

**FEMINIST READING OF GOTHIC SUBCULTURE:  
EMPOWERMENT, LIBERATION, REAPPROPRIATION**

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**Abstract:**

Shifting in and out of public eye ever since its original appearance in the 1980ies, Gothic subculture, music and aesthetics in their impressive variety have become a prominent established element in global media, art and culture. However, understanding of their relation to female gender and expression of femininity remains ambiguous, strongly influenced by stereotypes. Current research critically analyses various distinct types of Gothic subculture from feminist angle, and positively identifies its environment as female-friendly and empowering despite and even with the help of its strongly sexualized aesthetics. Although visually geared towards the male gaze, Gothic subcultural environment enables women to harness, rather than repress the power of attraction generated by such aesthetics.

**Key words:** Subculture, Feminism, Gothic.

**INTRODUCTION**

Without a doubt, Gothic subculture is a much-tattered subject, being at the centre of both popular mass media with its gossip, consumerism and commercialization, as well as academia with diverse papers debasing, pigeonholing and even defending the subculture. Furthermore, even within the defined, feminist, angle, a thorough analysis of Gothic subculture would require a volume of doctoral dissertation to give the topic justice. This leaves one in a position of either summarizing and reiterating earlier research (a useful endeavour, however, bringing no fresh insight), or striving for a kind of fresh look made possible by the ever-changing eclectic ambivalent nature of the subculture. Current research takes the middle ground approach: touching upon earlier research only where relevant, providing a very general, yet necessary outlook on the contemporary Gothic subculture in its diversity, so as to elucidate its more relevant elements whilst focusing on the ways in which it empowers women. The chosen examples therefore focus explicitly on women within the subculture and its media to provide real life illustration, leaving out male performers and members.

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## 1. WHAT IS GOTHIC SUBCULTURE (TRENDS AND ORIGINS)?

Whether one is personally familiar with Gothic subculture, has studied it academically or has a vague notion of it derived from mass media, one point stands: the subculture is too broad and diverse to fit within a specific definition. Dark make-up, corsets, vampires, crosses, mysticism, bizarre costumes, pale face with bleeding black mascara and teenage angst together with depressive melancholic music and even drugs are among the possible common stereotypes related to the subculture. Yet both stereotypes and the subculture itself (at least much of its fashion and coordination into a coherent group) are largely created by the media and replicated by its mainstream audience, with a closer look revealing a much more diverse and complex truly global and intercultural subculture.

Even overlooking historical connection going back to Romantic Movement of eighteenth century (Clark, 1978, p. 28) (Masse, 1990, p. 679), Gothic subculture has undergone tremendous expansion since its origins in the early eighties postpunk scene. Whether internally, through consumerism, art and literature or mass media influence, the subculture has grown to include, generate, or partially merge with such diverse elements as Vampire and Victorian fashion, Cyber and Industrial style, Metal and Punk influences, Martial and Neofolk trends, Steampunk and Dark Cabaret variations, even Western Goth style as well as the more mainstream, commercialized and more teenage Emo and New Metal/Alternative<sup>1</sup> relatives. It has also gone global, reaching Far East, getting transformed into a range of “Gothic Lolita” fashions and lifestyles, to then reimport these newly acquired elements into European and American scenes.

While some earlier researchers were providing a very stereotyped, simplistic, almost comical description of the subculture:

*“Dress and Appearance: All black including hair, Doc Marten shoes or boots, black stockings, short skirts, big coats, white make-up, dyed or weirdly cut hair, heaps of eyeliner, rings and upside down cross around their necks*

*Key activities and behaviour: Against the church, slouch around, smoking pot and raging out, generally just talk together, criticise other people, keep to themselves, seances, meditating, loud concerts, visit grave yards at night, shopping at flea markets.*

*Relationships with adults: Rebellious, avoid and hate adults, don't get along at all, usually don't live with parents, adults dislike them” (Denholm, Horniblow, & Smalley, 1992, p. 23).*

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<sup>1</sup> With Evanescence, Lacuna Coil and Nightwish being amongst the most known examples of bands with female vocalists. Influence spread even further and one is able to find elements of Gothic image or music videos in this style with most of contemporary pop and rock bands.

