *Rolling Stone* did review a handful of albums by artists that were not nearly as well-known as Siouxsie and the Banshees or Bauhaus. The reviewers chastised bands such as Lords of the New Church because they found the influence of horror films on their work to be tacky and lacking in subversiveness. The writers did not recognize the critical potential of camp and artifice. American journalists compared goth bands to glam rock artists more than they did punk bands. The lack of attention given to goth music in America underscores the fact that the genre was, primarily a distinctly British phenomenon. During the early 1980s the reviewers for *Rolling Stone* categorized goth bands as new wave artists, just as they did punk groups like The Clash.

No goth artist received the level of attention enjoyed by the group Joy Division, one of the most talented English bands to appear during the late 1970s – early 1980s, and one of the few bands from the period whose style has resisted classification. The press in both Britain and, to a much lesser extent, America developed a fascination with the group after their breakup following the suicide of singer Ian Curtis. According to Mick Mercer, Joy Division were highly influential on goth artists but were generally not considered part of the goth scene because their music was too morose, had no interest in theatricality or parody, and because their music lacked irony.<sup>291</sup> Yet this is precisely why critics found them so compelling. Jon Savage, writing in the June 1980 issue of *Melody Maker*, stated “Joy Division built up a reputation based on the communication of a particular mood, rooted in Manchester, yet wider, alienated nostalgia, displacement of belief, yet searching for an answer at a time when common systems have disappeared and little is left.”<sup>292</sup> James Hannaham, in his essay on goth, concluded that “Joy Division was what goth could have been.”<sup>293</sup> Critics for *New Musical Express* praised Joy Division

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<sup>291</sup> Mick Mercer, personal e-mail, 13 March 2005.

<sup>292</sup> Jon Savage, “From Safety to Where?” *Melody Maker*, 14 June 1980, 10. Reprinted in *NME Originals:Goth*, 1/17, 23.

<sup>293</sup> James Hannaham, “Bela Lugosi’s Dead and I Don’t Feel So Good Either: Goth and the Glorification of Suffering in Rock Music,” in *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Twentieth Century Art*, ed. Christopher Gruenberg (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), 92-118.

because “their music is filled with the horror of the times—no cheap shocks, no *Rocky Horror*, no tricks with mirrors, but catastrophic images of compulsion, contradictions, wonder and fear.”<sup>294</sup> But the music of goth bands expressed similar sentiments, while also recognizing the expressive potential of humor and artifice.

### Academic Responses to the Goth Approach

Like heavy metal, goth music was, and continues to be, presented in a negative light. Positive reviews of albums or singles by Bauhaus, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Alien Sex Fiend, Sisters of Mercy, etc. in the British popular press were rare. Unfortunately, some of the animosity that critics in the popular press have felt for this music has made inroads into academic writing. James Hannaham, for example, a music critic for *The New York Times*, contributed an article titled “*Bela Lugosi’s Dead and I Don’t Feel So Good Either: Goth and the Glorification of Suffering*” for a volume dedicated to the analysis of gothic aesthetics in all types of artworks from the twentieth century. Until now, the essay represented the most substantial academic writing on the goth genre to date. Unfortunately, the author seems to have known little about the music and was never interested in understanding the music on its own terms. Hannaham’s title, for example, is misleading; in the research that I have done, and the interviews I have read or conducted, neither the artists nor the fans feel that suffering is glorified in the music. They see it as self-expression, and the desire to draw attention to issues and problems in society. Hannaham never explains what criteria could be used to judge when a work is legitimate self-expression, or a self-indulgent celebration of melancholy.

Hannaham states (with no supporting evidence) that goth music was descended from the British blues movement of the 1960s, even though goth musicians deliberately distanced themselves from blues-based expression. Hannaham portrays goth as a genre that lacks any real sincerity, and seems to feel that its fakery lies in the British approach to blues playing. He writes, “Not that England’s bluesmen couldn’t feel authentically disenfranchised or sad, but the sadness was the result of an entirely different environment than say, your average Mississippi bluesman. But by the time it reached England the

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<sup>294</sup> Paul Morley and Adrian Thrills, “Don’t Walk Away in Silence,” *New Musical Express*, 14 June 1980, 38. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1/ 17, 24-26.



form of blues had been established. It then became possible for the most salient component of blues-misery, to switch from impassioned declaration to a kind of rapture or goal. Chances are when a black American sang the blues, he just had them. When an Englishman did it he also wanted them.”<sup>295</sup>

This statement is problematic on many levels. It does not take into account England’s social and economic history, and it implies that people in Britain had near perfect lives. He never explains how English musicians could legitimately express negative emotions without being accused of posturing. Hannaham offers no quotations or musical evidence concerning what these British blues musicians wanted. The declaration also directly contradicts statements that African American players have made praising the authenticity of their British counterparts.<sup>296</sup>

But, according to Hannaham, goth was part of an English tradition of “staged” melancholy. He continues, “Turning death, madness and violence into archetypes de-personalizes their connection to horrific events. They position themselves as reporters or tour guides to the macabre, rarely its victims.”<sup>297</sup> As we have seen, this statement does not reflect the artist’s or the fans’ view of this music; the idea that “they emphasize the distance between their own pain and that which they describe” is not accurate.

In his article, Hannaham overlooks possible connections between British blues and goth. For instance, during the 1960s English guitarists showed a greater interest in ambience and timbre than the African-American artists that inspired them. This was possibly a way for British guitarists to make their playing distinct, and perhaps compensate for their inability to achieve the same degree of nuance that black American players and singers brought to their art. Eric Clapton, for example, during his tenure with John Mayall, and Cream, used distortion to a much greater degree than did Muddy Waters or B.B. King. Following in the footsteps of Clapton and Jimi Hendrix, who also was active in London and achieved his distinctive tone through the manipulation of effect

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<sup>295</sup> James Hannaham, “Bela Lugosi’s Dead and I Don’t Feel So Good Either: Goth and the Glorification of Suffering in Rock Music,” in *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Twentieth Century Art*, ed. Christopher Gruenberg (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), 95.

<sup>296</sup> Examples of great African-American bluesman praising British blues players are legion. For excellent examples see Tom Wheeler, *The Stratocaster Chronicles* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2004), 175.

<sup>297</sup> Hannaham, “Bela Lugosi’s Dead,” 115.

pedals, English guitarists continued to experiment with the timbre of their instruments in order to achieve greater intensity and expressive nuances, and goth players were no exception. Also, in contrast to African-American artists who often stressed that blues was supposed to be an uplifting musical experience, some British guitarists did not sound like they were trying to create an uplifting affect when they played and this may have had an influence on goth, for example, Peter Green's performance on "A Fool No More" by Fleetwood Mac. Green's guitar signal is saturated with a cavernous reverb effect that brings depth and a palpable sense of emptiness to his long-breathed and eloquent phrases. Green's use of extended techniques in this solo, such as scraping the strings with the edge of the plectrum, or using the side of the plectrum rather than the fingers to execute ornaments, provide textural nuances that help convey a sense of empty space. When he recorded "A Fool No More" Green was clearly more interested in creating mood and atmosphere than he was in making the audience feel uplifted.

Jerrold Levinson writes in *Music, Art and Metaphysics* that part of the reason why music that expresses negative emotions is so enjoyable is because it is devoid of "contextual implications," and allows listeners to savor the emotional force of the work for its own sake. This in turn allows for the "greater understanding of the condition of feeling involved in some recognized emotions."<sup>298</sup> Levinson's observations are probably valid for goth music as well, as fans reveled in the emotional intensity of the work and recognized a part of themselves in it.

### Conclusion

The four musical examples presented in this chapter demonstrate that goth music does exhibit characteristics that literary scholars have identified as essential for a work to be called "gothic" in style, and that the label was not used indiscriminately by music journalists when they described this repertoire. Like gothic writing from the past, songs from this genre were set in the familiar and disrupted the commonplace with the goal of making the audience feel threatened or at risk. The music exhibited a preoccupation with

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<sup>298</sup> Jerrold Levinson, *Music, Art and Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 324-25.

capturing the mood and ambience of the scene described in the lyrics, expressing excessive nostalgia, and the emotional damage caused by personal and national tragedies.

The songs also mocked structures of power and blurred the lines between comedy and horror, all qualities associated with Gothicism in the arts. Songs were often inspired by gothic films and literature, horror film soundtracks, and English decadent poetry. Goth music was not widely accepted beyond the boundaries of the subculture and was often mocked or ignored by the press, and even academic writers attacked goth music because of its camp qualities and the writer's misconceptions about the music's origins.

## CHAPTER 5

### SIOUXISE AND THE BANSHEES: GOTH AND POSTMODERN GENDER THEORY

#### Introduction: Goth and the Significance of Gender

Feminist scholars such as Joy Press, Norma Coates, Sarah Thornton, Angela McRobbie, and others who have turned their attention to popular music typically are concerned with the ways female artists have been ignored or marginalized by the press, the often chauvinistic attitudes of the recording industry, the ways male artists subvert or reinforce prevailing gender stereotypes, and, generally, how the patriarchal nature of modern society affects their work and careers.<sup>299</sup> For these scholars, the lyrics of much popular music can appear threatening to women by continuously reinforcing patriarchal attitudes that characterize the feminine as the “other” of the masculine, leaving women with no sense of identity, the feeling that they have no control over their destiny, and a belief that the music of contemporary society does not speak for them. A survey of gender studies in popular music by authors such as those mentioned above reveal that scholars are divided in their opinion as to whether popular music can help to break down established gender conventions and the patriarchal nature of society, with the ultimate goal of allowing women to achieve a full presence.

Obviously it is not possible for a male musicologist to speak with complete authority on the experiences of female goth participants, so with this chapter I will lay the groundwork for further research into goth by raising a number of questions and presenting observations that deserve further investigation and interpretation. For several reasons, goth music should be of considerable interest to feminist critics and others who study gender issues. First, goth is a musical genre that has largely been gendered feminine by the media. Second, androgyny, and the use of traditional feminine signifiers forms an important aspect of the image of goth bands and the fans themselves. The biggest influence on goth artists, both in terms of music and image, were groups and individuals known for their “gender bending” (appropriating fashion, signs, mannerisms, etc. from the opposite sex), including Marc Bolan and David Bowie in particular. Third, goth fans typically abhor musical styles that are associated with masculinity, such as

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<sup>299</sup> The scholarship of these authors will be discussed individually, in detail, later in the chapter.

heavy metal, progressive rock, and, with the exception of rockabilly, most types of blues or overtly blues-based styles.<sup>300</sup> Songs within the goth genre are typically free of musical signifiers associated with masculinity such as guitar solos, crushing power chords, or misogynistic lyrics.

Next, in spite of its foreboding music and image, goth is known as a genre that is not threatening to women; female musicians are celebrated in the subculture, and the genre features more gender diversity in the composition of bands than is typical in other styles of rock. From the 1980s to the present, women also have made up a very high percentage of the best goth DJs.<sup>301</sup> Finally, and perhaps most significantly, goth is a genre where the sound and image were defined and shaped in large part by a female artist, making the style rather atypical in the culture of popular music. This chapter, therefore, will examine the work of that artist, Susan Ballion. I shall examine the way she and her (all male), band developed what most goths consider the genre's prototypical musical and visual style. Siouxsie and the Banshees, as the group came to call themselves, managed to successfully fuse aesthetic values typically associated with femininity and the gothic in both their sound and image. The resulting style subverted some of the cultural attitudes and sensibilities concerning gender in Britain during the 1980s while simultaneously reinforcing others. In addition, I shall also explore how Ballion's artistic approach corresponds with much postmodern gender theory.

### Susan Ballion: Goth's Matriarch and the transition from Punk to Goth

Like any popular music genre, the stylistic parameters that defined punk rock came about through the work of musical groups responding to specific cultural circumstances, from the needs and desires of the fans, and to the music industry that produced and commodified it. Eventually, some artists who sympathized with punk

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<sup>300</sup> Possible reasons why goths enjoyed rockabilly but disliked other blues-based styles are the genre's melodicism, clean-toned, lush guitar timbres, a fascination with nostalgia, and the non-threatening tongue-in-cheek character that most rockabilly from the 1980s exhibited.

<sup>301</sup> Mick Mercer, personal E-mail, 20, April 2005.

sensibilities wanted to create their own interpretations of the style, resulting in what would come to be known in retrospect as goth. Music journalists who covered the British club scene and reviewed new recordings by independent record labels insist that the genre has no single progenitor, that the sound and image of goth actually developed through the efforts of many now largely forgotten artists--for example, Doctors of Madness and Adam and the Ants--who achieved little commercial success even within the confines of England's musical underground.<sup>302</sup> However, as Hebdige observes, in order for a subcultural style (or any way of composing music) truly to catch on, "it must say the right things at the right time. It must encapsulate a mood, a moment, it must embody a sensibility."<sup>303</sup> The artists whose work best characterized what the press, the fans, and fellow musicians would come to recognize as goth, were Siouxsie and the Banshees.

Through her charismatic stage presence, the beauty of her voice, and her sensitive interpretation of the lyrics, Ballion became an extremely influential musician and currently enjoys iconic status in the goth community. But even though the vocalist may be the group member with whom fans most identify, Ballion has always maintained in interviews that she was not the "director" of the Banshees, but that the band was an equal partnership among its members. Indeed, publishing credits on the band's albums does bear this out. Ballion alone wrote well over half of the group's lyrics, with bassist Severin and the drummer, known only as "Budgie," contributing the remainder. Interestingly, many of the songs whose lyrics address issues such as the physical abuse of women, or words clearly intended for a female persona were composed by male members. For example "Sleepwalking," "Staring Back," and "Hang Me High," were all composed by the Banshee's male drummer. Musically, Ballion was responsible for the vocal melodies, with the harmonies and arrangements composed largely by Severin or one of several guitarists who joined the group over their lengthy career.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Thompson, *Dark Reign*, 28-31. Mick Mercer has also confirmed this in my personal correspondence with him.

<sup>303</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 122.

<sup>304</sup> John McGeoch and John Valentine Carruthers were two of the group's most creative guitarists.

Artists who eventually came to be associated with goth found that the Banshees' distinctive sound and image, including their satirical commentary on popular culture, allowed the group to expand the scope of punk's social criticism to include concerns of a personal nature. In this way, the Banshees were very influential. Their music was free of the sexism prevalent in much popular music of the day; however, the melancholic and somber tone of the music, and the way in which the lyrics were fixated on topics commonly associated with gothic literature, maintained the subversiveness of punk but without the misogyny.<sup>305</sup> As Mick Mercer explains, "goth has the largest female-to-male ratio I have ever experienced. It is totally non-sexist, and equality is the watchword."<sup>306</sup> It is doubtful whether goth would have developed into the British subculture most associated with women and the feminine without the attention given to Ballion's abilities as a performer and songwriter by fans and the media.

The Banshees were more open to experimenting with recording technology and extended instrumental techniques than punk bands were at the time. They embraced synthesizer technologies and worked with a diverse palette of harmonies and timbres that exceeded punk's stylistic norms. Perhaps most importantly, the Banshees brought a pensive, introspective quality to the punk style with an uncanny ability to capture vividly the mood and ambience of their lyrics, which were often inspired by films, literature, and incidents of cruelty they had witnessed or experienced in everyday life. It was a quality that came to define authenticity in goth more than any other.

Frequently, I have asked women who were goths during the 1980s if they felt drawn to the subculture due to its lack of chauvinism, and I asked if they believed that Ballion was largely responsible for setting the tone for this particular youth movement. The answers to both questions were always, "Yes." Typical of the responses that I received was that of Alexandra from Newcastle: "Siouxsie's music was always intelligent and thoughtful. It draws out the romantic in me in a way that [heavy] metal never did."<sup>307</sup> Eve, from London replied: "I never feel like I'm being attacked [in goth music] even if its

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<sup>305</sup> Themes common to gothic literature include the mocking of power, hostility toward so-called progress, family curses, drawing strength from suffering etc.

<sup>306</sup> Mick Mercer, personal E-mail, April 20<sup>th</sup> 2005.

<sup>307</sup> Alexandra, personal interview, 28 October 2006.

very doomy and melancholic.”<sup>308</sup> My informants also stated that they admired Ballion for succeeding in a male-dominated industry, and they expressed respect for her vocal abilities, but they stopped short of saying that they felt any collective pride in her accomplishments simply because she was a woman. These fans most admired her ability to be aggressive, subversive, and to capture the grim realities of life with her singing in a way that they considered more creative, sensitive, and thoughtful than the male-dominated punk and metal groups. Other female fans have stated that Ballion was the only female artist who made them feel strong and assertive. Shirley Manson, writing in the preface to Mark Paytress’s *Siouxsie and the Banshees: The Authorized Biography*, summarizes what many women have expressed about the vocalist: “She was the first to project a really powerful impression of womanhood. There had been a lot of protest singers, but their music never resonated with me. You never got the feeling that she was anyone’s victim or anyone’s whore. She was my girl and has been ever since.”<sup>309</sup> Manson goes on to praise the originality of Siouxsie and the Banshees’s music, stating that she was inspired to become a singer because of them.

### Ballion Sioux: Background and Influences

Neither Susan Ballion, nor Steven Severin, nor the Banshees’ management responded to my multiple requests for an interview. Therefore, I have been forced to rely on secondary source material for biographical information and possible insights into how the Banshees’ influences helped shape the group’s style. I felt that some biographical criticism would be a necessary component of this chapter, since feminist scholars of popular music often rely heavily on the life experiences of their subjects to support their arguments, and there is much in Ballion’s upbringing that may provide insight into her musical style.

Ballion speaks at length about her troubled upbringing in Paytress’s useful, if biased, account. While relying on such an uncritical source poses perils for a researcher,

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<sup>308</sup> Eve, personal interview, 27 October 2006.

<sup>309</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 8-9.



it does supply a valuable record of frank comments made by the group members. The book is organized as a series of reflections by each member about each phase of the band's career, and it touches on topics ranging from the band's musical influences to their dealings with the recording industry. Occasionally, the book gets into difficult topics, as when Ballion discloses that a friend of the family sexually molested her when she was a child.<sup>310</sup>

She describes her father as an intelligent and talented physician, but possessing a weak and submissive character. In contrast, Ballion describes her mother as a stern, strong-willed pragmatist, who had a significant influence on the development of her personality. The vocalist speaks affectionately of how her mother frequently took her to the movies and how she came to love the artistry of Alfred Hitchcock, and Roger Corman's adaptations of Edgar Allen Poe, with Vincent Price. Ballion says that she had always been drawn to female actresses, such as Diana Rigg, who played strong, assertive characters, and that she had a fascination with television portrayals of Native Americans' whom she considered "sexy" and intriguing due to their status as perpetual underdogs.<sup>311</sup> Strangely, Ballion never discusses how she was inspired by the early Hollywood vamps whose influence is unmistakable in her style of make-up and seductive stage persona. Also conspicuous is the absence of any discussion of how she became familiar with Berlin cabaret singers whose influence can be seen in her stage mannerisms and Bohemian, Art Deco clothing.

Ballion grew up in the suburban town of Bromley, and much has been made in the popular press about how the "dull and depressing" atmosphere of the suburbs may have made her hungry for a career in show business, where she came to "seek refuge" in the glamour of punk, glam rock, and cinema.<sup>312</sup> While this view might have been a result of popular journalistic hyperbole, Ballion does appear to be a product of her childhood influences: the attention to film aesthetics in her music, the brash stage persona she displayed during her early career, the fact that she named the band after the Sioux tribe

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 16-30.

<sup>312</sup> See Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 16-30, Thompson, *Dark Reign*, 41-47, and Mark Paytress, "Suburban Guerillas," *Mojo*, June 2006, 71-74.

(symbolizing non-conformity) and a Vincent Price film (“Cry of the Banshee”), and her obsession with childhood traumas and molestation in her music. The last characteristic would, because of her influence, become a trademark feature of goth music, with groups such as Christian Death and The Mission composing songs about the terrors of childhood, although not as frequently as did Siouxsie and the Banshees and without the intimate tone achieved by them.

Ballion and Steven Severin, the two founding members of the Banshees, admit that they had no formal musical training, but that they had been greatly encouraged by punk music’s veneration of the amateur artist as well as its directness and uncomplicated style. Ballion reveals that she was attracted to Severin because “he seemed like an outsider and was not scared of my directness or sick humor,” two qualities commonly associated with the Banshees’ music.<sup>313</sup> In typical punk fashion, the pair reportedly began composing songs by instinct and trial and error, letting the music evolve and take shape rather than being forced into stereotypical blues/rock patterns. Similarly, the guitarists and drummers who played in the band over the years were chosen by Ballion and Severin for their intuitive ability to capture the mood of the lyrics rather than virtuoso skill or due to their ability to interpret a song as a soloist.<sup>314</sup> This does not mean that the band’s music was rigorously composed. As Ballion notes, the Banshees’ early performances were completely improvised,<sup>315</sup> and this ability to generate spontaneously the mood and atmosphere of the lyrics (or at least to give the illusion of spontaneity) would become a major musical hallmark of goth authenticity.

The strongest musical influences on Ballion and Severin appear to have been the British punk icons The Sex Pistols, and they attended many of that group’s performances, even following them onto the continent.<sup>316</sup> Ballion recalls that she found The Sex Pistols intriguing because of the way they intimidated and repelled an audience, and they were encouraged by their unpretentious “anyone can form a band” aesthetic so celebrated by

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<sup>313</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 28.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>316</sup> Paytress, “Suburban Guerillas,” 71-74.

fans of punk.<sup>317</sup> This seemingly irreconcilable sensibility of performing an accessible music style while projecting an exclusionary demeanor was intriguing to punk fans and critics, and Ballion made the characteristic an integral part of goth, as well.

Steven Severin's commentary on why The Sex Pistols were more of an influence on The Banshees' music than the equally iconic punk group The Clash is one of the most noteworthy quotations in Paytress's book and is essential for gaining insight into the goth approach to music. He states,

I thought they (The Clash) were fantastic but I felt there was something very traditional about what they were doing. There was always this kind of worthy thing about them and you never knew which side of the fence they were on. There was something more debauched about The Pistols, and that was obviously more attractive. The Clash were more sincere and a bit humorless. With The Pistols there was always a point in the show where I'd be howling with laughter."<sup>318</sup>

The remarks reveal the extreme distrust and cynicism that artists of the punk genre felt toward any attempt at authenticity, and sincerity, any vestige of idealism, and established conventions of any kind, even within the boundaries of punk itself. Severin's statement, however, illustrates more than just goth's rejection of idealism and authenticity, it also repudiates values associated with masculinity since the logical, the rational, the production of unambiguous meaning, transparent identity, and capitalist production are all associated with the masculine. What Severin admired about the music of The Sex Pistols was that it was fascinatingly ambivalent in meaning, it mixed humor and seriousness in ways that violated the logic of utility. Gavin Baddeley in his concluding remarks on the goth subculture in his book *Goth Chic*, inadvertently echoes Severin's point: "its [goth] playfulness, theatricality, and love of the arcane represent a direct affront to dull consumer culture and a rigid work ethic."<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 44.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>319</sup> Baddeley, *Goth Chic*, 284.

Music critics of the 1980s also used the adjective “feminine” to distinguish the Banshees’ music from that of punk. In the September 1998 issue of *Melody Maker*, Chris Robert’s review of the album *Peepshow* asserts, “Siouxsie and the Banshees avoid meaning like the plague, and this feline wisdom has served them well.” Two paragraphs later, he notes, “The Banshees can mean anything to anybody, embarrassing the gospel of rationality and clarifying chaos by paying it lipservice with that gloss. The Banshees remain coolly dependent on the slyest of feminine touches.”<sup>320</sup> Robert’s comments illustrate how even non-academic writers recognized that Siouxsie and the Banshees’s music was subversive and effective because it sought to undermine the logic of masculine rationality and utility.

Perhaps the biggest influence on the Banshees’ musical style was The Velvet Underground and Nico’s later collaborations with Brian Eno. Not only does Ballion and Severin’s lyric content echo the feelings of alienation and urban loneliness found in The Velvet Underground’s music, but Andy Warhol’s famous collaborators also taught them how to set their disconsolate poetry to music that sounded both unpretentious and chic, skillfully experimental without sounding intellectual or overly clever and contrived. Both The Velvet Underground and Siouxsie and the Banshees take on an almost cabaret persona in their performances, presenting lyrics and tones that disgust and fascinate, combining a self-mocking humor with genuine pathos, and conveying the impression that the artists are so internalized that they seem sadly resigned—as if the music was the product of a decadence born of despair rather than that born of simple indulgence in pleasure for its own sake.

Ballion admits that it was the male members of the band who introduced her to The Velvet Underground, because following new music through the press was such a “boy thing.”<sup>321</sup> Both she and Severin soon came to rely upon the aesthetics of The Velvet Underground as their own standard when auditioning new band members. Ballion remembers not hiring a specific guitarist because “he was a real rock guitarist, always trying to put licks into songs and making funny faces when he played. We spent most of

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<sup>320</sup> Chris Roberts, Review of “Peepshow,” *Melody Maker*, September 1988, 37.

<sup>321</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 29.

the time trying to make him forget what he learned; the mesmeric drone of The Velvet Underground was the blueprint for what we wanted and he was having none of that.”<sup>322</sup> Severin adds, “If someone had showed up and played “Waiting for the Man” on just two chords, and made some kind of silly discordant sound they’d have probably gotten the job immediately. Instead they showed up to noodle for ages. It was horrible. What we wanted was someone who knew the value of being mesmerizing without being a rock virtuoso. And they had to look right. That was probably most important because we had a very precise idea of how the band should look.”<sup>323</sup> Nevertheless, the Banshees differed from Warhol’s band in many ways. James Wolcott wrote in a 1976 review of The Velvet Underground’s music for *The Village Voice*, “even The Underground’s most beautiful love songs were about distances between people, the inability to penetrate the mystery of the other.”<sup>324</sup> The Banshees, on the other hand, had no interest in even attempting to sing about the desire for intimacy. In most of their songs, human relationships are not places of safety, physically or emotionally.

Ballion and the other band members emphasized their high regard for the way The Velvet Underground’s music generated tremendous impact through an economy of means, such as half-spoken lyrics, minimal drum work, and drone-like, repetitive accompaniments. This admiration is very evident in the Banshees’ music. But where The Underground used drones, dissonant sound effects, and repetitive structures and patterns to give their largely blues-based harmonic progressions and melodies an unsettling feel, or as a way to disrupt and call into question the relevance of traditional rock ‘n’ roll conventions, the Banshees, in typical punk rock fashion, built upon The Underground’s approach but shied away from blues-based conventions. For their part, they used drones, sound effects, and extended techniques more to enhance the mood and atmosphere of the lyrics, with accompaniments that possessed traits of both punk rock and film music. The use of blues-influenced melodies and harmonic progressions would have contradicted the Banshees’ desire to ridicule any style that society celebrated as “authentic” and therefore

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>324</sup> Quoted in Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules: Punk Rock and the Making of a Style* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), 15.

masculine. In other words, Andy Warhol's band disturbed the listener by violating and overloading expectations. For the Banshees, defacing a tradition was not enough; they needed to develop their dark sound from other influences, such as film music, punk, and glam rock--sources associated with glamour and/or ephemerality that could be subversive in a way that blues-based structures no longer were.

It is difficult to use blues or blues-based based rock to create irony and sentimentality because the styles are commonly viewed as iconic symbols of authenticity, sincerity and "grass-roots" expression.<sup>325</sup> David Bowie, T-Rex, and The Velvet Underground were the most successful performers at undermining the implied authenticity of blues-based structures through parody, glamour, and theatricality. But irony and sentimentality are key components of goth as exemplified by Siouxsie and the Banshees, whose essential message was that for British youths cynicism and excessive emotion were, in fact, justified, considering the uncertain future that they faced. This also explains why the Banshees embraced studio technology and were able to fascinate audiences by juxtaposing deadpan serious lyrics and sentiments with artificial production values, a sharp contrast to the unrefined, almost "garage" sound of The Velvet Underground.

The Nico/Brian Eno collaborations on albums such as *The End* also unquestionably influenced Siouxsie and the Banshees' artistry. Nico had been widely admired by goths during the 1980s, and even today her songs and video performances frequently appear on goth compilation discs. Nico's most introspective and melancholic songs are characterized by a highly original abstract symbolism, which rock critics have characterized as "existential."<sup>326</sup> Nico's lyrics do feature imagery that is unusually concentrated and vivid for popular music, and symbols that draw the listener's attention beyond literal representation.

Nico's despondent lyricism, eerie and haunting in and of itself, was made all the more effective by the vocalist's distinct monotonal style, which was often described by

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<sup>325</sup> Most music reference books list a preoccupation with authenticity as the most prominent characteristic of blues and rock. For example, Peter Wilton's entry for "Rock" in *The New Oxford Companion to Music* 2003.

<sup>326</sup> Holly George Warren, "Nico," in *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, ed. Barbara O'Dair (New York: Random House, 1997), 251-61.

critics as unemotional or detached. In actuality, Nico's vocal timbre was responsible for a considerable part of the emotional impact of her music. The vocalist's throaty alto and *Sprechstimme*-like delivery can overwhelm the listener with a sense of hollowness and despair, making albums like *The End* sound like meditation on the futility of human life, surpassing The Velvet Underground in emotional intensity. Part of what makes Nico's music so fascinating and seductive is that it has much in common with her appearance. Just as the vocalist's dour demeanor and "hard" features both contrasted with and, intriguingly, complemented her physical beauty, her ominous vocal timbre made her melodies both fascinating and unsettling for the listener.

Brian Eno had a sympathetic view of Nico's approach to songwriting, and his ambient, textural accompaniments and sound effects provided the vocalist's melodies and lyrics with an atmosphere that enhanced the texts, enveloping listeners and perhaps making them feel as though they themselves had experienced the events depicted in the lyrics. His accompaniments are often the result of experimentation with recording techniques. He had an affinity for using synthesizers and other sophisticated sound processing technology without indulging in "technical excess," and for exploring the sonic possibilities of a few select instruments.<sup>327</sup> Eno's own commentary on his musical style suggests an approach to composition that may be regarded as feminine, or at least highly compatible with a feminine sensibility. He describes his ambient music as seductive, mysterious, and sensual with an inspired, spiritual approach to instrumental technique and a disdain for gymnastic, athletic execution. He shares with Nico a desire to create music strong in aesthetics but with "no moral or overtly political content."<sup>328</sup>

Eno says he agrees with author Edward Whitmount, who, in his book, *Return of the Goddess*, declares that the phallic values associated with the consciousness of the Cold War created the nuclear age, then lost the power to control it, and finally left a society in desperate need of feminine sensibilities.<sup>329</sup> Staying true to the spirit of Whitmount's writings, Eno was an ideal collaborator for an artist such as Nico, who held uncompromising ideas about how her music should sound.

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<sup>327</sup> Eric Tamm, *Brian Eno and the Vertical Color of Sound* (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 1995), 29.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-82.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

The influence of the Nico albums can be heard clearly in the music of Siouxsie and the Banshees with its emphasis on ambience and atmosphere in the music, and lyrics that dwelt on negative experiences. However, significant differences do exist between these artists—differences that had implications for goth, since the genre’s style is largely a synthesis of the style of Nico and Brian Eno and punk rock. Ballion and Severin’s lyrics generally contain less abstract symbolism than Nico’s, as they are more influenced by popular culture and are less epic and formal in tone. Their music ultimately has more in common with punk than Eno’s; the ambient timbres, textures, and studio effects are only part of the intertextuality of the Banshees’ music. As might be expected for a group so heavily influenced by punk rock, Siouxsie and the Banshees experimented less with synthesizers than Eno had done, relying more on the typical rock ensemble of voice, guitar, bass, and drums. Ballion’s approach to singing is much different from Nico’s who used her deep, resonant alto range to complement the somber mood of her lyrics in ways that seemed both beautifully expressive and deliberately grotesque. Ballion’s mezzo-soprano voice is elegant and striking in its beauty, and she employs it with great musicality. Her vocal articulations range from light and breathy, to rich and resonant, to piercing screams. Her almost expressionistic glissandos from one extreme register to another were probably derived from the punk style described by Hebdige as defiling what is beautiful—self-mutilating her attractive timbre.

When she sings, Ballion never sounds as inconsolable as Nico’s whose vocal style was once described by record producer John Cale as a musical depiction of suicide.<sup>330</sup> Ballion’s lyrics sometimes surpass those of the former Velvet Underground vocalist in terms of the graphicness of her depictions of anguish, but the accompanying music still possesses the energetic drive of punk, and, when combined with the forcefulness of Ballion’s singing, the lyric persona strikes the listener as having a fair chance of transcending its negative circumstances. It is for this reason that Ballion’s music is more accessible and comes across as having a slightly more consoling tone without seeming maternalistic in any way.

Siouxsie and the Banshees cite David Bowie and Marc Bolan as their primary influences, expressing admiration for how their androgyny made them interesting to both

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<sup>330</sup> Warren, “Nico,” 259.



sexes, and how their images were just as much a part of their creative expression as their music.<sup>331</sup> Throughout the group's authorized biography, Ballion constantly discusses image and fashion when identifying her influences, but she rarely has much to say about the music that inspired her. The androgynous figures of Bowie and Bolan are the most feminine of all the artists that she cites as influences, so perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to suggest that the vocalist's ideas concerning the use of femininity as a subversive signifier came to her through these artists and not from actual women.

Ballion states (correctly) that she was not simply copying Bowie in terms of music or image but definitely felt she was filling the void left behind when the singer stopped challenging audiences through his appearance and eschewed the Orwellian vision of society that he expressed through his lyrics.<sup>332</sup> Nevertheless, the press consistently attacked Ballion throughout her career as a talentless Bowie clone. For example, Julie Burchill began her review of *The Scream*, for *New Musical Express*, by rhetorically asking "Who wants to be David Bowie when they graduate? Hands Up! Siouxsie-ah Siouxsie."<sup>333</sup> Sexism may have played a part in the Bowie comparisons, but many of Ballion's most strident detractors were women like Burchill who felt that the vocalist appropriated too much of glam rock's theatricality and the style and content of Bowie's lyrics. In retrospect, David Bowie's influence was not particularly pronounced in Ballion's music *or* image. The impact of Muddy Waters on Eric Clapton's guitar style or the influence of Woody Guthrie on Bob Dylan is far more apparent by comparison, yet, the originality of these artists has been called into question far less frequently in the British and American music press than has that of Siouxsie and the Banshees, possibly due to the importance of image to the band's ability to make an impact on their audience.

Unlike Bowie albums such as *Ziggy Stardust*, the Banshees did not create concept albums centering on constantly shifting, fictional personas, as this would be at odds with punk definitions of authenticity that remained strong in their music and image. Even on the level of individual songs, Bowie, with his theatrical conception of rock, was

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<sup>331</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 35.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>333</sup> Julie Burchill, Review of "The Scream," *New Musical Express*, November 1978, 45.

constantly expressing himself through characters, from Major Tom in “Space Oddity” to “Andy Warhol.” Ballion, on the other hand, rarely speaks through such defined alternate personas, preferring to write reflectively or from the perspective of a narrator. Ballion and Severin’s lyrics are just as sophisticated as Bowie’s, similarly dealing with uncomfortable feelings surrounding a wide range of social ills, but the energetic drive and discordant harmonies and timbres (holdovers from punk) ensured that the group’s social critiques would always be viewed as menacing, subversive, and innovative in a way that, by 1979, David Bowie and other glam rock artists no longer were. Bowie inspired the Banshees to take an interest in the beat poets and demonstrated to them that, unlike punk and metal artists, one can write effective social commentary with a contemplative, reflective tone, and without using powerful, aggressive, violent rhetoric.<sup>334</sup>

Musically, Siouxsie and the Banshees have little in common with Bowie, whose music remained solidly ensconced on a blues-based foundation, with references to the rock stylings of the 1950s, although frequently used in an ironic, sarcastic manner. What the Banshees share with Bowie was the importance that they both placed on refined studio production, the vivid evocation of a mood in each song, the privileged position of the voice in the mix, and lyrics that offered serious reflection on contemporary society. Each possessed a willingness to experiment with new timbre and creatively appropriate a wide variety of influences. But perhaps the most significant characteristic that they shared was their special ability to create rock music that did not passively entertain the listener, but required some thought to be fully appreciated while at the same time was no less accessible to audiences than other genres of rock.

Although in Paytress’s biography Ballion never mentions the early twentieth-century cabaret singers as an influence, she obviously appropriated much from that historic art form. The band probably borrowed the idea of applying cabaret principles to modern rock music from David Bowie’s work during his so-called “Berlin years,” when the artist was producing and composing for albums such as *The Idiot* by Iggy Pop—recordings that played on postmodern, media-driven stereotypes of the German capital as a place of angst, decadence, intellectualism, and gothic art.

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<sup>334</sup> For information concerning the artistic collaborations between Burroughs and David Bowie see Allen Hibbard ed., *Conversations with William S. Burroughs* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), xii.

Susan Ballion's appropriation of cabaret is, of course consistent with postmodern principles of tearing signifiers out of their original contexts and (ideally) making them relevant in a new setting. That Ballion was an admirer of Bowie and influenced by his interest in Berlin cabaret is not especially surprising, since glam rock and the decadent German repertoire share some common features. They both parody popular fashions and forms of entertainment, they both possess curiosity and a cynicism about modern social values, and they both question established gender roles through androgyny, lyrics with wit, the rejection of political conservatism, and the vital importance of mannered, affective live performances to successfully communicate the sentiments of the composer.<sup>335</sup> In addition, cabaret, glam rock, and goth all share, despite their flamboyant nature, a melancholy self-awareness of their own ephemerality, which was generated through sentimentality and a foregrounding of elements considered faddish or unimportant by the larger bourgeoisie society. The three styles all mock nostalgia in a knowing way (i.e., that is, that the good ol' days were not so good) while skillfully inviting the listener to feel nostalgic for the music itself through its sentimentality, and masterfully and deliberately generating a sound to correspond with the zeitgeist. Ballion probably found inspiration from German cabaret because it was a style full of wit, intellectual without being stodgy, an accessible and pleasurable diversion but still rich in social critique. Appropriating cabaret signifiers was a creative way to provide a new, sophisticated element that was compatible with punk (and subcultural) expression, as Ballion's borrowings played upon historical, tragic conceptions of cabaret during the 1930s as an art of persecuted nonconformists, pitiable because of the ultimate fate that befell many of the performers and fans during Hitler's tenure. In other words, the borrowings help provide goths with the means to portray themselves as intelligent, victimized, but resilient dissidents living in decadence during a conservative, oppressive era. Ballion probably also found the signs of cabaret useful because it allowed her to retain a subversive image while simultaneously distancing herself from masculine punk aggression. Female cabaret singers were notorious for their erotic stage shows, which, as Peter Jelarich states, simultaneously satirized strip shows while capturing some of their

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<sup>335</sup> Peter Jelarich, notes to *Ute Lemper Berlin Cabaret* (1997), CD, London 9180-7.

energy.<sup>336</sup> The same could be said for Ballion's presentation of her own sexuality. While the "vamp" was not the only component of what would become the stereotypical image of goth women (from Ballion's influence), it certainly was a major element.

The influence of cabaret extends to goth music as well as its image and lyrics. Cabaret was both suave and easy to grasp, incorporating techniques from jazz, musical theater, and popular songs of the day, from oompah-pah rhythms to extended techniques on instruments, to intricate counter melodies, to a jazz-inspired chromatic harmonic palette, all with the singular purpose of evoking the mood of the text without interfering with the prominent position of the voice. Ballion's work, particularly after 1979, was increasingly influenced by the "theatrical" style of cabaret singing, with its syllabic declamatory delivery and lines punctuated by long-held notes and vibrato for added lyricism. Vocal effects common in music theater, such as laughs, sighs, snarls, moans were prevalent in Ballion's vocal style. In sum, the influence of cabaret on the music and image of Siouxsie and the Banshees, like the influence of early horror films, Nico, and David Bowie, forms part of an intertextuality comprised of sources that expressed melancholy emotions in a captivating, glamorous way consistent with the social trends of the 1980s.

### Siouxsie, Gender, and the Development of a Subculture

Engaging and confronting gender stereotypes and the politics of gender form a significant component of Ballion's work as a recording artist. This naturally leads to questions of how her music and image (however inadvertently) came to be seen by fans and the press as the paradigm of goth, and the role of gender in this development. As I previously stated, by and large, goth music has been gendered feminine by the press. The absence of chauvinistic attitudes was significant to persons who identified themselves as goths. Ballion's contribution to the creation of a new subculture was no small achievement and remains underappreciated by music journalists. Even academics who have published extensively on punk rock and categorize Siouxsie and the Banshees as

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

punk artists have given her short shrift in their writings.<sup>337</sup> Whenever Ballion has been featured in popular and academic publications, many more pages have been devoted to her appearance than to her music or to her abilities as a vocalist and poet. This is unfortunate, since Ballion's music was as important to the development of goth as her image.