Later studies in a postmodern fashion denied it any internal coherence, passing the subculture for another media invention:

*“The media have not just described the Gothics, they have been instrumental in their creation as a coherent social group. Thus, it can be argued, in cases like this, the media feeds on its own inventions, as it continues to identify, catalogue and explain each new youth subcultures. Thus, some young people, who just happen to share a nebulous cluster of musical and fashion tastes, have been transformed into a subculture: Gothics”* (Tait, 1999, p. 8).

Contemporary studies, while acknowledging aesthetic and consumerist elements having a strong formative role within the subculture also raise its relevance to the role of women by highlighting its liberating quality from the angle of gender. In referencing (Pitts, 2000), (Goulding & Saren, 2006, p. 212) note, *“from a feminist poststructuralist view, bodies and subjects are shaped within a context that privileges heterosexuality, binary gender roles and certain forms of self”*, one of the ways to alter this patriarchal order is in creating social spaces where gender roles and models can be realized without constraints of traditional society. *“Goth offers such a space. It could be argued that it comes close to a “gendered paradise that is radically different from the existing social order”* (Kacen, 2000, p. 345) *where participants feel free to express their ‘real’ and ‘desired’ gendered selves unfettered from prejudice and ridicule”* (Goulding & Saren, 2006, p. 213).

The selected definitions signify both advantages and problems in dealing with the subculture: stereotyped, diverse to the point of all-inclusive, underground and mainstream, inspired by Gothic art and literature stereotyping female<sup>2</sup>, yet gender reconstructive and primarily based on feminine aesthetics and female gender. *“(Garber, 1992) claims that the real male cannot be embodied at all, that embodiment is a form of feminization. In a study of male icons (Valentino, Elvis etc.,) Garber shows how fetishized images of masculinity bear within them traces of the feminized – man transvestite and thus point towards their own constitutive instability and displacement.”* (Goulding & Saren, 2006, p. 212). In order to fully explore this notion, we would have to analyse male representatives of the subculture.

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<sup>2</sup> *“Contemporary feminist literature has made a number of significant points: it has illustrated the pre-eminence of women writers within Gothic literature (such as Mary Shelley and Jane Austin); it has highlighted the pivotal role played by women within the structure of the Gothic novel (although generally from a psychoanalytic perspective); and it has suggested that the readership of such novels was primarily female (Ruggiero & Weston, 1977), (Mussell, 1983), (Restuccia, 1986), (Masse, 1990). It is therefore conceivable that some convincing links can be made between these feminist claims, and the fact that the contemporary Gothics are predominantly female...”* (Tait, 1999, pp. 5-6).

## 2. REMARK ON BELONGING & IDENTIFICATION

*“Liminal subcultures can be conceptualized as groups that have begun to break out of the very boundaries through which they are defined; they are characterized as much by ambiguity and diversity as by coherence and definition. But while stylistic demarcation is not rigid, classification is not an impossible enterprise. As Widdicombe and Wooffitt discovered in their own interviews, respondents resisted a specific subcultural categorization, ‘while not definitely denying the potential relevance of a subcultural identity . . . After all, the kinds of dress and appearance of the respondents invite a certain kind of categorical ascription’ (1995, p. 104; original emphasis). But certain individuals in my study seemed almost to defy such attempts at definition. In the terminology of Kaiser (1990) ‘appearance perception’ was problematized, classification into subcultural ‘types’ rendered invalid”<sup>3</sup> (Muggleton, 2000, p. 75).*

As is made evident, one would find it difficult if not impossible to locate contemporary Gothic subculture within clearly defined borders: identification, self-identification, definition (inclusion or exclusion of traits) is a nightmarish task, with just the discussion deserving a separate paper. Therefore, when sampling the categories below, an informed, although subjective categorisation of performers and traits of Gothic subculture subtypes and their interconnections. It is a common practice within the subculture when, for a range of reasons, including simply the maximalist “don’t pigeonhole me” principle, the members of subculture (be it artists or participants from the general public) refuse to identify themselves as Gothic.