Ballion does not discuss feminism, sexism, or any gender issues in Paytress's biography of the group. Perhaps doing so would run against the grain of rock notions of authenticity. Instead, she states that her gothic style of aestheticism was the result of growing up in a British suburban town "rooted in the grim realities of everyday life," which seemed to strip individuals of their uniqueness and from which "music and fantasy were the only escape."<sup>338</sup>

Ballion speaks at length in the Paytress book about her desire to give audiences popular music that prompts thought, the way she felt David Bowie and The Beatles had done in the past. Her sentiments are not unlike those of Bob Dylan, who, in speaking of the 1960s counter-culture movement, stated during his early career that:

There was no ideology in town to rebel against, so I had to manufacture an ideology. I would listen to songs like (Doris Day's) How Much Is That Doggie in the Window? and was convinced that the mainstream media was not presenting a picture of reality.<sup>339</sup>

Similarly, goth could be considered a manufactured ideology reflecting the perspective of an articulate youth who had found her environment insipid but then discovered a way to make artistic truth out of the banality. Ballion goes on to say that her art was also motivated by the prevailing ideas of what constituted normalcy, which prompted her desire to trash as many sacred cows of the mainstream as possible, an attitude consistent with her punk roots. The sound that Siouxsie and the Banshees imagined would achieve these ends was the total antithesis of Eric Clapton, Deep Purple,

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<sup>337</sup> For example she is hardly mentioned in Dave Lang's study *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock*, Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, or books from non-academic presses such as Vernon Joynson's *Up Yours: A Guide to U.K. Punk, New Wave, and Post Punk*.

<sup>338</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 11-38.

<sup>339</sup> Martin Scorsese, *Bob Dylan: No Direction Home* (2005), DVD, Paramount DVD1589-2

Led Zeppelin, and other groups brimming with masculine signifiers.<sup>340</sup> It is plausible that Ballion felt the need to incorporate signs from cabaret and gothic films and literature into her sound and image to intensify her position as “other.” It is remarkable that she felt being a female punk singer still did not position her with enough “otherness” to make social critiques that would have an impact on fans and the press.

Jean Baudrillard, in his many writings on postmodern culture, states that the mass media and virtual technologies shrink not only gender differences but also differences between adults and children, between ethnicities, or between any groups of individuals who used to possess significant differences, as signs and symbols are constantly combined, modified, and recontextualized. This environment of pastiche, eclecticism, and unstable, shifting meanings leads, according to the philosopher, to a collective, unbearable craving for otherness—to be an other, to see an other, and subcultures could be considered a symptom of this deficit of difference. In his essay *Otherness Surgery*, Baudrillard introduces the following concept:

The other is no longer an object of passion, but an object of production. Perhaps in its radical otherness or its irreducible singularity, the other has become dangerous or unbearable, and its seductive power has to be exorcized? Or perhaps, quite simply, otherness and the dual relation progressively disappear with the rise of individual values and the destruction of symbolic ones? The fact remains that Otherness does come to be in short supply, and if we are not to live otherness as destiny, the other has to be produced imperatively as difference. This goes for the world as much as for the body, sex, and social relations. It is to escape the world as destiny, the body as destiny, sex as destiny, that the production of other as difference will be invented.<sup>341</sup>

Ballion’s subversive image and musical creativity reflects Baudrillard’s comments by the way she skillfully downplays masculine visual and musical signifiers in an attempt to regain the passion and intensity that otherness used to inspire. Ballion’s

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<sup>340</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 51.

<sup>341</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 51.

seductive appearance stands in great relief when contrasted with the emaciated males who comprise the Banshees. The way Ballion's music and image create a unified melancholic affect, synthesized from a variety of compatible signifiers, draws attention to the constructed nature of otherness in contemporary society.<sup>342</sup>

The Gothic aspects of her artistry serve to make her so overtly other that society's impulse to cleanse itself of her dangerous seductive power is greatly magnified, making her artistry the perfect foundation for a subculture. Since goth has much in common with punk rock (in many respects goth is a feminized form of punk), the fundamental differences between the two must be articulated in order to appreciate goth's uniqueness as a musical genre and subculture.

Bob Dylan, in discussing the influence of Woody Guthrie on his music, revealed that he and other folksingers of the 1960s were able "to find out who they were by channeling Guthrie." Speaking of the original American folksingers, Dylan goes on to say, "when you looked into their eyes, they always seemed to say I know something you don't and I always wanted to be that kind of performer."<sup>343</sup> Similarly, goth fans came to view the work of Siouxsie and the Banshees and subsequent bands as embodying a coherent sensibility. The gothic literary and cinematic elements of her music and image gave her an affected and afflicted mystique, that suggested that she understood the harshness of life with greater sensitivity than ordinary people, and that fans could "find themselves" through her.<sup>344</sup> This stands in sharp contrast to punk rock, which defines authenticity through populism. The bands do not suggest that they know more than the fans, or that they can articulate the concerns of their followers better than the followers could themselves.

It is difficult to see how goth could have developed the way it did without Siouxsie and the Banshees. But feminist scholars should ask whether her espousal of

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<sup>342</sup> Charles Mueller, "The Postmodern Trajectory of Brian Warner" ( Unpublished Paper Presented at the Extreme Folklore and Musicology Conference, Indiana University, March, 2006), 8.

<sup>343</sup> Scorsese, *Bob Dylan*.

<sup>344</sup> A picture of Ballion could not be added due to copyright restrictions, but the band's official website [www.vamp.org](http://www.vamp.org) contains many galleries of old and new photographs. Also see the DVD Siouxsie and the Banshees, *Nocturne*, which contains performances from the early 1980s.

feminine signifiers, her aestheticism, and rejection of masculine musical signifiers can be read as a feminist statement. Some feminist scholars feel that the pursuit of individualism is usually associated with the masculine, and Siouxsie's music and image could be seen as a statement of individuality and not a celebration of the feminine.

Marion Young, for example, feels that community is the feminine counterpart to masculine individuality. She writes, "asserting the value of community over individuality, the aesthetic over the instrumental (which Ballion does), and the relational over the competitive does have some critical force to resist the dominant patriarchal ideology underlying social relations."<sup>345</sup> But Ballion's music does not have the sense of community that punk possesses in its simplicity, directness, and anthem-like quality. Her music is filled with themes of alienation, and personal subjective experiences. Ballion says she deeply resents her reputation as goth's matriarch, probably because she desired to follow in the footsteps of artists like Bowie, Nico, and The Velvet Underground, who possessed irreproducible styles and had no subculture or social community associated with them. Siouxsie and the Banshees created a sense of community because they captured subjective moods so effectively that they conveyed a sense of mutual empathy. A genre based on creating specific moods helps explain why bands labeled "goth" sound so diverse.

In order to fulfill her stated goal of inspiring others to explore their own uniqueness, Ballion's music and image had to retain an element of "star power," fascinating with no sense of everydayness, becoming what Baudrillard often calls a "super sign." This explains the necessity of incorporating symbols from cabaret, early Hollywood vamps, and gothic cinema into her creative work. Bassist Severin believes that the band inadvertently started the goth genre with their 1979 album *Join Hands*, which he described as "gothic" to music journalists, due to the influence of Edgar Allan Poe on many of the songs.<sup>346</sup> But Ballion and Severin have nothing but disdain for other bands in the goth genre, primarily because they feel that their music is faithful to the aesthetics of gothic literature with its complexity and terror (authenticity) as opposed to

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<sup>345</sup> Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 307.

<sup>346</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 106.



other groups who simply use gothic symbols for their empty sign value. Ballion asserts that “Gothic in its purest sense is actually a very powerful twisted genre, but the way it was being used by journalists always seemed to me to be about tacky harum scarum horror and I find that anything but scary. That was not what we were about at all.” She adds that their 1981 album *Juju* “had a strong identity which the goth bands who came in our wake tried to mimic, but they simply ended up diluting it. They were using horror as the basis for a stupid rock ‘n’ roll pantomime. There was no tension in their music.”<sup>347</sup>

Ballion ridicules other bands for using gothic symbols in ways she considered kitsch, while denying this element in her own music. But it was precisely their kitsch style that made the sounds and images of goth bands resonate with working class youths, playing on English stereotypes of the supposed lack of taste among the lower classes. Some fans echo Ballion’s sentiments, believing that goth bands who followed her overworked the gothic signifiers and turned her music into a cliché, destroying its subversive qualities. For example, Shirley Manson opines, “Later the press began to describe them as a goth band. I never thought of them as goth. Goth has never been particularly angry, just a little dismayed. It always had a weak submissive side to it. The Banshees always had a real edge to what they did there was so much articulated spite, humor, and politics with a small ‘p’ I never felt they went down that simply gloomy path.”<sup>348</sup> Ballion is equally dismissive of members of the goth subculture, who, in punk fashion, wanted to blur boundaries between the stage and the audience.

Postmodern theorists would describe the emergence of goth as an example of how commodities end up producing new categories of people, but I question whether this can be true of something as affective as music, even in its commodified form, due to its abstract nature. Baudrillard would probably question whether goth is truly a subversive counter-culture style, because postmodern consumerism has a way of normalizing neuroses and deviance as they become part of the whole system of consumer objects.<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 9. Mason’s comment is simply her opinion and does not reflect the views of most goth fans in the U.K. or that of music journalists.

<sup>349</sup> This is one of the central ideas that Baudrillard presents in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 9-57.

Still, fans insist that artists like Siouxsie and the Banshees were simply articulating sentiments they had already internalized and agreed with. For example, when journalist Steve Sutherland of the *New Musical Express* accused former Banshees guitarist Robert Smith, who also served as a guitarist and vocalist with The Cure, of creating a fanbase that wallows in self-pity, the songwriter defended the sincerity of his music and his fans: “I’ve never really considered that I’ve had anything of importance to say on record and yet we get hundreds of letters from people who are very concerned about what we’ve done; it’s almost been a soundtrack to their crises. It’s [their music] not like an incentive for someone to wallow in their own despair. It’s impossible for me to justify what we’ve done because it only mirrored our own experiences, it never really sought to do anything more than that.”<sup>350</sup>

Although Siouxsie and the Banshees enjoyed an iconic status in the goth scene, they in turn were often ridiculed from within the subculture for their arrogance and self – important attitude. However, if the group seems frivolous and petty in attempting to safeguard their originality, it should be remembered that the Banshees started during a time when different youth subcultures shared an often uneasy co-existence in Britain. As Severin now admits, “These days, everything is smoother it [styles and subcultures] evolves across boundaries and gets sucked into the whole culture.”<sup>351</sup>

### Gender and the Punk Roots of Goth

In her article “Girls and Subcultures,” Angela McRobbie points out that females often have different motivations for joining a subculture than males, and the characteristic style and behaviors of such groups can often have a special significance or meaning for women.<sup>352</sup> For this reason the question of whether goth has more or less potential than punk to make women feel less vulnerable, and more empowered, with

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<sup>350</sup> Steve Sutherland, “The Incurables,” *Melody Maker*, December 1982, 18.

<sup>351</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 46.

<sup>352</sup> Angela McRobbie and Jenny Graber, “Girls and Subcultures,” in *The Subcultures Reader*, edited by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London and New York: Routledge, 1977), 112-20.

greater opportunities for creativity is an issue that should be of concern to feminist scholars of popular culture.

In Lucy O'Brien's insightful article "The Woman Punk Made Me," one of the few essays to chronicle the punk movement from the female perspective, the author expresses sentiments that are often echoed in the music of Siouxsie and the Banshees.<sup>353</sup> For O'Brien, the single most compelling reason why young British females became interested in alternative ideologies and the styles of music and fashion that accompany them was the unsatisfactory way that the American counter-culture movement manifested itself in the U.K. She argues that although the "hippie" movement is stereotypically viewed as being based on an ideology of liberation, offering an escape from the endless cycle of consumerism and outmoded social conventions of all kinds, it was anything but emancipatory for women growing up in the early 1970s. She offers the following reasons: First, by the time the 1960s had come to a close, the "hippie" image was so prevalent that it had been absorbed into mainstream fashion and no longer possessed any subversive connotations, while mainstream ideals of beauty had begun to permeate the counterculture movement to the extent that female "flower children" were expected to be just as slender, obedient, and ornamental in function as a bourgeois housewife. Second, she claims that the espousal of the "free love" that was a part of the 1960s counterculture simply became an excuse that men used to justify promiscuity, and a ruse to get women to sleep with them, making their partners feel that they were holding up the revolution by abstaining. And finally, the economic uncertainty and unemployment in England at the time did not create a suitable environment (that is, provide the required affluence) for a carefree anti-establishment counter-culture to flourish.<sup>354</sup>

This cynicism and aversion that female punks like O'Brien felt for the counter-culture movements of the 1960s could explain why Ballion has never cited Janis Joplin as an influence. On the surface, it might seem like Joplin would have been a natural role model for a young female artist like Ballion who aspired to become a subversive voice in

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<sup>353</sup> Lucy O'Brien, "The Woman Punk Made Me," in *Punk Rock: So What?* ed. Roger Sabin (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 186-98.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 186-188.

music. Joplin was, after all, a celebrated recording artist during the 1960s and was part of a musical movement that helped effect political change. However, Joplin's legacy is controversial for critics concerned with the relationship between popular music and emancipatory social change for women. Simon Phillips and Joy Press give an excellent summary of why feminists are more likely to dismiss Joplin as a wastrel than revere her as role model, in spite of the passion and musicality of her performances. Phillips and Press describe Joplin as a figure who consistently projected an image of neediness and powerlessness, composed lyrics based on female masochism, and was controlled by her passions. The quality of Joplin's performances and recordings was inconsistent, and her music does not represent enduring achievement.<sup>355</sup> Susan Ballion, on the other hand, was inspired by women who radiated strength. Even Nico, whose lifestyle was just as self-destructive as Joplin's, never seemed needy, or out of control. Ballion was also influenced by women (and men) who were seductive, which Joplin never was. Joplin was content to work within blues-based conventions, which had gradually acquired masculine connotations by the late 1970s.

O'Brien affirms that the punk subculture provided females with an attractive way to voice dissatisfaction with society. Dressing like a punk with the aesthetic terrorism described by Hebdige became a device for vandalizing mainstream images of femininity, while simultaneously proclaiming their self-determination and individualism.<sup>356</sup> The author's descriptions of the unsettling effect her appearance had on English citizens is similar to the way Julia Kristeva portrays the effect of abstract styles of writing on language, making it easier for women to express themselves beyond the gender binaries coded in language.<sup>357</sup> O'Brien also found punk liberating because women did not have to conform to a specific body type in order to feel welcomed in the subculture; an ugly [overweight] body in tight clothes could function as a part of punk's terrorism through

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<sup>355</sup> Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock "n" Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 272-74. Unfortunately the authors fail to cite the feminist scholars who have criticized Joplin, or name the lyrics that they found to be masochistic. Their harsh critique of Joplin is debatable.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 191-93.

<sup>357</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Weller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 110-26.

style, and this attitude complemented the disdain for sex and romantic relationships common in punk expression.<sup>358</sup>

According to O'Brien, women paid a high price for their participation in the punk movement. She describes how they were constantly threatened by men outside the subculture, but were also viewed with contempt and dismissal by fellow participants if they wanted to perform music. She describes her admiration for Susan Ballion and how her blank-eyed stare and aggressive stage presence were necessary devices for survival in the industry.<sup>359</sup> However, since Ballion began her career as a member of the Sex Pistol's entourage, and later founded a subculture based on her artistry, then feminist scholars should consider the question of how much of punk's constructions of femininity she retained? Another unresolved issue is whether goth (basically Siouxsie's interpretation of punk) is less sexist with more principles in common with contemporary feminism than punk, which is generally considered an assault on all liberal values.<sup>360</sup> Goth retains the use of fashion as a subversive tool and as a symbol of independence. But goths were different from the "walking graffiti" characterized by Hebdige, disruption through bricolage that characterized the punk style. Goth's image, saturated with signifiers historically associated with decay, mourning, and expressionist horror films, defied the sense of empowerment that punk gave its members, and its fatalism was a more pointed symptom of disapproval with society, and with a greater unity of affect.

Although the protest singers of the 1960s made it acceptable for female artists to exhibit a strength of character and perform music with a confrontational tone, the music and image of Siouxsie and the Banshees reflects O'Brien's belief that the hippie movement did not free women from their subordinate position in society, where they functioned as sex toys and as emotional support for the counter-culture revolutionary heroes. Siouxsie's image, an amalgamation of the cabaret vamp, a corpse, and a patient of Dr Caligari, combined with music centered around uncomfortable topics, and a Nico-inspired singing style gives the vocalist the appearance of being too disturbed or angst-

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<sup>358</sup> O'Brien, "The Woman Punk Made Me," 191-93.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>360</sup> Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 33.

ridden to be sexy. The message of glamour equals decay runs as a continuous thread though her artistry intuitively reflects the postmodern view of the sexual revolution as an empty sign that led nowhere. The mystery and passion of sex was sacrificed as the act became a commodity forever associated with masculine productivity.<sup>361</sup>

Lucy O'Brien feels that one of the most serious side effects of the philosophy of "free love" was that it caused nothing but anger and anxiety, as most individuals could not cope with the jealousy generated by promiscuity.<sup>362</sup> Siouxsie and the Banshees's music (as well as that of other goth bands) articulates this source of tension between the sexes perhaps more affectively through her angst-ridden image and music that treats relationships not with the disdain of punk but with melancholic cynicism or as a source of danger.

According to my female informants, goth is a subculture where women of all shapes and sizes can feel good about themselves, since the style requires a great deal of artifice. Feminist critics can decide for themselves, if this interest in fashion, where the beauty of women is based on the artifice that adorns them rather than their actual physical bodies, is a type of sexism. However, O'Brien's description of full-figured women proudly using the "ugliness" of their bodies in the service of punk's aesthetic terrorism potentially sends a far more damaging message to women, reinforcing the mainstream view that they are unattractive unless they are extremely thin.

Ballion's emergence as a subcultural icon is also an issue worthy of investigation by female scholars, since as Simon Reynolds and Joy Press point out in *The Sex Revolts*, women signify the antithesis of rebellion. According to the authors, "Women represent everything the rebel is not (passivity, inhibition) and everything that threatens to shackle him (domesticity, social norms). This ambivalence toward the feminine domain is the defining mark of all the classic instances of rock rebellion."<sup>363</sup> Therefore, the idea of a female counter-culture icon is almost an oxymoron. Postmodern theorists like Baudrillard insist that in consumer society women are slowly becoming more like men with less

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 37-49.

<sup>362</sup> O'Brien, "The Woman Punk Made Me," 194.

<sup>363</sup> Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 3.

contrast between the sexes than ever before, and a case could be made that Ballion (and all female punks) are a symptom of this phenomenon.

But if punk provided a context for women to behave in a more assertive manner, militantly aggressive in their non-conformity, are they really appropriating masculinity? And if so, why is goth, which has its roots in punk, gendered feminine? It seems likely that these women were simply standing up for issues that they believed in and voicing their concerns about society just like their male counterparts. Scholars such as Norma Coates insist that often women have sacrificed their femininity, becoming tomboys in order to be taken seriously by the fans,<sup>364</sup> but it is questionable if this observation applies to Siouxsie, so her strategies for registering refusal must be different from those employed by other genres.

The goth genre, as defined by Siouxsie and the Banshees, was not unrelated to the punk movement described by Hebdige. In *Seduction*, Baudrillard describes industrial capitalism as governed by a logic that is distinctly masculine. It is a system fanatically obsessed with growth, accumulation, and transparency. No ambiguity of any kind is acceptable in this masculine sensibility, and all gestures or symbols of deviance or defiance must be obliterated or neutralized through their absorption into the system of fashion and consumerism.<sup>365</sup> Siouxsie and the Banshees attacked the masculine logic of production, transparency, and force through the use of signifiers associated with seduction, and by developing a musical style that was the antithesis of all that was considered masculine in rock. In this way, Siouxsie and the Banshees influenced all the bands who later came to be described as goth. Goth's assault on masculinity took many forms. Masculine power in sex and relationships was a frequent target in the songs. The band identified the masculine logic of production as the primary cause for the banality of contemporary life. Seduction and artifice undermined the masculine preoccupation with utility and power. In other words, Goth continued the punk movement's critique of the late capitalist system through gender.

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<sup>364</sup> Norma Coates, "Revolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender," ed. Shelia Whiteley (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 50-65.

<sup>365</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 15, 34.