The said situation at times becomes borderline ridiculous with Robert Smith of “The Cure” (as is the case with most earlier gothic bands), one of the founding icons of Gothic image and style saying something like *“It’s so pitiful when ‘Goth’ is still tagged onto the name The Cure. We’re not categorizable. I suppose we were post-punk when we came out, but in total it’s impossible”* (Stereogum, 2006). Therefore, although one can argue that the self-labelling is an exclusive right of the band or subculture member, current paper takes an authoritarian stance overriding otherwise endless debate, instead deriving categorization based on historical, visual and behavioural basis.

## 3. TYPOLOGY OF GOTHIC SUBCULTURE(S)

As noted earlier, despite the diversity of types, styles and ideologies, three elements remain the most important in Gothic subculture: aesthetics,

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<sup>3</sup> *“Hebdige (1979, p. 39). Would informants, anyway, wish to recognize themselves in academic accounts? Evans (1997) has argued that, by seeking to explain the nature of subcultures, texts such as this are engaged in exactly that process of definition from which the members of subcultures are attempting to escape.”* (Muggleton, 2000, p. 7 notes)

music and worldview<sup>4</sup>. It is these three interlinked categories, which can be useful in mapping the role of women, within the subculture.

To simplify preselecting process, categorization suggested by Megan Balanck (also featured in “Schillerndes Dunkel: Geschichte, Entwicklung und Themen der Gothic-Szene” and *Kunststoff Kulturmagazin*) is adhered to. Her classification identifies 23 subtypes of Goths (Balanck, 2011), with each subtype defined and distinguished from each other. Although it would be useful to provide a brief identification (based on her overview) of every subtype, so as to derive fine nuances of female roles and identities accordingly; the sheer quantity does not permit this. Even such generous categorisation is not all-inclusive or in any way canonical, missing for example Pagan Goth type, but identifying younger Goth into a separate Goth category (The baby bat), or mixing Goth personalities into two types (mopey and perky). Therefore, similar kinds are grouped, when possible, while some types are altogether excluded. Furthermore, an attempt is made to illustrate most relevant subtypes by a female celebrity.

### **1.1. The Trad Goth (Deathrock)**

Trad Goth is an abbreviation from “traditional”. Despite not looking victorianesque, this subtype represents adherence to traditions, style and musical taste of the earliest Gothic subcultural formation dating back to the early 80ies. Originating from punk subculture, aesthetics, behaviour, and attitudes of the subculture during that period were closely interwoven with its predecessor, albeit less political, less aggressive. On the aesthetic level one may note spiky hair, leather, fishnet stockings, piercings and strong expressive, yet unelaborate make up.

Siouxsie Sioux (Susan Janet Ballion) is a perfect icon for the period and a good starting point towards exploring the development of femininity and the role of woman within the subculture. She lost her father at the age of fourteen. Having suffered from a life-threatening colitis, which she would later comment on as "*completely demystified the body for me*" (Paytress & Mathur, 2003, p. 21), she spent her younger years immersed in rock music of her time, as well as gaining a celebrity-like status in gay clubs due to her extravagant looks. Eventually she started her own band, becoming a cult icon with her remarkable voice, lyrics and image. She performs to this day.

The salient elements here are:

- painful childhood (sickness, early loss of father)

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<sup>4</sup> While (Tait, 1999) identifies this with self-fashioning, or creating artificial persona for the “*scene*”, (Goulding & Saren, 2006), position the same phenomenon rather as unrestrained enactment of the true self, living a dream outside prejudice.

- flexibility in gender issues (gay clubs, openly bisexual: “I’ve never particularly said I’m hetero or I’m a lesbian. I know there are people who are definitely one way, but not really me. I suppose if I am attracted to men then they usually have more feminine qualities”) (Eyre, 2007)
- originality and aestheticism (own memorable creative influential image, which can be linked to punk as well as more remotely to theatrical make-up)
- Strong personality and leadership qualities (forming and leading her own successful band)
- No excessive focus on politics, like punk predecessors
- DIY approach to styling and clothing

In a way, starting off as a stereotypical withdrawn fragile teenager, “damsel in distress”, she turns the tables and becomes a renowned artist, band leader, fully in control of her life. Contrary to liberal feminist image of strong woman, she is not a serious alpha female of business world, managing business and family, but a creative, artistic emotional and sensual leader.