Goths typically point to *The Scream* by Siouxsie and the Banshees as the first goth album. Certainly on this album the Banshees developed a sound considerably different from the work of The Clash, The Sex Pistols and The Ramones. *The Scream*, although not without humor, is filled with sentiments of personal distress rather than political rage. The music is far more sophisticated than punk in terms of its harmonic language, production, and recording, and more experimental in every respect, in the tradition of The Velvet Underground. Siouxsie's voice possessed a greater range and a more refined technique than that of punk singers, and was often multi-tracked to harmonize the vocal line (a rarity in punk). Severin's bass was foregrounded in the mix and provided an ominous ambience that helped give every track on *The Scream* the same bleak, static quality. This gave Ballion, and guitarist McKay a solid foundation on which to build a tapestry of disjunct melodies and cluster-chord harmonies that left listeners with the impression of near cacophony. Ballion explained that although many thought the album's title referred to Edvard Munch's famous painting of the same name (quite understandable, since both works express the same dizzying angst), it was actually inspired by the Burt Lancaster film *The Swimmer*, which deals with a person who nearly drowns.<sup>366</sup>

The album quickly became a source of aural empathy for listeners who felt that life offered limited possibilities for happiness and self-fulfillment. But *The Scream* leaves behind the confrontational quality that defined authenticity in punk in favor of capturing the pensive mood shared by young people at the time. What makes the recording noteworthy from a feminist perspective is that the album, for the first time in punk, contains lyrics dealing with the domestic abuse of women in songs like "Suburban Relapse," and openly ridicules masculine signifiers of power as its primary purpose. An excellent example of Ballion's ability to mock and caricature manifestations of patriarchal power is the song "Metal Postcard," a track said to have been inspired by a speech delivered by Joseph Goebbels.<sup>367</sup> The song also bears the inscription "Dedicated

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<sup>366</sup> Mark Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees: The Authorized Biography* (London: Sanctuary, 2003), 72-73.

<sup>367</sup> Dave Thompson, *The Dark Reign of Gothic Rock* (London: Helter Skelter, 2002), 42.



to Joseph Heartfield,” an artist who used elaborate photomontages to ridicule the Nazis, and Siouxsie admitted that her idea for the song came to her after viewing an exhibit of Heartfield’s work in 1977.<sup>368</sup> Possibly the vocalist found inspiration in this technique because like punk rock, photomontage requires insight and imagination but no virtuoso technique. It is also typically based on an aesthetic of ugliness and invites audiences to question the truth behind appearances (particularly in regard to the way the media covers events). Photomontages fascinate and entice the viewer into a nightmarish world where the logic of industrial capitalism and the masculine sensibilities of production are presented as grotesque and absurd. Such industrial-themed photomontages also leave one with the sense that all values associated with femininity such as beauty, empathy, and tenderness have been permanently effaced from the world. The juxtaposition of biological organisms and industrial objects blurs their distinction, leaving one with a sense that the organic being has been violated (a female, particularly a rape victim like Ballion, might sense this even more acutely).

“Metal Postcard” shares many of the same aesthetic characteristics as photomontage. The lyrics caricature and lampoon the ease with which societies in the twentieth century have conformed to media messages and revered masculine, charismatic figures. The ostinato figure that accompanies the verses is programmatic with its precision of ensemble and its evocation of clockwork, mechanical production, which is achieved through the anapestic rhythm. This riff is only a small number of instances where Siouxsie and the Banshees constructed a song with so called “power chords,” the harmonic foundation of almost all punk and heavy metal music and that are often considered masculine signifiers.<sup>369</sup> However in this case the chords, when combined with the programmatic rhythm, parody rock’s masculine power, and the logic of production and order. The riff is rhythmically captivating but not a gesture of power, since it is a witty parody. The blue note bends on B-flat that open the song similarly ridicule the masculine obsession with authenticity in rock guitar solos. The chorus provides a sense of contrast with its long sustained harmonies, but the equal emphasis given to each beat of

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<sup>368</sup> Susan Ballion notes to Siouxsie and the Banshees, *Downside Up* (2004), CD, Universal LC6444.

<sup>369</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 42-45.

the measures maintains the mechanistic atmosphere and draws attention to the rhymes in the text that lampoon the musings of the fictional dictator.

The timbres enhance the machine-like quality of the music, which implies that punk and heavy metal are formulaic and monotonous. The guitar's tone is overdriven but not fully distorted, allowing the percussive, metallic snap of the steel strings to be prominently heard. The mix contains a moderate amount of reverb, intensifying the mechanical pulsation of the riff and saturating the ears of the listener with an industrial ambience (the tone of the hollow-body electric guitar that McKay was known to have used also contributed reverberation as well). The treble and midrange emphasis in the final mix allows the guitar to grate over the bass line. Unlike many rock and pop songs, Siouxsie's narrow-range melody is memorable, clearly defined, and has a recitation-like quality. Her tone appropriately changes from juvenile defiance during the verses to haughty pompousness during the choruses, as the point of view shifts between a narrator and a dictator. Her shrill and unpredictable glissandos deliberately deface her attractive voice, suggesting that her femininity was lost and consumed by the logic of masculine production.

In *The Sex Revolts* Reynolds and Press describe *The Scream* as “the most fleshless and unfluid music ever written.”<sup>370</sup> And although it still possesses directness, accessibility, and the amateur aesthetic of punk rock, the importance of studio production, the emphasis given to evoking a distinct foreboding mood in each song, and its ridiculing of masculine symbols were new to the genre and would come to be seen as important characteristics of goth.

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<sup>370</sup> Reynolds and Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 302.

## Siouxsie and Postmodern Seduction

No gender study of a rock artist from the 1980s, the “golden age” of MTV, would be complete without discussing their connection and interaction with the postmodern environment in which sex and relationships take place. In the case of Siouxsie and the Banshees, examining their place in the postmodern sexual milieu helps define their strategies for resistance that would come to define goth, and it helps to underline the essential differences that separate it from punk, metal, and other genres that value masculine authenticity.

Perhaps the most effective essay on the challenges of having relationships in the postmodern age is Jean Baudrillard’s *Seduction*, published in 1979 (the same year the Banshees and goth began emerging as a phenomenon), and many of the issues and concerns that Baudrillard raises were reflected in the Banshees’ music and visual presentation.<sup>371</sup> *Seduction* is one of Baudrillard’s most difficult texts, and his explanations often take the form of lengthy contemplations. For the sake of clarity, I paraphrase the major points of his arguments, and then explain how the music of Siouxsie and the Banshees could be considered a soundtrack for the disquieting circumstances Baudrillard describes. Since the philosopher is the only one to have written extensively on the concept of seduction and its importance in postmodernity, this portion of the dissertation will largely consist of a discussion of Baudrillard’s observations as applied to the goth genre.

The first challenge facing sexual and gender relationships in the postmodern age is that the electronic mass media, through films, advertising, videos, etc., has made sex banal by oversaturation, or as Baudrillard (quoting Barthes) pithily puts it, “sex is everywhere except in sex.”<sup>372</sup> In other words, sex was at one time a unique type of union, reciprocated and symbolic between two people, but has since been rendered into a pure sign that can appear in any context. Baudrillard is not making a prudish argument here, but instead is disturbed over the way the rapid circulation of images is depriving people of experiences with the potential for intimacy and connectedness.

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<sup>371</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans, Brian Singer (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1979).

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

The situation is exacerbated by the level of detail and intensity in which sex as a sign is presented in the mass media, moving the act into the realm of the “hyper-real” or the more real than real. Baudrillard writes: “there is no need for the phantasies that haunt pornography (fetishism, perversions, primal scenes) for they are barred by an excess of ‘reality.’ Perhaps pornography is only an allegory, that is to say, a forcing of signs, a baroque enterprise of oversignification touching on the ‘grotesque.’”<sup>373</sup> To Baudrillard, this “pornography” or the visceral thrill of viewing digital images in immaculate detail and replacing the intimacy of sex, has more to do with the celebration of technological excess than it does voyeurism, not unlike the way that he feels, for example, that the Japanese obsession with creating hi-fidelity stereo is motivated more by their desire to flaunt their technical and productive capabilities than a love of music. And in the end our appreciation of music becomes poisoned to a certain degree, because we feel that we cannot appreciate it fully without the digital transparency that removes all the mystery and seductiveness from the tones.<sup>374</sup>

Baudrillard feels that the oversignification of sex and all portrayals of romantic relationships in the media have removed all of the passion and drama from real human interaction to the point that all relationships now resemble a game with no stakes or challenges, since both sides now know all of each other’s moves. He writes “sex today generally occurs in place of a missing seduction or as the residue from a failed seduction. It is the absent form of seduction that is hallucinated sexually in the form of desire.”<sup>375</sup> To put it another way, portrayals of sex and romance in the media are empty signs that play on desire but contain no trace of seduction, and this ultimately serves to contaminate real human relationships, reducing them to predictable formulas with no uniqueness or depth.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of postmodernism, concerning sex and gender, is, according to Baudrillard, the way that the feminine has been stripped of its seductive abilities. I do not believe that Baudrillard was making a gender-essentialist assumption,

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 40.

suggesting that seduction is the only significant characteristic of the feminine. His point is more a condemnation of postmodern society where the masculine logic of production is so all-consuming that seduction is the only way that the feminine can survive, but even this is slowly being taken away. Again, it is necessary to quote the social critic at length to understand the full scope of his argument: “This pressure towards liquidity, flux, and the accelerated articulation of the sexual, psychic, and physical body is an exact replica of that which regulates exchange value: capital must circulate, there must no longer be any fixed point, investments must be ceaselessly renewed, value must radiate without respite—this is the form of value’s present realization, and sexuality, the sexual *model*, is simply its mode of appearance at the level of the body.”<sup>376</sup> In other words, attraction, sex, and romance have become deeply intertwined with the masculine logic of capitalism, an obsession with value and the accumulation of meaning; yet another aspect of a larger destructive cycle where human beings gradually become more and more like consumer objects.

With this last point, Baudrillard has clashed with most feminist scholars, who have accused him of being hostile to the goals of contemporary feminism. The philosopher is, like the majority of intellectuals, in no way opposed to equal rights for women, but he is quite adamant that feminists are misguided in their distrust of seduction, and their desire for “liberation,” as this only serves to imbue women with the same logic of production that characterizes masculine thinking. Baudrillard explicitly expresses his conviction that masculine productive logic (with which feminism is compliant) attempts to define and limit sexual gender discourse in terms of transparent laws and rigid boundaries to create an absolute “truth” about sex, an aspect of life that should remain too ambiguous, personal, and profound to be represented out of context.

One theme that appears continuously throughout Baudrillard’s oeuvre is that “when reality is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning.”<sup>377</sup> Ballion’s work could be said to represent a nostalgia for seduction (we have previously seen how she attacks production), and genuine passion in relationships, and that she possesses an

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 43-47.

ability to disrupt the mania for transparency of meaning that would help to restore a feminine sensibility to music. On the other hand, her music could be interpreted as an expression of seduction as an empty sign, which could also be seen as an important symbolic gesture. Baudrillard points out that most feminists are distrustful of seduction and artifice because they feel the devices, if embraced, reduce women to simply objects for the male gaze and prevent them from achieving full status as a subject.<sup>378</sup> Considering Ballion's extensive use of artifice in her image and stage persona, and the seductive qualities of her music, it is unlikely that her work could be seen as being compatible with academic feminist thought. In the realm of popular music however, Ballion was attempting to create a musical style that could serve as an alternative to rock's misogyny, with clear benefits for women.

Postmodern theories of production and seduction are important for understanding the goth approach to music composition, their subversive strategies, visual representation, and the genre's essential distinctness from punk and heavy metal. Baudrillard believes, for example, that society has lost a great deal of its humanity because it is completely dominated by the masculine logic of production, which he says only accumulates without deviating from its end (i.e., all must be transparent, power and desire must grow and accumulate, everything is a means to an end). "It replaces all allusions with its own, which becomes the reality principle. Production, like revolution, puts an end to the epidemic of appearances."<sup>379</sup>

Whether one considers the fashion and music of punk to be an authentic and tangible act of subversion the way Dick Hebdige does, or a hollow and ultimately meaningless network of signs, the genre features the rhetoric and logic of revolution and confrontation as its defining characteristic. Siouxsie and the Banshees, on the other hand, embraced the principle of seduction and made it central to their approach to expression and subversion. The group seems to have understood intuitively Baudrillard's observation that the principles of progress, growth, production, and value—the key attributes of contemporary society—are sustained by clarity, transparency, and concrete

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 42-45.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 57-65.

definitions and meanings. But ambiguity, seduction, mystery, and uncertainty annul and disrupt those vital characteristics, threatening the dominant ideologies. “This [production, capital] is what today assures sexuality of its mythical control over hearts and bodies, but it is also what lies behind the fragility of sex and the entire edifice of production.”<sup>380</sup>

Seduction is the antithesis of positivism and power, and this explains why it plays such a significant role in the music and image of goth.

Ballion’s physical appearance, which became the model for goth females, has undergone many changes through her career, but it always signified seduction. Baudrillard states that no seductress can be more seductive than seduction itself.<sup>381</sup> This is exactly what the vocalist appears to be trying to achieve. Whereas the image of punk, according to Hebdige, relied on a bricolage of working class symbols, with the participants disfiguring themselves to become walking graffiti,<sup>382</sup> Ballion’s image was always a compilation of symbols of both angst and beauty, more glamorous than punks, but ultimately more disquieting. Most of Ballion’s costumes consisted of carefully defaced art deco outfits from the 1920s or English Victorian funeral attire. Occasionally accessories associated with sexual sadomasochism were added. Her hair was styled into a mane of jet-black spikes, and her heavy use of make-up was inspired by the “vamps” of the silent film era.

Although her stage persona and mannerisms may have been aggressive and confrontational during her early career, for most of the 1980s, Siouxsie and the Banshees appeared melancholy, misanthropic, and introspective during their performances, with minimal body movement and a searching gaze that never made eye contact with the audience or each other. Any sense of camaraderie or rapport among the band members was not apparent, which made the musicality and tightness of their ensemble even more intriguing. The message of their songs became more seductive as a result of their

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>382</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture*, 26.

enigmatic behavior and appearance, bringing to mind Baudrillard's observation that "the power of words and their symbolic efficacy is greater when uttered in a void."<sup>383</sup>

In spite of Ballion's unsettling but glamorous appearance, the beauty of her eyes, and the attractiveness of her physical features, the singer does not radiate sex appeal but presents herself as a symbol of seduction rather than a living person, and this may have been what the press was referring to when they characterized her appearance as ghoulish.<sup>384</sup> Ballion's grim, sensual, but unisexual image complements her songs, which in most cases portray sex as dangerous.

Baudrillard observes, "the seduction of eyes...is the most immediate, purest form of seduction, one that bypasses words. Where looks alone join in a sort of duel, an immediate intertwining, unbeknownst to others and their discourses: the discrete charm of a silent and immobile orgasm. Once the delightful tension of the gazes gives way to words or loving gestures, the intensity declines. A tacility of gazes that sums up the body's full potential (and that of its desires?) in a single subtle instant, as in a stroke of wit. A duel is a simultaneously sensual, even voluptuous, but disincarnated—a perfect foretaste of seduction's vertigo, which the more carnal pleasures that follow will not equal."<sup>385</sup> Ballion has no interest in the carnal pleasures either; the power of seduction is enough.

There are different ways that Ballion's presentation of herself as a personification of seduction could be linked to a gothic sensibility. First, she dramatizes, with her beautiful but hollow, seductive but dispirited image, the unseen currents that postmodern theorists have identified as flowing largely unnoticed through contemporary society: the insatiable captivation with negativity and tragedy, and the collective feeling of emptiness that derives from living in a world of endless production where all is known and all is banal. Secondly, as Baudrillard believes, signs and signifiers are most seductive when they have been turned away from their meanings.<sup>386</sup> Typically, sex and relationships

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<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>384</sup> Paul Morley, "This is Siouxsie and the Banshees," *New Musical Express*, January 1978, 7.

<sup>385</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 77.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 74.



connote fulfillment and life, however, in Ballion's artistry, they signify the exact opposite. Finally, her appropriation of signifiers from cabaret, early cinema, and the glamour of art deco were meant to invoke impressions of seduction and stardom that have always been synonymous with death. "The death of stars is merely punishment for their ritualized idolatry. They must die, they must already be dead so that they can be perfect and superficial, with or without their make-up. But their death must not lead us to a negative abreaction for behind the only existing form of immortality, that of artifice, their lies the idea incarnated in the stars, that death shines by its absence, that death can be turned into a brilliant and superficial appearance that it is itself a seductive surface."<sup>387</sup>

David Bowie had previously expressed the emptiness of the cold seductive fascination of glamour with his *Ziggy Stardust* and *Aladdin Sane* albums, but Ballion presents a more intense and fatalistic interpretation of the principle. What is perhaps most inventive and imaginative about the goth genre as defined by Siouxsie and the Banshees is the way its music and image simultaneously present these glamorous symbols of death and seduction in a manner that seems both sepulchral and humorous, a seductive irony that could never exist in the realm of masculine order with its rigid maintenance of boundaries.

Ballion's embodiment of seduction conforms to the Banshees' music in the way one might expect. The band composed a number of songs about seduction as if attempting to capture the mystery and intensity of either casting the spell or being in the power of another. An excellent example is "Melt" from the album *A Kiss in the Dreamhouse*, recorded in 1982. Bassist Severin remarked that the title came to him (in postmodern fashion) after watching a TV program about Hollywood prostitutes during the 1940s who would undergo plastic surgery in order to emulate the appearance of certain movie stars,<sup>388</sup> tragic victims of the same zeitgeist that Baudrillard would describe forty years later and goth would dramatize by juxtaposing signs of glamour and death, and ridiculing masculine production. The lyric persona of "Melt" is an unknown woman, perfectly concealed behind her mask of artifice, the ideal metaphor for the annulment of

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>388</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 74.

power.<sup>389</sup> The theme of the song is clearly the dramatization of the seduction and death of the object by the subject, which represent the ephemerality of affections, the danger of sex to one's physical and emotional life, and a celebration of the power of women. We really do not know why she is speaking (which is seductive in and of itself). We have no idea of the persona's goal. Is she mocking, taunting, or simply asking for the surrender of the object? The lyrics progress in a manner similar to a Poe narrative, where an aggressor treats the victim to an extended description of his fate.<sup>390</sup> Here, however, we are unaware of the persona's motivations, or if the victim deserves his fate, the song simply describes pure seduction, one-upsmanship, and death. The persona's only concern is to carry the act through.

Every element of the song is designed to envelop and captivate the audience in an atmosphere that is appropriately both impassioned and foreboding. Like a poem by Poe<sup>391</sup> the listener is smothered by unceasing repetition, from the sound of the words, to the rhythms, melodies, and harmonic progressions. The repetitions are rendered all the more effective by the sensual nature of the individual motives. The contrast between the beautiful, lyrical melodies and harmonic progressions and the violence of the lyrics is seductive, marking the only dramatic contrast in the song, which is consistent with the



Example 5.1 "Melt" a. opening guitar theme with rapid tremolo

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<sup>389</sup> *A Kiss in the Dreamhouse* is currently out of print. See the Siouxsie and the Banshees website to obtain the lyrics: <http://www.vamp.org>.

<sup>390</sup> The celebrated *Cask of Amonillado*, and *The Pit and the Pendulum* are but two examples.

<sup>391</sup> *The Raven* and *A Dream Within a Dream* use this technique extensively.



b. melody of the chorus

single-mindedness of seduction. Within the lyrics and music themselves, the contrasts are subtler, but they are responsible for generating considerable tension.

The only allusions in the song are musical. The flamenco-inspired tremolo guitar line in the introductory measures (Example 5.1), the bright, metallic percussiveness of the instrument's strings, and the harmonic progression evoke the style of Enrico Morricone's film soundtracks, which Ballion cites as an influence.<sup>392</sup> The Morricone allusions evoke drama and suspense, stylization and artifice, and loneliness, but, perhaps most importantly, they signify the dead Hollywood icons, forever fascinating, seductive, and beautiful, blurring the lines between reality and illusion.

The lyrics are intimate and personal in tone but laced with destructive, cruel phrases. Throughout the song, the diction is a double-edged sword, simultaneously cold and tender with carefully chosen metaphors and adjectives: melting (diffusion, impotence, surrender, death), suicide in sex (seductive contradiction, the most uncomfortable phrase in the song), blazing orchids (femininity, sensitivity, beauty, fragility, exoticism concealing danger), beheaded (castration of power), handcuffed in lace, blood, and sperm (passion, entrapment, beauty), funeral of flowers (cold reality in stylized language). The timbres of the voice and guitar mirror the simultaneous sensuality and coldness of the diction. Ballion's voice is resonant and projects strongly, but her lines are articulated with a quivering vibrato that appropriately signifies weakness. As Baudrillard observes, one always seduces with weakness, not strong signs of power. John McGeoch's guitar tone is similarly sensual (performed on an electric twelve-string guitar with pitch-modulation effect pedals) but also quite metallic and cutting. The effect is both lush and transparent, a false depth.

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<sup>392</sup> Susan Ballion, notes to *Siouxsie and the Banshees Downside Up: The Singles* (2004), CD, Universal LC6444

The incessant descriptive images of melting and suffocation in the lyrics are accompanied by repetitive arpeggio patterns on the guitar and bass. These broken chords relay a sense of disintegration, made all the more effective by the reverb and modulation effects, which soften the articulations, blur the definition of the notes, and take the strength and punchiness out of the bass line.

The harmonies were chosen for their sensual qualities, as well. E-minor is the most lush and sonorous key available on the guitar because it can be rendered with mostly open strings. The harmonies accompanying the verses consist of the alternation between i and iv (E minor and A minor, the two most resonant chords on the guitar), a simple progression but a device used frequently by film composers like Morricone when they wished to create a pervasive sense of melancholy.<sup>393</sup> The harmonies supporting the chorus alternate between i and VI, a gesture that has always been associated with sentimentality or strong feelings of sadness in popular music going back to the 1940s.<sup>394</sup> And since the Banshees wish to keep the listener seduced and “in the moment,” there is not a dominant chord to be found in the song; the slightest sensation of movement would destroy its captivating mood.

The sounds of the words play an important part in the song’s musical evocation of seduction. There are no rhyming words, but the repetition of consonant sounds in the alliterations is unnerving and stands in contrast to the sensuality of the music. The alliterations all evoke different connotations: men/melt (eclipse of power), suicide/sex (disturbing contradiction), funeral/flowers (death), breathe/breath (physicality), discipline/devotion (the emotions involved in the song), and, appropriately for a song about seduction, an enchanting reiteration of the word “you.” The captivating repetitions are augmented and magnified by the infinite arpeggios of the guitar and bass parts, and the repetition of the ascending vocal lines of the verses.

Another important source of tension in the song is how the passionate, almost frantic lyrics are sung with strong, continuous, mesmerizing rhythmic patterns. Ballion performs the verses with a strong iambic emphasis on the syllables. However, for a brief

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<sup>393</sup> *A Fistful of Dollars, A Few Dollars More and, The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* are just a few of the films where the composer used this device.

<sup>394</sup> “Stand by Me” by Ben E. King, “As the Years Go Passing By,” by Deadric Malone, and “Evenin’” by T-Bone Walker are three examples.

moment during each verse she dramatically switches to a tumbling triplet rhythmic pattern in order to emphasize the most powerful phrase. In the first verse, the pattern changes on the words “leads to an insatiable desire.” The second verse, which contains the figurative violence of the seduction, the rhythmic shift emphasizes the castration, “making you choke, making you sigh.” The most graphic imagery comes during the third verse, where Ballion rapidly alternates between iambic and triplet patterns of accent. Her technique creates a great deal of tension, making it clear that the subject is completely lost to the object. The caesura at the end of each line marks the end of one complete thought and complements the flow of the rhythmic patterns of the singing. The only caesura that does not occur following a line is after the word, “suicide,” to emphasize the danger of the physical act, death in sensuality, and the power of the subject over the object. The rhythm of the chorus is sung with an iambic feel but with spondaic accents to emphasize the commands of the seductress, “So Melt!”

The patterns of rhythmic accent in the singing are enveloped in an incessant ostinato rhythm of the drums, evocative of a bolero with its tumbling bursts of sixteenth-notes, which complements the Spanish folk-character of the opening guitar melody and symbolizes eroticism, since the exotic is often associated with passion and primal desires (particularly in pop culture). The rhythm throws the fervid lyrics into striking relief, and, at the same time, underscores Baudrillard’s observation that “in seduction no quarter can be given in a challenge where love and desire are dissolved. Nor any respite less this fascination be returned for nothing?”<sup>395</sup> The intimacy of the seduction is conveyed through the narrow range of the melodies and the gentle, enticing way each of the phrases of the verses ascends melodically, with the length of each note matching the hypnotic rhythm of the poetic meter. The most unsettling part of the melodies comes at the end of the chorus, when the line plunges into the lower register on the ominous imperative “my lover melt.” Ballion’s delivery of each phrase echoes what Baudrillard identifies as the credo of every seductress: “I do not want to love, cherish, or even please you but to seduce you—and my only concern is not that you love or please me but that you are seduced.”<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 86.

The listener is immersed in the seductive effects in “Melt,” being at once more static and more ambiguous than the typical verse-chorus format of most punk rock by using the same accompaniment for the chorus that is used for the second part of each verse, and the integration of the haunting guitar melody of the song’s introduction into the music of the final verse.

“Melt,” reflects the spirit of postmodernity in a number of important ways. With all its musical materials deployed in an unremitting, perpetual manner appropriate for a musical evocation of seduction, it is a metaphor for the way the electronic media permeates one from all sides, simulating a total environment. Goth’s obsession with generating an enveloping ambience is an aesthetic perfectly befitting the values of the twentieth century. The version of “Melt” recorded on *A Kiss in the Dreamhouse* was produced with those values of total simulation in mind, with its heavy use of digital delay (echo) and continuous digital reverb effects that distract from the music’s melodic and harmonic beauty and the musicality of the performances of each member. The band’s live performance of the song on a 1983 episode of *The Old Grey Whistle Test* has a much different character precisely because the digital effects and studio production do not push the melody and harmony into a secondary position.<sup>397</sup>

“Melt” could be interpreted as an example of nostalgia for the seduction that Baudrillard feels is sorely missing from contemporary life. The song underscores the fact that sex is everywhere in society, but relationships are often frail, and plays against the listener’s desire and expectations for transparency, to make everything known and tangible. By offering no concrete intention, it remains seductive, which Baudrillard identifies as the most powerful and important characteristic women can possess: “Yes women have been dispossessed of their bodies, their desires, happiness and rights. But they have always remained mistresses of the possibility of eclipse, of seductive disappearance and translucence, and so have always been capable of eclipsing the power of their masters.”<sup>398</sup> Most feminists consider the power that the philosopher describes as little more than a consolation prize for the kind of submission that women have endured

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

<sup>397</sup> Siouxsie and the Banshees, *Nocturne* (2006), DVD, Universal 062498305171.

<sup>398</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 88.

throughout the twentieth century. Although academic writers could interpret Ballion's creative use of seduction as reducing women to caricature, it could be argued that she helped women achieve a full presence within the medium of popular music and subculture.

### Siouxsie's Seductive Image

There can be little doubt that Ballion's presence played a major role in the spread of the Banshees' reputation as a prototype of the goth look, sound, and feel, helping the band both to establish an identity and to deliver its musical message. Much has been made in the popular press of Ballion's "sinister" look, but the reasons why her appearance has been considered so disturbing have not been correctly identified. As I previously mentioned, *New Musical Express* called the vocalist a "ghoul" because of her heavy, dark eye makeup, ghostly white powdered face, and blank, stoic expression. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press describe Siouxsie as a female David Bowie who fused the dominatrix, vampire, and Halloween witch into style terrorism. They go on to say that her image was a weapon to confront the male gaze, and describe her music as "abandoning politics for magic and mystique."<sup>399</sup>

While elements of Ballion's attire sometimes included sexually alluring accessories such as black nylons or fishnet stockings, most of her stage costumes consisted of ornate, black, Victorian funeral attire, and/or art deco style outfits from the 1920s. I have never seen any recorded performances or photographs where she overtly resembled a witch, vampire, or dominatrix. As for her music's being apolitical, magical and mystical, there is hardly evidence for that; the group's lyrics engage in a wide variety of social commentary, and certainly engage in the sexual discourse of its time, as we have seen. A survey of the group's lyrics will yield few examples of songs dedicated to magic or mysticism. The key to Ballion's subversiveness lies in her use of signifiers associated with seduction and her ability to express and dramatize their destructive potential. Virtually all of the group's most disturbing or melancholy songs, with topics ranging

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<sup>399</sup> Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts*, 282-92.

from child molestation, to the murder of women, to sex as a source of angst and terror, involve the sinister use of seduction.

The characteristics of Ballion's image that have been labeled "gothic" also derive from her appropriation of signs associated with glamour and seduction from the vamps of early films and cabaret acts, and the stars of early horror films. Baudrillard calls cinema idols and other "star" performing artists "sacred monsters [an appropriate term for Ballion's persona] no longer beings of flesh and desire, but transsexual, super-sexual beings endowed with the power of absorption [of meaning] rivaling the world's power of production. They were our only myth in an age incapable of myths, or figures of seduction comparable to those in mythology and art."<sup>400</sup>

Siouxsie is the personification of a void or abyss (which Baudrillard uses as metaphors for seduction, since they represent the mysterious and unknown). She does not use her appearance as a weapon to confront the male gaze with force, she annuls power. What critics identify as her ghoulish qualities are a dramatization of the fact that "the seductress' face is not the reflection of a soul or sensitivity, which she does not have. To the contrary, her presence serves to submerge all sensibility and expression beneath a ritual fascination with the void, beneath the ecstasy of the gaze and nullity of her smile,"<sup>401</sup> and nowhere has this been shown more effectively than in Ballion's music videos. The short films that accompany each song feature a pastiche of rapid cutaway images of Siouxsie's face and eyes while she dances provocatively in various disfigured Art Deco costumes. Her images are, as Baudrillard would say, "dazzling in their nullity and coldness, a metaphor for our universe of meaning with its flickering network of signs and images."<sup>402</sup> She appears as a beautiful, captivating corpse, an effect made more intense by the appearance of the Banshees' emaciated looking male band members, usually dressed in white (with bleached hair), or an unadorned all-black suit, throwing Siouxsie's seductive properties into greater relief.

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<sup>400</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 95.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 123.



Ballion draws attention to the “gothic” aspects of glamour and the veneration of idyllic media icons by playing the role of the dead sex object—dead just like the film star, clone prostitutes described in *A Kiss in the Dreamhouse*. In the postmodern age, people prefer, as Baudrillard describes it, “the possessive spell cast by dead sex objects to the seduction of a living being who would demand love in return; the monotonous fascination with dead difference over seduction.”<sup>403</sup>

This is the state of relationships that the work of Siouxsie and the Banshees chronicles: media objects seduce individuals, which, with the misuse of seduction in “real” relationships creates a perpetual state of sexual angst. But Siouxsie and the Banshees’ image and music would not be so compelling if society did not thirst for seduction, for anything that is not transparent. With her piercing gaze and robust, sensual, and penetrating vocal timbre, Siouxsie, as Baudrillard says of all seductresses, does not suffer the weight of desire.<sup>404</sup> Consistent with the themes of her songs (seduction as a destructive force, child mistreatment, abuse of women) she seems seductive but indifferent to sex. Baudrillard states that to seduce is to die as reality and be reborn as illusion,<sup>405</sup> and goth, with its imagery of decay, dramatizes the emptiness of the rebirth. At the same time, the themes of Ballion’s songs suggest that she feels no nostalgia for the real—that artificiality, with all its shallowness, is still preferable to the banality and despair of everyday life.

The vocalist’s seductive but melancholy image and emotionally intense music play on the essential commonality between negative misconceptions of women as hysterical and common criticism of the horror film: that each is guilty of excessive emotion. With Ballion’s construction of femininity as subversive, her use of visual and musical symbols from horror films and gothic literature are understandable and consistent with the postmodern yearning for authenticity, the desire to feel connected to the past, and a longing for fulfilling, meaningful experiences.

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<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 23.

Baudrillard writes in *Seduction*, “Love is a challenge and a prize: a challenge to the other to be seduced in turn. Perversion from this perspective takes on a somewhat different meaning: it is to pretend to be seduced without being seduced, without being capable of being seduced.”<sup>406</sup> The vocalist’s misanthropic image most certainly appears impervious to any enticement, and her music often conveys this phenomenon as well. “Something Blue,” an experimental B-side of the single “The Passenger” (1986), is the synthetic reverie of an unidentified person. The song is similar to “Melt” in the sense that it attempts to capture and present a single affect in the abstract, without a clearly defined sense of time, place, or context, and seduces the listener through the repetition of rhythms, arpeggios, and melodic phrases that correspond to each line of the text. Also, only one verse is repeated throughout the song, each time separated by instrumental interludes that maintain the reflective mood of the vivid daydream.

The music exudes and deliberately makes creative use of what Baudrillard describes as the primary characteristic of the portrayal of romance on the screen—“an exercise of the senses that is not the least bit sensual.”<sup>407</sup> For example, the only timbres that are used to accompany the voice are the artificial sounds of an emulator (the first sampling keyboard that produced extremely phony, synthetic replications of the instruments that they were supposed to imitate). In this instance, the synthetic guitar



Example 5.2 “Something Blue” a. sampled marimba ostinato

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<sup>406</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 86.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.

Some - thing Blue, some - thing spark - l - ing though,

5  
out of the Blue I'm re - mind - ed of you \_\_\_\_\_

Example 5.2 - Continued b. melody of chorus

sounds more like a nasal, reedy organ, and the perpetual-motion arpeggios produced by the synthesizer are set to resemble a marimba (see Example 5.2a). The timbres fascinate as a starlet might, that is, they seem too beautiful to possess so little warmth and depth. The instruments were mixed with a considerable amount of digital reverb (set to mimic a large hall), which the Banshees' producers seem to use as a metaphor for the impermanence of strong emotions (a fake depth, both fascinating and alluring.). The electronic timbres are so overwhelming that one hardly notices the quality of the chords.

The rippling accompaniment during the verses features hollow open fifths, a quality enhanced by the percussive timbre of the marimba setting on the synthesizer. Mixed into the background are additional synthesizer parts set to mimic the lush orchestral strings used in film soundtracks. Since they were composed to imbue the music with a sentimentality worthy of the cinema, these harmonies do contain minor thirds, which sound striking when juxtaposed with the open fifths of the simulated marimba lines. The timbre of the "synthetic" string parts was deliberately used as a tacky counterfeit of a string orchestra, saccharinely sweet and incapable of conveying a sincere sentiment. The music is simply sensuality reduced to an exercise. However, the effect caused by the importance of the harmonies being overshadowed by the timbre does complement the song's lyrics, which primarily appeal to the sense of sight with their emphasis on imagery over action and references to synthetic, vivid colors.

Ballion's vocal lines remind one of a melody from a cabaret number with its declamatory character and narrow range that, despite this, are still dynamic, due in large part to the interpretative abilities of the singer. Each phrase in the song is sung to a clear

melodic period; she does not just simply recite the lines of a single pitch. Ballion claims that she was (again) influenced by the scores of Enrico Morricone, boasting that the song was a soundtrack worthy of the celebrated film composer.<sup>408</sup> His influence is especially apparent during the haunting melody of the chorus (Example 5.2b) with its long-held, vibrato-heavy pitches, and conspicuous leaps of a minor third reminiscent of themes that Morricone penned for *Once Upon a Time in the West*, *A Few Dollars More*, and other spaghetti westerns. The melody brings the glamour and seductiveness of the cinema to bear on the lyrics, with considerable success. The song never comes across as trite or contrived, juvenile or generic in its presentation, only seductive.

Although camp culture, from Oscar Wilde, to Boy George, to *Hammer* horror films, to television shows like *Absolutely Fabulous* has had a long tradition in England, none has utilized seduction and glamour as a tool for social critique as effectively as Siouxsie and the Banshees. Ballion and her colleagues view the masculine logic of production as a destructive mindset responsible for a majority of the ills plaguing postmodern society, from domestic abuse, to unfulfilling personal relationships, to the abuse of political power. The group was not ashamed to make creative use of the power of artifice that they appropriated from Berlin cabaret singers, early horror films, and Hollywood starlets. In addition to their effective articulation of the fears and anxieties of young people during the Thatcher era, Ballion's unique interpretation of the style of punk rock was instrumental in the creation of goth, a music-based subculture that many women found appealing and non-threatening.

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<sup>408</sup> Ballion, *Downside Up*.

## Siouxsie and the Banshees, Musicology and Feminist Criticism

Most feminist scholars of popular music base their methodologies on the work of Julia Kristeva, who (although sharply critical of popular culture as a force for social change) believed that female artists and writers could help all women achieve full subjecthood if they could disrupt the masculine control of language.<sup>409</sup> A good example of scholarship that builds upon Kristeva's intellectual legacy (although the authors never acknowledge her influence) is *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music*, co-written by Lori Burns and Melissa LaFrance.<sup>410</sup> According to the authors, a "disruptive diva" is essentially a female composer and/or performer who has helped liberate the language of popular music for women, and such artists possess five distinguishing characteristics: First, their music has in some way run contrary to the dominant traits typically found in the genre they work in. Second, the music of these artists "disquiets and unsettles the listener" by drawing attention to negative experiences and feelings that are more common to women than to men, what the authors refer to as "gyno-centered" traumas. Third, Burns and La France state that disruptive female artists verbally or musically call into question what is considered typical or normal in politics and society. The fourth feature that they share is that they actively participate in the recording and production process of their music and have a reputation for standing up to record companies, if necessary, in order to achieve their artistic goals. The authors feel that this characteristic is particularly important for "the female voice" to be fully realized in popular music. Lastly, Burns and La France believe that the truly subversive female artists, those who stand the best chance for helping to improve the social position of women, are those who have been commercially successful, writing in a style with wide popular appeal, and whose careers have possessed a substantial amount of longevity. The writers stated that they deliberately excluded artists who have been outspoken on gay rights, and punks, heavy metal artists (and goths) whose music is associated with

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<sup>409</sup> An excellent summary of Kristeva's complex ideas can be found in Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 163-64. The original source is Kristeva, *Revolution*, 1-10, 43-106.

<sup>410</sup> Lori Burns and Melissa LeFrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

subcultures that tend to antagonize or alienate large portions of society.<sup>411</sup> Evidently, the authors felt that musicians who work in styles typically considered “underground,” or appealing to only a niche audience, are unlikely to influence significantly the beliefs and values of the general population.

Burns and Le France are unflagging optimists about the ability of popular music to effect emancipatory social change, and they reject the opinion that popular music can never be subversive or critical because it is a commodity and more often than not produced by large corporations. In their analysis of works by female artists, they are concerned with explaining how and why the media attempt to trivialize and neutralize the most subversive compositions by women composers, and why the sexist, racist, homophobic attitudes that characterize the most pervasive ideologies in society seem never to prevent most audiences from enjoying the musical expression of artists who represent a voice of dissent for social groups that are oppressed. In other words, they are interested in determining what factors serve to make subversive music palatable to a large demographic.<sup>412</sup>

The points raised by Burns and Le France, are certainly legitimate interpretations, but there are questions concerning their validity for goth, punk, and other styles of rock that are associated with particular subcultures or niche audiences, with limited appeal for a large percentage of the population. For example, Burns and LeFrance state that a “disruptive musical presence” involves the creative interrogation of power structures, particularly challenging the definitions of what constitutes “normalcy” or the status quo in society.<sup>413</sup> But most music, artwork, fashion, etc. associated with a given subculture functions in this way as its *raison d’être*. Therefore the disruptive strategies of female punk, goth, metal, etc. artists should probably be analyzed on a case-by-case basis. We have already seen how Siouxsie became a disruptive presence by embracing seduction, both visually and musically, mocking masculine signifiers, and generating considerable

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 1-5.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 2.

tension by contrasting sensual music with lyrics centered on uncomfortable topics, all hallmarks of goth. Although some feminist scholars may disagree, Siouxsie's approach as a singer, songwriter, and subcultural icon does achieve the effective balance of receptivity and provocativeness required to help women achieve a presence in the male-dominated field of popular music. If this had not been the case, goth music would probably not have held as much interest for women as it did.

Ballion meets Burns and LeFrance's second criterion for an effective critical female artist, since she has written numerous disconcerting songs exploring "gyno-centered traumas" and their social roots, usually in a manner that plays against a listener's musical expectations. Ballion's use of gothic themes and the bluntness of her lyrics were certainly not what one would expect of female artists, even in a post-1960s environment, and writing songs about domestic abuse and child molestation was a violation of punk conventions, as was the Banshees' sensual use of timbre.