*“Siouxsie just appeared fully made, fully in control, utterly confident. It totally blew me away. There she was doing something that I dared to dream but she took it and did it and it wiped the rest of the festival for me, that was it. I can’t even remember everything else about it except that one performance” (Albertine, 2009).*

Deathrock is the more punkish version of Trad Goth, which some would identify as the predecessor, while others would equate the two.

### **1.2. The Romantic Goth (Medieval Goth, Fairy Goth)**

These Goths are interested in mysticism, sensuality, fantasy, magic and of course the romantic literature and movies representing Victorian period. One might also find close links with New Age religions and philosophy. While for other Goths the idealized image might be dominatrix, vampire, succubus, princess or aristocrat, - for romantic Goth it is a magical fairy, beautiful witch, sorceress.

The costumes reflect this by being colourful, flowing, reminiscent of medieval fantasy fiction. One might identify this type with a dreamer, artist, musician, a creative, slightly detached personality.

A good example would be Monica Richards, a singer, writer, poet, visual artist, painter, graphic designer... Perhaps most known as a frontend singer in the band “Faith and the Muse”.

Primary focus of romantic Goths is therefore on creativity, mysticism and emotions. While creativity is a contested field in the bipolar system of

masculine-feminine paradigm, emotions and mystery and mystique that are commonly associated with the woman are freely expressed and encouraged with this type<sup>5</sup>.

Medieval Goth is similar to Romantic Goth, however, with a much greater interest in history, participation in reconstruction events and medieval fairs.

Fairy or Faerie Goth types are closer to fantasy role-playing communities.

### **1.3. Vampire Goth**

Is yet another “trademark” of Gothic subculture. Inspired by both Gothic (classical and pop) literature (such authors as Anne Rice, Bram Stoker, Lord Byron, Marilyn Ross) and cinema about vampires, members of the subculture in this category imitate their idols. Clothing style ranges from Victorian fashion with addition of red colours and capes, to more theatrical, pagan, macabre, eclectic mixture with vampire make-up and fake fangs.

The degree of involvement ranges from purely aesthetical to borderline occult with members of this subtype for instance implanting fangs and drinking actual blood as part of sexual or religious experience.

Commonly female Vampire Goths enact the role of seductress, yet here we could possibly distinguish two types – openly eroticised eclectic image or rarer more restrained medieval-like attire with subtle but powerful feminine features expressed through fangs, make up and red colour. First image goes more in tune with over the top girl power idea with aggressive exposed sexuality, allowing women to transgress such stigmas as “whore”, “seductress”, “sinful woman” by willingly taking on the attributes and harnessing their undeniable power of attraction over the opposite sex. The second image could be seen within context of a more mature control of expression of femininity, retaining its powerful features, yet subtly establishing the aesthetic dominance through more refined elements emphasis via attire and make-up. This approach to sexuality, however is seen very critically by feminists such as Rosalind Gill, who believes that “*it represents a shift in the way that power operates: from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing, narcissistic gaze. It can be argued that this represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime. [...] Girls and women are invited to become a particular kind of self [...] closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy...*” (Gill, 2007, pp. 151-152). A view, which however excludes lesbian fascination with

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<sup>5</sup> We can of course take a radical feminist stance and suggest that feminine mystique is a patriarchal construct instead concealing lack of that very sane and logical thinking on the male part.

sexualized female as well as being disparaging of the very idea that sexualized female can in herself be a beautiful interesting, individual, powerful and aesthetic to both female and male eye, downplaying it with pornography references, actually disempowering women by forcing them into ideology of medieval modesty.