As for the fourth and fifth criteria that Burns and Le France feel make for a "disruptive diva," Ballion and her bandmates admit that they had limited knowledge of the recording and production process early in their career, but they later came to work with famous producers such as Nigel Gray (who had previously produced The Police among others). Ballion was active in the recording and production of the Banshees' albums, and, according to producers, the record label (Geffen) could have marketed the group to a wider audience, and made them more commercially successful, if the group had not insisted on composing such critical and provocative material.<sup>414</sup> Burns and LeFrance feel that it is impossible for a female artist truly to bring about a change in society's perceptions of gender and dispel gender prejudices unless she possesses wide appeal. It is true that Siouxsie and the Banshees did sell more records than the goth bands who followed them, but one could not truly say they possessed a broad fanbase, particularly in America, where their performances were largely confined to small venues in the nation's largest cities. Nevertheless, when subjecting the art of Siouxsie and the Banshees to feminist criticism it should be recognized that many of the group's most gyno-centered songs, such as "Arabian Nights," "Candyman," "Cities in Dust," etc. were

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<sup>414</sup> Mark Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 66.

released as singles. Also, many songs that were originally released as B-sides, for example, “The Whole Price of Blood,” “Hang Me High,” and “Red Over White,” dealt specifically with the abuse of women.

Additionally, Ballion (unfortunately) possesses another characteristic that Burns and Le France associate with “disruptive divas;” the press was seemingly bent on disarming and marginalizing her work, largely by dismissing her as a Bowie clone, mocking the Banshees’ music as “artsy and pretentious,” and depicting her as a punk *enfant terrible* who did not live up to all the hype.<sup>415</sup>

Another significant contribution to feminist criticism in popular music is the anthology *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* edited by Sheila Whitely, a collection that brings together a wide range of attitudes and viewpoints. Unquestionably the article most confrontational in tone is “Revolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender” by Norma Coates.<sup>416</sup> Coates feels that the overall sound of blues-based rock is inherently phallic, particularly the way in which music by groups like The Rolling Stones “hits the body and the hormones” with heavy beats and aggressive guitar picking techniques, combined with the raw, unrefined, rustic sound of their instruments that were virtually free of any signal processing.<sup>417</sup>

Coates points out that most audiences cling to media-driven stereotypes that perpetuate the idea that rock music signifies masculinity, authenticity, honesty, and rebellion, while pop holds negative connotations of femininity, dishonesty, ephemerality, and trashiness. According to Coates, synthesizers, and most digital technologies are also coded feminine.<sup>418</sup> Her interpretations are based on the theories of Judith Butler, whose influential book *Gender Trouble* outlines her belief that the behavior and social values of men and women are based largely on traditions, social discourse, and the manipulation of signs, and not on any tangible differences. As a result, Coates feels that gender in popular

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<sup>415</sup> For example, Julie Burchill, “Review of Siouxsie and the Banshees: The Scream,” *New Musical Express* 18, November 1978, 45. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, Vol. 1, issue 17, 2004, 13.

<sup>416</sup> Norma Coates, “Revolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 50-65.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-52.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*



music is a dramatization of the performative nature of gender taken to extremes. Women must therefore learn to manipulate gender signs to their own advantage.

Coates laments the fact that female performers are rarely celebrated as serious musicians unless they are presented as tomboys, but she feels that the only way to break down musical and social boundaries is for women to continue to play rock in a way that is similar to male bands.<sup>419</sup> Following the same line of thinking, it is Coates's opinion that female rock vocalists are celebrated more than women instrumentalists, but vocalists are rarely held in the same high esteem as those who play instruments in the minds of most audiences.<sup>420</sup> This is due to the fact that women have a particularly difficult time being accepted as rock musicians because the maternal values associated with the feminine are the antithesis of rock's rebellious spirit.

The "gender bending" of male rock artists is characterized by Coates as offensive and patronizing, and she has little use for male bands whose work has typically been of a highly sentimental nature or has extensively explored melancholic affects (goths would presumably fit into this category), for she feels such conventions amount to little more than male artists incorporating, containing, and neutralizing the artistic and expressive potential of women. What Coates finds particularly infuriating is that male artists get to appropriate the mantle of "victimhood" but those who really are victims never get to use it as musical fashion.<sup>421</sup>

The work of Siouxsie and the Banshees is congenial to many of Norma Coates's theories, as well. The group's music certainly does not "hit the body and the hormones" like the music of The Rolling Stones, punk rock, metal, or most types of blues-based rock. The drums are rarely foregrounded or prominent in the mix of their recordings nor their live sound (except when the timbre of the drums is used as a device to convey the meaning of the text). For example, the song "Umbrella," from the 1987 album *Tinderbox*

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>420</sup> Coates perhaps feels that singers are usually celebrated for their charisma and performance abilities but instrumentalists are typically considered the creative force that drives the band. Therefore, in the minds of the public, instrumentalists possess more intellectual gravitas than singers. This is debatable, and Coates offers no supporting evidence. Nevertheless, she maintains that society holds vocalists in lower esteem than instrumentalists.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 58.

describes the reflections and feelings of a rape victim in a moment of uneasy repose. The lyrics are brief but dignified, with imagery that is powerful in its simplicity. The main goal of the music is clearly to invoke the complex emotions of the lyric persona (a major concern in goth music), since the introduction lasts for a considerable length of time before the vocalist enters. The song eschews the traditional verse-chorus structure in favor of the static repetition of two musical periods and a through-composed text.

The continuous unfolding of the gentle guitar line in the first musical period, contrasting with the slow diminished arpeggios of the second is an effective evocation of the simultaneous calmness and bitterness of the persona, made even more intense by the cutting, overdriven, metallic timbre of the guitar, and the way John Carruthers manipulates the volume knob on his instrument, swelling each note to portray the ebb and flow of the victim's thoughts. But what is particularly powerful is the raw "live" presence of the drums and cymbals foregrounded in the recording. The percussion in this case does strike the body with disruptive force, clearly intended to portray phallic sexual energy as ominous and emotionally destructive.

The music of Siouxsie and the Banshees is usually too episodic and ambient to be strongly phallic in character. Even on *The Scream*, a recording extremely close to their punk roots in terms of style, the music is too dissonant, too melodically disjunct to be sexual. It makes the listener feel too uncomfortable or unsafe for intimacy. On later albums, the manipulation of timbres, the transparency and intelligibility of the text eclipses or effaces any groove that might be considered sexually provocative. Since sex is depicted as destructive in the Banshees' music, it appropriately lacks the poetry of desire, going against the grain of most rock music. Norma Coates states in "Revolution Now?" that female artists are rarely associated with rock in the collective consciousness of society but are commonly linked to pop, a genre defined by melodicism, ephemerality, sentimentality, and its acceptance of new technologies. In Coates's view such characteristics are always negatively associated with femininity, dishonesty and trash, in contrast to rock's masculinity and sincerity.

Ballion's music could be seen as a feminist statement in the way that her music resists these stereotypes; it revolves around themes that are real and disturbing, but it still makes the most of synthesizer and recording technology. Ballion's assertive and affective

vocal style disrupts the stereotypes that associate femininity with a lack of authenticity. The Banshees music has the melodicism of pop, but the sophisticated song structures and harmonic vocabulary are uncharacteristic of that genre. Although many of Coates's generalizations are valid, in a majority of circumstances, Ballion could be perceived as authentic without being a tomboy, even early in her career. The artist retained the visual and musical signifiers of femininity for reasons that are in sympathy with most feminists. The extreme artificiality of her appearance and the exaggeration of her beauty through heavy make-up, as well as the absence or downplaying of masculine signifiers in her music, do draw attention to the performative aspects of gender. As Ann E. Kaplan suggests in "The Politics of Feminism, Post-feminism, and Rock," such performativity does destabilize the subject, an important part of what feminists feel is necessary to liberate language from patriarchal control.<sup>422</sup> Rosi Braidotti writes in "The Politics of Ontological Difference" that women should fight to maintain the traditional signifiers of femininity and not allow them to become free-floating signs in the postmodern media-scape or encourage any kind of gender neutrality in society until women achieve full subjecthood.<sup>423</sup> In other words, the feminist movement will have been all for naught if the feminine becomes an empty sign before women have achieved equality.

Preserving the subjecthood of females was a key component of the subversive strategies of Siouxsie and the Banshees. Ballion's transformation of stereotypes of women as superficial, vamps, hysterics, and symbols of death and chaos into symbols of strength, throwing them back in the face of the dominant society, was very much in line with a punk sensibility. But one would have expected a female artist from the 1980s to radiate more warmth and more sexual display. Siouxsie humiliated the male gaze, not by force but with a lack of passion, and music that lacked an expression of desire. Songs such as "Metal Postcard," "Melt," and "Arabian Nights" are an expression of rebellion against male impulses to control. In this way, Siouxsie is very much like the *femme fatale*

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<sup>422</sup> Ann E. Kaplan, "The Politics of Feminism, Postmodernism and Rock: Revisited with a Reference to Parmar's 'Righteous Babes'," in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, ed. Judith Lockhead and Joseph Auner (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 323-341.

<sup>423</sup> Victoria Grace, *Baudrillard's Challenge: A Feminist Reading* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 59. The original source is Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 173-190. Braidotti is interested in how the decline of binary conceptions of gender in postmodernism and the breakup of classical notions of the self and the subject will impact feminist thought.

protagonists in films by David Lynch (a director much loved in the goth subculture), Dorothy in *Blue Velvet*, Renée in *Lost Highway*, and Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks*, who demonstrate that it is male obsession and not female inconsistencies that is the source of many social problems.<sup>424</sup> Lynch's somber, mysterious leading ladies also destroy traditional manifestations of heroism.<sup>425</sup> These characters are usually placed in horrendously abusive, pitiable circumstances and make no attempt to conceal the intense pain they feel as a result. It is here that Lynch creatively plays with the boundaries between an almost expressionistic emotional intensity and saccharine sentimentality. The heroines seem so totally overwhelmed with despair that the viewer is overwhelmed with an intense apathy, wanting to help the character with the logic of masculine production, to play the role of hero or savior to the female victim, which is never the solution in Lynch's narratives. In his films, the female victim achieves transcendence on her own, through her intuition, sensitivity, and receptivity. Ballion's music and performances function in a similar way. When watching videos and concert footage of Siouxsie and the Banshees, one is instantly drawn to her beauty, starlet glamour and theatricality, but even more seduced by her inconsolability; needless to say, the intensity of the group's music plays a large part in this. One feels not lust for Siouxsie but a desire to console, and at the same time a sense of powerlessness because she seems so beyond the reach of any heroic gesture (largely do to the beauty and affectedness of her voice). This partly explains why instrumental virtuosity or elaborate solos are antithetical to the Banshees' artistry; visionary or heroic guitar parts are not wanted or needed in the goth genre.

Coates believes that female artists produce a transgression into male territory when they perform rock, which creates a space breaking gender stereotypes. But the music of Siouxsie and the Banshees does not correspond with this theory. The group's songs embrace studio and synthesizer technology, melodicism, and glamorous costumes all associated with pop and femininity. However, the seriousness of their music's subject matter, its complex arrangements and emotionally affected performances are all

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<sup>424</sup> Martha Nochimson, *The Passion of David Lynch: Wild at Heart in Hollywood* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 209.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

associated with rock. This blurring of the boundaries between pop/feminine and rock/masculine would become an important hallmark of the goth genre.

The “gender bending” so prevalent in goth similarly does not fall into alignment with Coates’s theories. Siouxsie claims that she was influenced by David Bowie and Marc Bolan because she found their androgyny fascinating and artistic, and admired how their image allowed them to reach out to both male and female audiences.<sup>426</sup> She never indicates in any published interview that male androgyny was something she found threatening or insulting to her as a woman. Coates is aggravated by what she feels is the male appropriation of female victimhood by androgynous rock groups. But to play the devil’s advocate, a cynic could accuse Siouxsie of using victimization and despair as a fashion statement as well. It should also be noted the Banshees were mildly androgynous, and that Siouxsie was friends with male musicians who engaged in much gender bending, such as Robert Smith of The Cure, who briefly became the guitarist for the Banshees after John McGeoch left the group due to mental illness. In my conversations with women who identified themselves as goths or having been a goth during the 1980s I have found no evidence that these women viewed androgyny the way Coates does.

Even if male goth bands were using the feminine for its sign value as other, a pure negative symbol, this does not have to be construed as a sign of disrespect for women. The artists were using feminine signifiers as one of many elements in their image and music, or for social commentary. Coates did not clarify when, and under what circumstances male artists could express negative emotions without being accused of self-pity or appropriating “female victimhood.”

The use of androgyny in popular music is the primary focus of the next article in the anthology, Sheila Whiteley’s “Little Red Rooster vs. the Honky-tonk Woman: Mick Jagger, Sexuality, Style, and Image.” This author also treats gender as performative rather than biological. Whiteley’s point is that the gender bending conventions of popular music, from David Bowie to Boy George, are simply a part of Jagger’s legacy. She feels that the vocalist’s slight use of androgyny was a way for him to simultaneously play the role of both the submissive woman and the male aggressor, functioning as a being overloaded with sexual signifiers (oversignified) capable of expanding the limits of

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<sup>426</sup> Paytress, *Siouxsie and the Banshees*, 18.

sexual pleasure for the audience.<sup>427</sup> She feels that Jagger's stage persona as a sexual superman was rooted in the demonic imagery surrounding the blues, and in the way the vocalist molded the machismo and virility common in blues expression into an inflated hyper-arrogance.

Even though Mick Jagger popularized androgyny, goths did not use the device in a similar way, to transform themselves into hypersexual beings. Goth artists like Ballion downplayed or avoided using signifiers from blues-based rock, so they could not intensify in the same way the sexual antagonism that often exists between men and women as portrayed in blues music, which is what Whiteley identifies as the foundation for Jagger's gender bending. But was blues music really as chauvinistic, and threatening to women as Whiteley assumes? After all some of the most famous blues vocalists have been women, who often collaborated and toured with their male counterparts. Male blues artists have commented that women understood and related positively to the sexual nature of their music to a greater degree than their male listeners.<sup>428</sup> It is debatable if the subject is truly trying to control and dominate the object in this genre since it was a cathartic response to powerlessness. A large percentage of blues songs focus on the feelings of a jilted lover, but the music cannot truly have the same impact in, or effect on, a society where signs and symbols of sex are found everywhere, as it did during the time when the blues genre came into existence. In other words, blues expression stems from unfulfilled desires, but in the postmodern media these desires are constantly produced, which is not the same as desires that emerge from a lack or loss, since enticement or seduction is not possible. With Ballion playing upon society's nostalgia for seduction, it becomes clear why she tries to purge blues signifiers from her music.

Charlotte Grieg's article "Female Identity and the Woman Songwriter" is much different in tone from the previous articles. Grieg takes the position, based on her experiences as a performer, that there are actually very few experiences that are unique to

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<sup>427</sup> Sheila Whiteley, "Little Red Rooster vs. the Honky-tonk Woman: Mick Jagger, Sexuality, Style and Image" in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 95.

<sup>428</sup> As Howlin' Wolf sang "The men don't know but the little girls understand." Robert Palmer, *Deep Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 161.

one sex or the other.<sup>429</sup> She also suggests in her essay that the position of a rock song as a commodity nullifies any difference between a male vs. female approach to songwriting. This is precisely because the commodified form of a song is required to be grotesquely over-signified with “emotional and moral sentiments and euphemisms.”<sup>430</sup>

Goth musical expression supports Grieg’s position that men and women have more experiences in common than they have differences, even though Siouxsie and the Banshees wrote many songs that were gyno-centered. But what Grieg sees as the inherent emotional excess of popular songs, goths find authentic; the extreme sentimental nature of the music and its reliance on euphemisms are necessary to do justice to the subject matter of the song. This is precisely why Siouxsie and the Banshees appeal to male audiences, even when Ballion sings from the female perspective, she is able to get males to identify with her, no small feat in a male dominated industry.

Before leaving this discussion of the music of Siouxsie and the Banshees and feminist theory, I would like to raise a series of questions that transcend the work of a single artist. Two of the most important components of contemporary feminist thought are the backlash against theories that assume women speak with one voice, and the recognition that gender studies should perhaps focus on one group of women at a time.<sup>431</sup> This leads to the question of exactly what “type” of women Ballion represents or claims to speak for? The vocalist was not just the other of men but an Other to most British women as well. She always presented herself as an outsider ahead of her identity as a female, which allowed the artist to appear subversive and not maternal to any degree. Victoria Grace points out that all individual interpretations of womanhood are contingent upon class, race, and age.<sup>432</sup> Ballion’s distinction as a subculture participant and a disgruntled lower middle-class, educated, late 1970s British youth affected her interpretation of femininity, both in terms of image and music as I have explained

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<sup>429</sup> Charlotte Grieg, “Female Identity and the Woman Songwriter,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 169.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>431</sup> Grace, *Baudrillard’s Challenge*, 80.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*

throughout the opening sections of this chapter. However, female scholars could provide a different perspective based on their backgrounds and experiences and it would be of interest to read a critique of Ballion's work from their point of view.

Since Siouxsie and the Banshees were, however inadvertently, the founders of a subversive subculture that was gendered feminine by the media, her music is a natural starting point to continue the long-standing debate in postmodern scholarship over whether artists (and subcultures) represent a continuation of the emancipatory endeavors of the twentieth century or simply a nostalgia for such activity in the controlled environment of the media. For example, postmodern philosophers such as Baudrillard feel that people no longer want revolutions of any kind but instead desire signs to cling to, and a case could be made for or against the validity of this statement in regard to the music of Siouxsie and the Banshees. In the final analysis, it should be remembered that Siouxsie and the Banshees did win space for women by creating a distinct style of popular music that addressed their concerns in an aggressive way at a time when such writing was not prevalent.

Finally, the gender dynamics of the group's music and the development of the goth subculture is an area that invites further study and interpretation. For example, Marion Young in "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference" feels that individualism (one of the many factors that motivate subcultural participation) is a product of masculine thinking, while the idea of community reflects feminine thinking.<sup>433</sup> Ballion has always tried to be a model of individualism and claims to resent her position in the goth subculture. It is not difficult to see how the melancholy and emotionalism of her music could generate a large following by creating what Young calls an "ethic of sympathy and affective attention to particular needs."<sup>434</sup> But feminist scholars could argue that an artist who embraces individualism over community could not truly make affective feminist statements, regardless of how much she privileges the aesthetic over the instrumental.

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<sup>433</sup> Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 306-7.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.



## Androgyny and Goth

Androgyny was, and continues to be, an important aspect of the male goth image largely due to the influence of Siouxsie and the Banshees. In a patriarchal society where homophobia was the norm, it is unusual for male audiences to identify themselves so strongly with a female artist, which serves to affirm the originality and perceived authenticity of the Banshees' music and the rhetorical power of Ballion's vocal abilities.

There are many theories as to why androgyny has been so common throughout the history of rock music. Norma Coates felt that the gender bending of male artists was an attempt to absorb and nullify female excursions into rock music, purifying so to speak, a male institution of power and control, while simultaneously "appropriating victimhood" in order to place the male bands in a position to attack society's traditional values that threaten to contain their virility.<sup>435</sup> Robert Walser, on the other hand, believes that androgyny is actually linked to male insecurities and anxieties about women, that gender bending is actually a way to confront and resolve their fears. He also concludes, based on his study of heavy metal fanzines, that androgyny is actually a symbol of masculine strength, since one has to be comfortable with his sexuality in order to attempt such behavior.<sup>436</sup>

Explanations for androgyny in the popular press typically fall into one of two categories: First, critics feel that the device is simply used to imbue the image of an artist with the sexual allure of both genders in a display of hyper-eroticism. Or journalists suggest that the androgyny of current rock bands is just a part of the rock tradition; Elvis and Little Richard wore make-up as a symbol of subversion, rebellion, and bohemian artistic sensibilities, so modern bands follow suit, even though the practice is not nearly as startling or rebellious as it once was, currently signifying little more than "this person is a rock musician." Nevertheless, androgyny even in the postmodern age is still a powerful device to grant one instantly the status of "other" due to society's continuing deep-rooted sexual anxieties and prejudices. Androgyny can serve a different function in

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<sup>435</sup> Coates, "Revolution Now?" 50-64.

<sup>436</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 128-137.

each musical genre, however, and factors such as the audience demographics, national traditions, and the nature of the artists' music must be considered to understand fully how and why the technique is being used.

Androgyny in goth is considerably different from that employed by the Los Angeles "glam metal" bands of the 1980s described by Walser. With few exceptions, androgynous heavy metal bands retained most of their masculine signifiers such as black leather biker attire, garish tattoos, and Harley-Davidson t-shirts that displayed their hairy chests and muscular arms. The artists did not look like women. Bands such as Motley Crue, Wasp, Ozzy Osbourne, Guns N' Roses, and Dokken continued to rely on masculine musical signifiers such as elaborate guitar solos, blues-based riffs, and some of the most misogynistic lyrics ever penned. Little about their style could be considered transvestitism. For Los Angeles metal bands their make-up and elaborate hairstyles were fantastical displays of glamour and charisma, "star power," which served to intensify their misogyny rather than diluting it.

In goth, members of the subculture were more androgynous than the bands they admired. Most bands associated with goth wore dark clothes with extremely spiked or ratted hair (Bauhaus, The Mission, The Danse Society). Some, following Siouxsie, wore excessive eyeliner, white face-powder, and lipstick, in order to resemble the appearance of stars from horror films of the silent era such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* or *The Phantom of the Opera* (Alien Sex Fiend, The Cure), while other groups such as Specimen drew inspiration for their androgyny from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (a film much loved in the goth subculture). Only the late Rozz Williams of Christian Death engaged in gender bending to the same degree as Boy George or "drag queens," appearing almost indistinguishable from females.

While heavy metal groups used glamour and mild androgyny to signify freedom and power, goth artists, following the lead of Siouxsie and the Banshees used it as a death symbol. For them, androgyny was associated with seduction and iconic Hollywood glamour. Theirs was a Warhol-esque interpretation of glamour, where fame and beauty are ephemeral and quickly decay into forgotten trash. Therefore it was easy for androgynous male bands to emulate Siouxsie's approach, which was not inconsistent with the mentality of punks who, according to Hebdige, sought to become trash

personified. Even goth bands who used masculine signifiers in their image, such as The Sisters of Mercy, with their black leather vagabond biker image, or The Fields of the Nephilim, who cultivated the image of apparitions from the “old west,” appeared emaciated, theatrical, ironic, or fascinating in a cinemagraphic way, rather than macho.

The androgyny of goth plays on the postmodern idea that gender is more about manipulating signs than real differences. But their appropriation of seduction always sought to overturn or exorcise power. Social theorists such as Kate Bornstein in her book *Gender Outlaw* also feel that gender bending is subversive because it challenges the public to see people as individuals, unique subjects rather than their gender.<sup>437</sup> When the corpse-like appearance of goth bands was combined with androgyny it was especially subversive, for as Baudrillard observes, “What we look for today is not so much health, but fitness, which is the promotional radiance of the body, much more of a performance than an ideal state, which turns sickness into failure. In terms of fashion and appearance we no longer pursue beauty and seductiveness but “the look.”<sup>438</sup> By contradicting such prevailing trends, the death symbolism of goth was similar to punk’s aesthetic defacement, while their seductiveness and androgyny served too remind the mainstream of what they have sacrificed in order to conform.

As Walser observes in his study of heavy metal, gender bending in goth was not a sign of homosexuality or bisexuality (although unlike heavy metal circles, both are warmly accepted in the subculture). In this regard Baudrillard offers the following comment on contemporary sexuality that is applicable to goth androgyny: “Transvestism. Neither homosexuals nor transsexuals, transvestites like to play with the indistinctness of the sexes. What transvestites love is this game of signs, what excites them is to seduce the signs themselves. With them everything is make-up, theater and seduction. They appear obsessed with games of sex, but they are obsessed, first of all, with play itself; and if their lives appear more sexually endowed than our own it is because they make sex into a total,

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<sup>437</sup> Quoted in Grace, *Baudrillard’s Challenge*, 120. Bornstein is a transgender lesbian who writes in the reflexive voice. She feels that society should distinguish between gender, and sexuality when engaging in gender discourse.

<sup>438</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2002), 124.

gestural, sensual, and ritual game, an exalted but ironic invocation.”<sup>439</sup> The corpse-like appearance of goths however, underscored the emptiness generated when sex is reduced to a loveless game of signs.

There are other reasons why the macabre imagery of goth complemented its use of androgyny. Their parody of sex through oversignification became more dramatic when combined with their melancholy appearance, because it underscored the cynicism of achieving intimacy through sex expressed in their music. They essentially embodied the practice of what Baudrillard calls “the strategy of exorcizing the sexual body by wildly exaggerating the signs of sex.”<sup>440</sup> In other words, they deliberately ensure that sex is lost in their theatrical presentation of their appearance. Baudrillard does not believe that gender bending has even the slightest liberating potential; he sees it as a sad confusion of categories as a result of tragic indifference to sexual intimacy.<sup>441</sup> For this philosopher, the androgyny of goth would probably be seen as an example of how the media has driven the signs of sex to exhaustion.<sup>442</sup>

In many ways the androgynous and dispirited appearance of bands like The Cure or Bauhaus complemented and enhanced the impact of their music. For example, the way the artists appeared in a state of perpetual angst and melancholy with their dour demeanor, distressed clothing, and make-up designed in part to give the appearance of death or madness, and desperate to find intimacy or consolation, augments the longing and inconsolability expressed in their songs. Also, make-up (like that worn by Siouxsie) was described by Charles Baudelaire as the need to transcend nature: “The red and the black represent life, a life surpassing and exceeding that of nature. The black frame around the eye makes the glance stranger and more penetrating; it makes the eye more distinctly resemble a window to the infinite. The red blaze on the cheek further enhances the brightness of the eye, and lends the woman’s lovely face the mysterious passion of

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<sup>439</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 12-13.

<sup>440</sup> Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 11.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>442</sup> Grace, *Baudrillard’s Challenge*, 131.

the priestess.”<sup>443</sup> In other words, make-up gives the band the appearance of extreme receptivity and sensitivity that complements the extreme sentimentality that characterizes their music. As stated earlier, Baudrillard feels that “to seduce is to appear weak, to seduce is to render weak. We seduce with weakness, never with strong signs of power.”<sup>444</sup> This explains why goth music relies so little on power chords, guitar solos, or other aggressive gestures and instead focuses on rendering a mood that reflects the spirit of the text.

As the media exhausts the signs of sex, and the passion once felt between the sexes begins to ebb, Baudrillard believes that the void is being filled by narcissism. He claims that mimicking the appearance of signs in the media is now a major source of eroticism, as we gradually become simulated selves.<sup>445</sup> This observation would help account for the allure and impact of Siouxsie’s image on the subculture as well as the charges of self-pity and self-absorption that were frequently used to describe goth music in the press.

Even though there are a few points of commonality between goth and heavy metal, such as the use of horror themes in the music and imagery, and sometimes androgyny, the two styles have little in common. Goth music rarely offers fans the fantasy of power over women; few genres of popular music express as little misogyny as goth, and erotic pleasure is rarely even mentioned in the songs (few romantic yearnings or sentiments of male/female affection are expressed either). To portray misogyny, sexual desires, or even the mutual attraction between two people would be at odds with the seductive nature of goth. Baudrillard observes, “Seduction never plays on the desires or amorous proclivities, this being vulgar, mechanical, and in short, uninteresting.”<sup>446</sup>

Unlike heavy metal, the lyric persona in goth songs is rarely a jilted male lover or a male victim of a female transgressor. When victimization is portrayed, the persona is more typically a female, a child, society as a whole, or a person of unspecified gender. In discussing the music characteristics of goth, Mick Mercer explained the main differences

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<sup>443</sup> Quoted in Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 93.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid., 102.

between goth and heavy metal: “In goth the human verse of the vocals is based more in reality and sung with more passion and humor than the sour metal merchants and their ludicrous fraternity. Goth is about music with occasional dogmatic ranting, metal is largely about fantasy. Goth may have its rock sections, frequently whimsical, but they’re making objective points and playing with language.”<sup>447</sup> Mercer’s response is remarkably but not surprisingly gendered, from describing metal as a fraternity, to the distinction he makes between rock, with its connotations of masculinity and production of authenticity, and goth, which sometimes uses rock signifiers in a tongue-in-cheek way. He describes the voice in goth as being “more human” than in metal, expressing “real life” sentiments with more passion, perhaps referring to the stereotypical association of femininity with empathy and sensitivity, and as “the last refuge from not only the heartless world but also an increasingly mechanized and fabricated one.”<sup>448</sup>

Mercer’s comments can be readily supported with musical evidence from the goth canon, for example, “Spiritual Cramp” by Christian Death, a song from the album *Only Theater of Pain* (inspired by the play of the same name by Antonin Artaud), recorded in 1982 and considered to be the definitive goth album by Mercer and several of my other British and American informants. The lengthy, wordy text is more of a supplication than a political diatribe common to the punk genre.<sup>449</sup> Each line of the text invites the listener to share the persona’s sensitivity to his/her environment, and it is songs such as this that frequently come to be viewed as manifestos for a subculture. So many words and phrases are used to characterize the angst of the persona that the listener is exhausted trying to internalize the imagery, an effect made even more unnerving by the dense, consonance-heavy text. The long-breathed phrases are marked with caesuras every other line, which gives the song a contemplative quality, a characteristic that illustrates Mercer’s comment that goths feel their music offers a more realistic and insightful assessment of society than heavy metal, which they feel would crudely oversimplify the subject matter. The formal

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<sup>447</sup> Mick Mercer, personal e-mail, 28 October 2005.

<sup>448</sup> Jane Flax, “Postmodern Relations in Feminist Theory,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 20-38.

<sup>449</sup> See the album’s liner notes for the lyrics. Christian Death *Only Theater of Pain* (1982), Frontier, 31007-2.

diction of the lyrics complements the religious tone of the song, with occasional end rhymes that make the biblical allusions seem snide, demonstrating Mercer’s observation that goth is about balancing melancholy with humor.

Musically “Spiritual Cramp” is based upon a single incessant guitar/bass riff of a rapid tempo that increases in intensity as it sequentially moves higher in pitch before repeating the cycle shown in Example 5.3. Generally, each repetition of the sequence is used to intensify and demarcate each section of text. The half-step motion that characterizes the riff is ominous when played with heavy distortion and is more foreboding than most punk riffs but too static and not distinctive enough for 1980s heavy metal.



Example 5.3: Christian Death, “Spiritual Cramp.”

The vocal line is more of a rapid recitation on a chord tone than a melody, with the syllables of some words exaggerated and elongated in the manner of a dramatic southern televangelist. Rozz Williams’s vocal timbre and singing style matches his transvestite image with effeminate fast upward glissandos to signify hysteria, all of which serve to enhance the transgressive nature of the music, since gender bending makes most members of the dominant society uncomfortable. The way Williams’s vocal resembles that of a woman also signifies vulnerability, which could possibly be what Mercer was referring to when he stated that goth features a “more human” vocal quality than that of metal. Clearly the band wanted to foreground the words in the song since the declamation is so clear and the voice is featured prominently in the mix.

The distorted power chords that Walser feels are such a large part of metal’s masculine power are not used in a similar way in goth. The power chords in “Spiritual Cramp” have thick distortion harmonics (atypical for punk rock), emphasizing the

midrange frequencies and providing a menacing backdrop for the text. But their forcefulness is not a symbol of resistance or a way to empower the listener (like Walser describes their function in metal) but instead reflect the gravity of the subject matter portrayed in the text with their ominous, thunderous resonance. Also the song contains no guitar solo, or “metaphorical ejaculations,” as Walser characterizes them, since the song is not a display of masculine rhetorical power, expresses no transcendence, and has no narrative or goal. But it does clearly describe the social conditions that give subcultures their *raison d’ être*.

Mercer also describes goth as using the signifiers of rock in a whimsical way, as simply play and not to fulfill a goal, a technique that feminists such as Kristeva feels can serve to decenter language. We have seen how Siouxsie and the Banshees mocked masculine productive language in “Metal Postcard,” but perhaps a more ironic example of how goth turns masculine authenticity against itself is the song “Vision Thing” by The Sisters of Mercy. Like Christian Death, The Sisters of Mercy depict a world that is corrupt and in need of a “vision.” but advocates decadence as a useful temporary distraction.<sup>450</sup> Unlike much of the American heavy metal from the 1980s the song does not glorify hedonism but ironically uses the language of bands that did.

The song is centered on a single guitar riff, shown in Example 5.4, that is as catchy and memorable as those that characterize the most famous songs in rock, in other words it has (or mimics) “star power.” Unlike the Christian Death piece, “Vision Thing” features a powerful though tongue-in-cheek groove that, as Norma Coates might say, hits the body in a way that is blatantly sexual, features no jarring half-steps or tritones, and uses several techniques that mock masculine authenticity.



Example 5.4 The Sisters of Mercy, “Vision Thing.”

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<sup>450</sup> See the album’s liner notes for the lyrics. The Sisters of Mercy, *A Slight Case of Overbombing/Greatest Hits Vol.1* (1993), Elektra/Asylum, 61399.



The song lasts so long that it was clearly written as an extended dance piece (which is exactly how it was and is used in goth clubs) and not a brooding statement of authenticity. The incessant rhyming of the text, with humorous profanity (uncommon in popular music during the 1980s), lampoons the hedonistic expression of much lighthearted rock music. Also at the time of this recording The Sisters of Mercy featured both male and female vocalists who sang on this track. The scoring could be interpreted as an androgynous musical gesture, but it also underscores the fact that this is about subversion through wit, rather than force of power.

The Sisters of Mercy raise the issue of the role of women in goth bands. Groups of mixed gender were and continue to be very common in goth (in addition to Siouxsie and the Banshees and The Sisters of Mercy there were All About Eve, Alien Sex Fiend, March Violets, and Christian Death, among others). The role of female members in goth bands is usually confined to that of vocalist, or keyboard player, the roles that Norma Coates believes are characterized as inferior in the eyes of the public. But goths do not define themselves by the standards of rock authenticity and delight in finding ways to make pop signifiers subversive, thwarting masculine depth with visual and musical play of surface.

### Conclusion

Susan Ballion composed songs that were inspired by her experiences as a woman, which in turn, influenced an entire genre of popular music that is typically associated with the feminine. Drawing inspiration from E.A. Poe, David Bowie, Marc Bolan, The Velvet Underground, Berlin cabaret, and music theater, Siouxsie and the Banshees composed music that was virtually free of masculine signifiers and blues-based rock conventions.

Siouxsie's music and image reflect Jean Baudrillard's theories concerning seduction, which the philosopher considers to be of vital importance in the subversion of masculine power that dominates postmodern society to an unhealthy degree. The work of Siouxsie and the Banshees supports much feminist criticism concerning popular music, since Ballion's songs often deal with gyno-centered traumas, treat sexual relations with

suspicion, and were self-consciously composed to sound markedly different from male bands. However, feminist critics have said little about her music, possibly because of her espousal of artifice and seduction, her band's use of androgyny, and because music that lacks broad appeal is unlikely to help break gender stereotypes. This is why it is important for women to be involved in future investigations into goth music.

CHAPTER 6  
GOTH AND POSTMODERNITY

Including a chapter on postmodernity and goth music may on the surface seem out of place, but I am convinced that the Marxist and semiotic scholarship of the Birmingham Center for Subcultural Studies, of which Dick Hebdige *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is the most famous and often cited example, does have merit and validity. My opinion is based on both my own experiences as a rock musician, the numerous interviews I conducted with former and current punks and goths in the U.K., and the important role that popular music played in the counter-culture movements of the 1960s.

A postmodern approach to analysis typically rejects, or at the very least calls into question, the wisdom of using metanarratives or all-encompassing theories (Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, etc.) to explain culture. Postmodern theory also dictates that signs and symbols no longer have stable meanings, and it has little faith in political emancipation of any kind. Rock musicians, as Hebdige, Walser, and I have documented, believe that signs still possess enough stable meaning, even if it may be residual, to be useful, expressive, and maybe even subversive. I also believe, however, that many of the observations made by postmodern theorists such as Jean Baudrillard concerning the effect of the electronic media on contemporary society are also valid and credible, and I feel that scholars of popular music, such as Sarah Thornton, have been remiss in rejecting postmodern theory out of hand.<sup>451</sup>

In this section I do not propose to engage in postmodern debates about the possibility or impossibility of political change in an electronic media dominated world, whether or not the media constructs a person's sense of identity, or if reality has been permanently replaced by computer games and television shows. Instead, I will focus on the way goth music could be considered a reflection of several of the major concerns raised by postmodern theorists to show how goth artists have used signs and symbols in ways that are consistent with beliefs about postmodernism, and to demonstrate how the

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<sup>451</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 42-43.

media had a major impact on how goth bands composed songs. The relationship between postmodern gender theory and goth artists has already been documented in Chapter 5.

The pessimistic and apocalyptic language of postmodern theory has much in common with the music of goth bands, and as Walser has shown with heavy metal as well. Baudrillard, for example, speaking during the early 1980s stated “Our emotional mood oscillates between boredom and terror and its psychological signs are decomposition.”<sup>452</sup> Given the imagery, lyric content of the songs, and musical devices employed, the connection between goth (and most other British subcultures) and such a statement should be obvious as I have explained in Chapter 2. The writings of Baudrillard and the music of goth artists share the same level of cynicism in their descriptions of contemporary living: “an incoherent cowboy film modernity: concrete, dust, duty-free, transistors, petrol, computers and the hubbub of useless traffics—as though the silence at the ends of the earth had to be obliterated. All that is inhuman here is sublime in its natural desolation. All that is human is sordid, civilization’s waste. There is some justice in the fact that modern man treats himself as a waste product.”<sup>453</sup> Goth artists, by embracing visual and musical symbols of decay and ephemerality, underscore this idea of people as a waste product to an even greater degree than punk groups did. However, one could argue that the tone of their music reflects a sense of resignation, demonstrating the principle that people generally desire signs more than revolution.<sup>454</sup>

One of the most important ways that goth music reflects postmodern principles in the realm of the social is the idea that “childhood and adolescence are today becoming spaces doomed by abandonment to marginality and delinquency.”<sup>455</sup> According to Baudrillard, childhood has virtually disappeared, and the reasons are primarily

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<sup>452</sup> Quoted in Arthur Kroker and David Cook, *The Postmodern Scene: Excremental Culture at Hyper-Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 10.

<sup>453</sup> Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 128.

<sup>454</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Phillip Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski (New York: Semiotextcel, 1990), 128.

<sup>455</sup> Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 102.

technological. First, the media bombards young people with such a variety of ideas and images that they are forced to become instant adults in order to keep up with the media stream. This robs the young of a critical stage of development and a sense of otherness from adults. This could be a reason why the expression of youth subcultures is often so colorful, dramatic, and deals with such sophisticated and mature topics. Subculture music and fashion are also a means to capture and regain a sense of otherness. Subcultures such as goth, with their emphasis on death and decay, could be seen as the beginning of what Baudrillard predicts will be a catastrophic future for adolescents.

They will become a wild delinquent species. They will lose the belief that they are children, ceasing to compare themselves pejoratively with the adult model. Doubtless they have always been potentially dangerous beings—a reality concealed by pedagogy and the modern bourgeois idealization of childhood. But now it is time, which childhood is not going to have, and the evolutionary chain is broken: the child is going to turn against the adult as an all out enemy. He will become an Other all the same, but now the other as *Alien*—a monster produced by the breakdown in the symbolic change of the generations.<sup>456</sup>

The breakneck speed of postmodern life simply does not allow proper gestation, and this is why the young have a special relationship with all that is instantaneous—drugs, music, film, and all manner of technologies. One point where I strongly disagree with Baudrillard is in his assertion that “where real time is concerned, he [the adolescent] is way ahead of the adult who cannot but seem a retard to him, just as in the field of moral values, he cannot but seem a fossil.”<sup>457</sup> The music of punk, goth and heavy metal artists exhibits a social conscience that one rarely sees in the evening news or most popular films and novels, and because of its desire to generate empathy, the gothic in the arts is a moralizing impulse.

Postmodern artworks of all types are commonly characterized as being made up of a collage of styles, pastiche, and boundless eclecticism. Frederic Jameson, for

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 104-06.