Although one may note the male count Dracula, as the most known and greatest inspiration in the genre, multiple influential female characters are present as well, ranging from fictional Biblical mother of all vampires Lilith, the second wife of Adam, and on to a real historical character countess Elizabeth Bathory. The relevance to women role here is significant in that by taking on persona of a vampire, a woman empowers herself (even if within the boundaries of the subculture) with a set of dominant attributes, transcending the gender and social role. Goulding and Saren provide a relevant focused selection of interpretations:

*“in keeping with the tenets of Gothic fiction to disrupt normal reality, the vampire is used to symbolize what our culture represses (Hanson, 2003). The ambivalence towards gender created by the notion of vampirism accordingly disrupts traditional delineations of gender roles. Because the sex act (sucking blood) is the same for both sexes and women vampires also penetrate with their ‘phallic teeth’ (Hanson, 2003, p. 2), the boundaries between men and women, masculinity and femininity are deliberately blurred (Gelder, 1994) and many consider the vampire to be bisexual or bi-erotic (Stater, 1997). In essence, the Goths, through their multifaceted gender performances allow themselves to subversively play with gendered meanings and in so doing, show how they can be resignified (Butler, 1990)” (Goulding & Saren, 2006, pp. 206-207).*

An artist performer example is Sonya Scarlet (1980). Starting in the band as the back vocal, she later became the main vocalist and lyricist of the band, creating unique highly erotic controversial stage image. A peculiar element of her performances is cutting herself and letting the fans drink her blood, thus offering them eternal life. While this can easily be interpreted as mental disorder (she actually did suffer a breakdown in 2008), symbolic meaning of this extreme stage act confirms Hanson’s idea of asexual empowerment of vampire image. It confirms that women can partake in it as much as men, thus transgressing not only their role within traditional society, but also the subordinate female vampire role established within classical Gothic novel.

Sonya Scarlett is very direct and open about the empowering effect that gothic aesthetics and scene provide her with:

*“Tell me what image means to you?  
I think image is very important; it’s the first thing that this world usually seems to care about you. In the music business, having*

*a cool image is one of the first things. You can tell me that music come first, this is true, and this is the main thing to be considered but music walk together with us. I think clothes are my second skin, I'm the same person dressed up as you can see in my pics or naked (as you can see as well), so for me it is exactly the same. This is a way of life, you must believe in what you are. I also think that a beauty dressed in an empty body is like a good painter without a soul, so empty and cold, just a copy of millions of others, its dust, that's all.*

*How did you come up with your stage image?*

*My stage image is not different from what I am in my everyday life, as I said before this is a way of life...Maybe I've got a stronger image now, it makes me feel free, without compromise, I hate compromise...I'm completely free to do what I feel on stage, dressed up or not is what I give to our fans is the most important thing. I give them my energy and my blood...*

*Are you married?*

*No and never in my life... no compromise.*

*When growing up what was your dream?*

*Living in an ancient castle hidden by wood, lost somewhere in the north part of Europe with few people. This is still my dream.*

*Men - I hate men" (Brian Rademacher , 2005).*

*"Since 2004 you're the only singer of Theatres Des Vampires. Was it hard for a girl to reach this position?*

*Not at all. Luckily we do have some Metal bands around with dark and powerful front girls at the moment. Personally I love Tarja, the ex-Nightwish singer, and I think that there'll be more women in near future. Anyway, the problem was that in our band the main voice was a male voice so, it was more difficult for me changing everything than starting something from the beginning. I worked hard in order to make my voice perfectly connected with our old songs at our live shows and I found my own style for the new album. It was a kind of surprise for our fans so I had to prove that with me the band goes on better than before. I'm here because I worked hard during these years to show everybody that a good looking girl can also have a strong personality and a good voice. Now I'm ready for everything" (Pellegrini, 2005).*

As can be seen, the center of her life philosophy is control and non-compromising individualism; almost obsessive focus on the image, which is merged, or claimed to be merged with own identity (which brings it closer to third wave feminism and into postfeminism with pushing this self-image control into explicit domain of erotic); expressed misandry (which links it with radical feminism), coupled with "no family" life philosophy clearly positioning woman outside the household and patriarchal nuclear family context as such. And finally, professional approach to media and image, identifying its importance and making use of it for success with the vast audience (again third wave feminism link). Like Siouxsie Sioux, Sonya

Scarlet is a self-made successful performer, replacing earlier male lead (which we could also see as symbolic within this paper context) choosing her own way in life, her own philosophy and image, even if radical, macabre and still with a touch of childlike naiveté, staying loyal to the dreams of childhood. While not directly feminist, with her interviews she touches upon the same subjects (most pertinent for second and third wave feminism) as Emilie Autumn. Her optimism and confidence in female frontend based bands expanding and her emphasis on hard work, provides yet again a positive liberating outlook for female performers of the subculture.