<sup>457</sup> Ibid.

example, describes postmodern architecture in this way: “randomly and without principle, but with gusto, it cannibalizes all of the styles of the past and combines them in an overstimulating ensemble.” He goes on to say that “our awareness of past styles is part of the experience, we are intertextual as a deliberate built in feature of the aesthetic affect; the history of an aesthetic style replaces real history.”<sup>458</sup>

I agree with Jameson’s statement that the awareness of past styles is part of the experience; goth music plays upon the public’s knowledge of Poe, gothic films, and cabaret, and I agree that the ensemble of different styles is designed to be as stimulating as possible. But, although Jameson and others feel that the appropriation of various styles in architecture often seems random, in popular music signs and styles are not appropriated in a haphazard fashion. Postmodern theorists are inclined to overstate just how disparate the different elements of a style or genre of popular music really are. Robert Walser supports this claim in *Running with the Devil* when he states, for example, that heavy metal appropriations of classical music are deliberate and specific.<sup>459</sup> Bands do not appropriate just anything at hand but choose signs carefully for a specific effect. Also it has been my experience that rock musicians do not see the various symbols and styles at their disposal as “plundering history out of context” simply for aesthetic play or to demonstrate cleverness or ingenuity, but that they were keenly aware of the effects that could be produced by utilizing certain styles or signs alone or in combination, like colors on an artist’s palette. Terry Eagleton feels that an eclectic postmodern approach to art is a way of “amassing valuable cultural capital,”<sup>460</sup> but I have not found any evidence that goth artists appropriated symbols from Poe or early horror films as a way of gaining credibility with the mainstream, or as a way of proving that their music was better than everyone else’s, they used gothic aesthetics because they were the most appropriate for articulating their feelings and as a way to give their music an intensity without resorting to a blues-based language. Jameson also claims that appropriating styles from the past is a symptom of a desire to feel some connection to history, which seems particularly

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<sup>458</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 19-20.

<sup>459</sup> Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 63.

<sup>460</sup> Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 206.

remote as a result of the immediacy of the media, but also because it seems depthless, since film, television, and advertising use many historical themes and images. This could be a valid point for goth, since many of the artists I spoke with, including Nick Fiend, Fields of the Nephilim, and many DJs, had a keen interest in British history.

Goth further reflects the stylistic concepts of postmodernity in the sense that, as Andreas Huyssen's states, "Modernist styles of art (as well as earlier styles) have not been abolished but enjoy a kind of half-life in mass culture."<sup>461</sup> For example, in addition to appropriating signs and values from gothic literature and film goth groups wrote songs about artists from the past or songs inspired by artworks. Bauhaus, for instance, composed a song called "Antonin Artaud" about the late nineteenth-century poet and playwright who advocated surrealism, was an early exponent of cinema, and explored themes of human cruelty in his writing. His theatrical works were designed to produce a violent physical impact on the audience, and it is for this reason that he was probably admired by goth artists, since they loved this same quality about the works of Emily Dickinson. Perhaps not surprisingly "Antonin Artaud" sounds like a Kurt Weill song being played by a punk rock band, with biting distortion but still possessing the jazz-inspired rhythms and acerbic tunefulness that characterized the composer.

Huyssen feels that the postmodern fascination with the past is indicative of dissatisfaction with modernity. He notes that even though pop culture may use styles and symbols from the past it is still susceptible to the problems that all art faces in the postmodern world.<sup>462</sup> Also, in an essay titled "The Art Conspiracy," Baudrillard poses the question of what can art mean in a world where everything is governed by aesthetic values, where art has no mystery, and where nothing is at the center of all signs, especially artworks?<sup>463</sup>

Goth bands clearly felt that blues-based rock music no longer had any mystery and that 1970s progressive rock was empty display to the point that it had no mystery either. But there is also an uneasy, melancholic quality to the way goth artists blatantly

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<sup>461</sup> Andres Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 248.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 181-83.

displayed their appropriated signs and influences, particularly when so many of them were associated with decay or ephemerality. One gets the sense that the goth style, constructed from so obviously appropriated signs and sounds, is a cynical celebration of unoriginality in the same way that Baudrillard claims that modern art is formality elevated into a perverse aesthetic value.<sup>464</sup>

In Chapter 4, I explained how goth artists and fans identified with characters in early black and white and B-level horror films, and the situations that they found themselves in. Postmodern theorists would probably describe this relationship as an unfortunate characteristic of the time period where people feel they have more in common with what they see on the screen than anything in real life. Baudrillard writes that everything today is conspiring to blur the boundaries and distinction between life and screen; “when all are actors there is no action any longer, no scene, the end of aesthetic illusion.”<sup>465</sup> However, it could also be argued that goth artists represented a sorely needed nostalgia for aesthetic illusion, and their appropriation of gothic signs, symbols, and stylistic gestures was necessary to do justice to the sentiments they were trying to express. Also, it should be noted that goth bands wrote songs about films in a way that drew attention to the fact that they were based in an artificial reality and popular ephemeral culture. This can be seen in the way bands treated film-based songs as studies in atmosphere, attempting, in postmodern fashion, to emulate musically the immersion of the video experience. This is in contrast to heavy metal songs that were inspired by films, such as “Black Sabbath” by Black Sabbath (inspired by the 1968 Boris Karloff film), and “Braveheart” by Yngwie Malmsteen, both expressions of masculine power. One of the most effective goth songs that was inspired by the cinema was “The Tenant” by the group Play Dead, which combines the punk rock, riff-based style with the ambience of a film score, although to my knowledge no material from the film’s actual soundtrack was used in the song. “The Tenant” probably appealed to the band and to goth fans because it tells the story of an ordinary citizen who is driven insane by his environment and living conditions. The film has a pronounced psychological element as

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<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

<sup>465</sup> Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 177.



a result of the surreal happenings that occur in each scene and the ambiguousness of the film's overall meaning.

The text of "The Tenant" illustrates the unattractive and exasperated quality of the language ("Habit forming that lead to habit breaking, the tenant's lost in his new undertaking, his mind's confused, he cannot tell who is wrong").<sup>466</sup> In the gothic tradition of Poe, the lyric persona is an impassioned narrator relating the film's storyline, and he assumes the listener knows the work he is referring to. The descriptive language of the lyrics focuses on physical sensations of anxiety, such as physically shaking with fear. The music does not attempt to express the feelings of the tenant but to provide a foreboding and eerie ambience that is faithful to the original effect of the film. This approach is consistent with the voyeuristic perspective of viewing a movie.

The text is heavy with rhymes that become more frequent as the song builds in intensity. The rhymes frequently employ a long "o" vowel that gives the lyrics a plaintive, melancholy quality when recited. The rhyme-scheme and lengthy, wordy text make the lyrics well-suited to dramatic narration, which creates an intimate rapport between the listener and narrator. The vocalist recites the lyrics in a way that enhances the rhythmic drive of the music. For example, he creates a rhythm by dramatically pausing at the end of each line, regardless of whether a caesura would appear there in natural speech. The singer is also consistent in the way he slowly declaims the first two or three words of each line before rapidly reciting the remainder in a steady eighth-note rhythm.

The vocalist does not possess a particularly attractive voice as far as timbre is concerned, but his declamatory singing style is very effective here; he functions as a dramatic, impassioned storyteller reminiscent of Vincent Price's recitations of E. A. Poe's writing. The singer does not possess great vocal technique in the way that heavy metal singers often do. He does not scream out; there is no sense of transcendence from the unhappy circumstances described in the text, or from the atmosphere of gloom in the music. The vocalist's theatrical singing and dynamic range helps to emphasize that the

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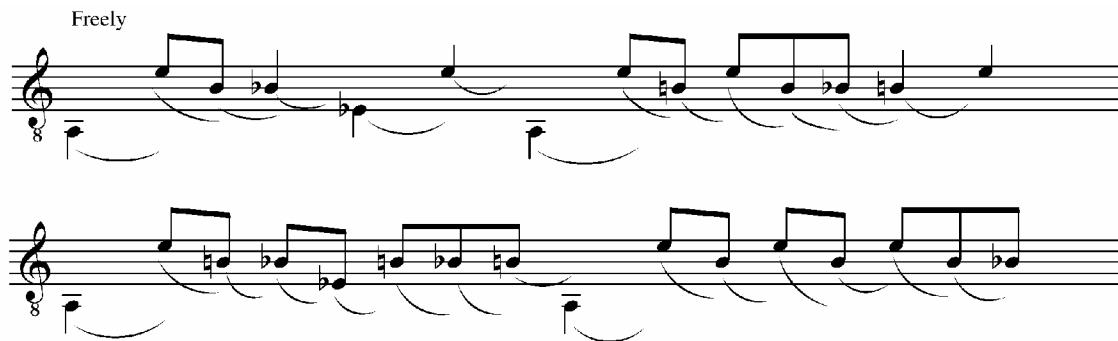
<sup>466</sup> For the lyrics, consult a website that posts the words to popular songs, such as <http://www.elyrics.com>.

words are mostly recited on a single pitch with a microtone inflection on the last syllable at the end of each line to make the caesuras more dramatic.

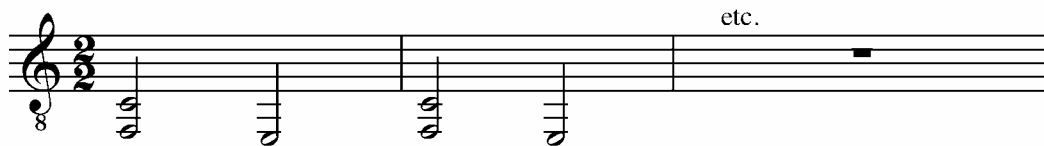
The singer is accompanied by a three-piece band of guitar, bass, and drums. There are no keyboards or synthesizers to provide any smoothness or homogenization to the timbres—each instrument is allowed its own space in the mix, which gives the music a minimalist, skeletal starkness. The guitar’s timbre is unusually metallic and abrasive in the higher registers, but the distortion has greater density and richness in the harmonic overtones than was typical in punk rock. However, the distortion is not so thick as to blur the arpeggios into an undifferentiated mass. The distortion seems to have been used to magnify the ominous quality of the diminished arpeggios and dissonant suspensions that dominate the guitar work. The heavy use of chorus and flanger effects serve the same purpose as the eerie lighting techniques in early horror films, in that they evoke an internal dimension. It cannot be overemphasized how important these guitar effects are to the impact of the song; played acoustically the guitar parts sound ridiculous, flat, a cartoon-like parody of a horror soundtrack. However, amplified, and with the effects engaged the guitar parts have the ability to physically unsettle the listener, physically as the best gothic works do.

The structure of “The Tenant” is verse-chorus but with an introduction and an interlude before the first verse. It is in the introduction and interlude that the band imitates the non-diegetic scoring of film music, generating intense feelings of anxiety and suspense. The song’s introduction surrounds the listener with an atmosphere of dread that is created by the free unpredictable rhythm of the unaccompanied guitar parts, which are filled with clashing major and minor seconds—A to B natural, and B-natural to B-flat. Also mixed into these sonorities is the tritone relationship from E to B-flat, as shown in Example 6.1a. It would be difficult to imagine more jarring harmonic sonorities in popular music, even more extreme than the dissonances in music by The Velvet Underground. The reverberation and echo effects on the guitar create a cavernous resonance, possibly a metaphor for a void, or the unknown. The shimmer provided by the guitar’s chorus effect gives the sound an ethereal quality, perhaps suggesting the inner world of the psyche.

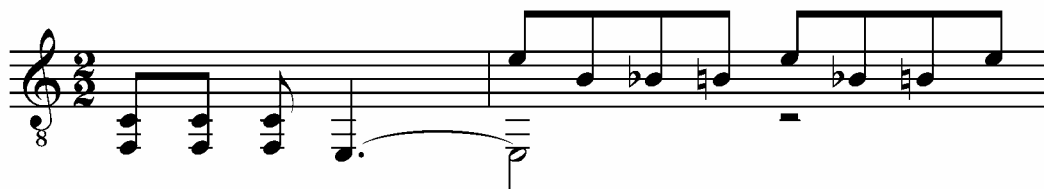
When the drums enter at the start of the first verse, the disturbing mass of diminished intervals and clashing seconds is superimposed with the alternation of an F power chord with an open low E on the guitar, two of the darkest and most resonant sonorities on the instrument (Example 6.1b). The sound is brooding, foreboding, like a premonition of danger. The chorus and distortion effects make the low sonorities sound like they are surging and churning. The main riff of the song played during the verses combines ideas from the introduction into one melodic and rhythmic gesture. The rippling E-B-B-flat figure is reminiscent of the grating violins often heard in horror soundtracks. The riff shows how bands were aware of musical clichés and their ability to make creative use of generic elements. The riff is primarily a sustained power-chord followed by a diminished arpeggio, the perfect musical symbol for a disturbed mind, particularly with the tomb-like reverberation effects. The chorus consists of consonant power chords followed by dramatic pauses given force by the bass guitar. It provides



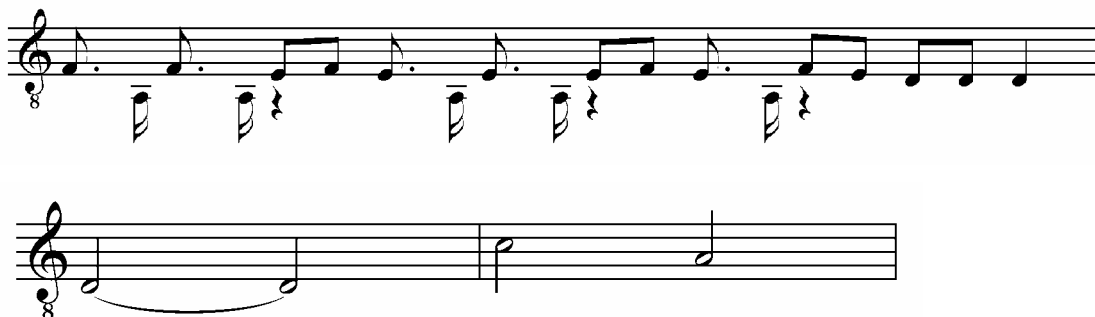
Example 6.1 Play Dead, “The Tenant” a. introduction.



b. power chords enter on top of arpeggios



c. main riff for each verse



Example 6.1 – Continued d. interlude

respite from the extreme dissonance of the verses and the extreme contrasts necessary in Gothic artworks (Example 6.1c).

The interlude (Example 6.1d) is also a moment of dramatic contrast, as the dynamics drop to a *piano* level and the song modulates from E phrygian to D dorian—another jarring relationship. The interlude is dominated by the suspense-building repetition of a guitar figure consisting of a melody and accompaniment guitar figure with syncopated dotted rhythms. A countermelody consisting of long sustained notes on the guitar played over the bass figure also adds to the sense of building suspense when it enters. The section is a clear imitation of non-diegetic film scoring, suggesting a suspenseful “calm before the storm” effect. The song then proceeds to repeat the chorus. In typical gothic fashion the song never has a climax, just a constant dreadful presence.

Critics at the time seemed to understand that goth bands were trying to appropriate the hypnotic power of cinema effects in their music, a technique that strongly reflected the postmodern preoccupation with visual media. For example, Ted Mico in his review of *First and Last and Always* by The Sisters of Mercy writes, “The Surge of drums finally yields to a sustaining piano note that stretches suspense to a point only dreamt by Hitchcock.”<sup>467</sup> Debra Ray Cohen, in her review of *Boys Don’t Cry* by The Cure, wrote that the music showed “film clip explicitness,” and suggested that singer

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<sup>467</sup> Ted Mico, “Review of The Sisters of Mercy, *First and Last and Always*,” *Melody Maker*, 16 March 1985. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1, 17, 79.

Robert Smith could be a screenwriter if he ever quit the music business.<sup>468</sup> The influence of film on the goth genre was powerful and unprecedented in popular music. Nik Cave's description of his music illustrates how pronounced the influence was on goth bands, "I see it [his music] in the same way as a tight, tense drama in the cinema. My songs require you to listen to and understand each line. Otherwise you get lost in the same way as you would if you decided to visit the toilet during the final scene of *Taxi Driver* and expect to know what the film is about."<sup>469</sup> The same could easily be said for the music of The Cure, Bauhaus, and Siouxsie and the Banshees.

The music of the goth subculture reflects many of the observations that Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson have made in regard to postmodernism; for example, the way the musicians of the genre developed a strong emotional attachment to characters from old horror films, related to them, and drew inspiration from their experiences. Like most individuals in postmodern society, the fictional worlds portrayed on the screen seemed more interesting to the musicians than anything in real life. The appropriation of aesthetic values from the cinema, the mannered gestures, the use of atmosphere, and the ability to convey vivid moods with a stark minimalistic use of materials demonstrate how visual mediums (T.V., films, video games, etc.) dominate all aspects of contemporary living.

The often serious issues that are addressed in goth lyrics reflect Baudrillard's concern that young people are exposed to so much information and so many images that they mentally resemble adults more than children. Goth's music and image underscores the point made by Baudrillard and Jameson that as the public becomes more and more fascinated by images on the screen, the more real people are treated as waste products and the more the real world decays. Goth music and postmodern writing both share the same apocalyptic language, conveying a sense of dread about the future. It could also be said that the goth subculture illustrates how individuals seem to value signs and images more than genuine social emancipation, but the gothic aesthetic values present in their music were used to stimulate an empathetic response in the listener and give their art a

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<sup>468</sup> Debra Ray Cohen, "Review of The Cure: Boys Don't Cry," *Rolling Stone*, 21 August 1980. 48.

<sup>469</sup> Don Watson, "If This Is Heaven I'm Bailing Out," *New Musical Express*, 12 May 1984, 28. Reprinted in *NME Originals: Goth*, 1, 17, 72.

social conscience. This was consistent with how gothicism has traditionally functioned in the arts.

### **Concluding Remarks**

This study is concerned only with the music of the goth subculture as it existed during the 1980s. Goth continues to exist in England, the United States, France, and other countries, in a limited way. The goth community in London is still large enough to support two pubs, their own nightclub, and a record shop. Many of the original participants are still active in the scene, and a few of the original bands still perform. Young people are still involved in goth because the music speaks to them and because of the endless fascination with nostalgia and the past that is a major characteristic of postmodern society.

I have used the words of past and present goth participants, goth musicians, and journalists who covered the scene as my primary source material in order to portray accurately what the music meant to them and how it reflected life in Britain from 1978 to 1990. My conclusions are based on interviews with over ninety informants, including members of iconic goth bands. In every interview, participants emphasized that goth culture was a reflection of their views concerning what they perceived to be serious problems in society, which caused them to feel insecure about their future and well-being. The music provided empathy and consolation, allowing them to draw strength from negative emotions.

My ethnographic research indicates that my informants' views on English subcultures have far more in common with the theories of Dick Hebdige than they have with those of his critics, who believe that subcultures only represent play and consumerism. Informants always stressed that they were not simply fans of a particular type of music but that the music reflected their beliefs and presented a worldview that was consistent with their own. This dissertation supports the position that the writings of Dick Hebdige were, and are, a valid interpretation of the function of subcultures, and

should be studied by musicologists interested in popular music. The power of symbolic gestures should not be underestimated, and these are necessary to subvert political hegemony.

An analysis of the music performed and recorded by artists who came to be labeled goth shows that the songs do, in fact, have much in common with gothic films and literature, both in terms of aesthetics, and objectives. Goth music is some of the most atmospheric popular music ever recorded, and the espousal of gothic aesthetics by goth artists was designed to stimulate an empathetic response, the traditional goal of gothicism in the arts. The appropriation of signs, symbols, and themes from literature and films demonstrates that postmodern musical artists are very deliberate and specific in their choice of material; there is little that is selected at random or haphazardly. The gothic signifiers appropriated by groups during the 1980s retained their expressive power and impact in their new context, and they were chosen by the artists because they symbolized their pessimism and anxiety and because they knew that they would be seen as subversive in British society. Goth music came to be recognized as a distinct genre because of the themes presented in the songs and the artists' atmospheric approach to text setting. This is in contrast to the way in which most other genres of popular music are defined by their timbre, structures, and harmonic progressions. The ability of goth bands to create music without relying on blues-based rock conventions demonstrated considerable originality.

What should also be appreciated about the work of goth bands, is how they recognized (like Jean Baudrillard in his writings) that seduction, camp, artifice, undecidability, and the irrational are of vital importance in breaking the stranglehold that the masculine logic of production exerts over society, threatening to obliterate all other perspectives. The music of the goth subculture demonstrates that musicologists need to be sensitive not only to how popular music reflects postmodernity stylistically, but also to how it echoes many of the same troubling concerns that postmodern theorists and philosophers have warned about in their writings.

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Charles Mueller received a Bachelor of Arts in music from Western Oregon University, and a Master of Arts in Music Education from Portland State University before earning a Doctor of Philosophy in Historical Musicology from Florida State University. Before becoming interested in classical music, Charles Mueller worked for many years as a rock guitarist on the Portland Oregon club scene. He continues to perform on electric guitar as well as early plucked string instruments from the baroque period. His research interests include English song from all historical periods, popular music and gender, and music and postmodernism. Charles Mueller has presented papers at The Midwest Graduate Consortium, The City University of New York's symposium on American music, Indiana University's Extreme Musicology and Folklore conference, Music and the Moving Image, The American Musicological Society regional conferences, and The Ivor Gurney Conference at Cambridge University. Charles Mueller has been the recipient of Florida State University's Malcolm Brown Award, and a fellowship from The Presser Foundation.