#### **1.4. Victorian Goth**

While similar to Romantic and Medieval Goth, represents in a sense the elitist version of both. Inspired by Victorian age novels, classical music of the time, costumes of the age (sometimes replicated with great accuracy), classical Gothic novels, they attempt to bring in and relive aristocratic spirit of the time (its artistic idealized fictional form). This, however, is mixed with the liberal attitude within Gothic subculture, turning corsets and concealing yet sensual clothing into powerful attributes of difference, resistance to contemporary norms, reappropriation of once restrictive attire. In striving to be aristocratic, one may also note a higher education level with this subtype.

A good example of a successful musician fitting this narrow niche is Melora Creager, most widely known as the lead singer, song-writer and composer in Rasputina band.

Besides being an exceptional original creative musician with classical education, Melora is openly independent, witty and strong with her lyrics. It is enough to consider the titles like “You Don't Own Me” and subtle, yet powerful lyrics of “Girl's school” with such verses as: “Don't believe what the boys from next door heard. Requirements do include math”, “A pupil transferred here from Lavender Lake. She wrote a winning essay on self-denial.” “They can catch us or they could kill us, but they can never crush our spirits.”

#### **1.5. The Cybergoth (Rivethhead / Industrial Goth)**

Could be seen as an opposite side of the spectrum from Romantic and Victorian Goths. Technophilic, bright, shining with neon lights and adorned with plastic suits and corsets, high-sole boots, sometimes military style with colourful fake braids-wires... Feminine shapes are accentuated and exposed, yet on many levels resistant of patriarchal gaze through highly aestheticized imagery, concealed face (with a respirator or gas mask and goggles) – disconnecting the eroticised exposed, fragmented by the costume elements from the woman, or even human. Thirdly, in combining exposure and highly attractive aestheticized attire, CyberGoths are empowering themselves with

the feminine beauty itself. Whether we side with 3<sup>rd</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminists, and respectively embrace or reject emphasis on the femininity, we cannot deny the sublime power that a beautiful healthy human body possesses, the very same as sublime power of nature, yet spliced together with the “masculine” mystic of the machinery<sup>6</sup>.

CyberGothic music genres are ebm, aggrotech, industrial, noise – mostly harsh, noisy aggressive music with antagonistic depressive lyrics (an aggression not reflected in behaviour of subculture members).

While an ideal for romantic Goth might be a sorceress, - for CyberGoth, it is the cyborg, machine, future soldier, technology (electronic and war machinery), “ideal” world is not victorianesque magical middle ages, but a nuclear polluted post-apocalyptic future (which is why goggles, respirators and skin-tight suits come into play). It is difficult to say, what links CyberGoths with the general Gothic subculture. A speculation would be: industrial roots, affinity through experimental electronic music and lyrics, escapism, highly aestheticized look, use of some Gothic fashion items, sharing the same clubs and events, apolitical non-confrontational transgression.

Rivetheads and Industrial Goths are more restrained in terms of colours and behaviour, than aesthetically military-oriented Cybergoths.

An interesting performer in this category is Destroyx (Amelia Tan AKA Amelia Arsenic), leading vocals, distortion, art, direction and visuals of Angelspit, a cyberpunk-industrial band from Australia. Thanks to her creative vision, the band is among the undisputed leaders of the genre.

Contrary to expectations, it is exactly the CyberGoth that comes closest to socialist and radical feminist views and goes beyond third wave in establishing a serious constructive reply to critique of consumerism and empty glam (as part of capitalist consumerist femininity). Let us look more closely at the excerpts from the ideology of the band:

*CREATE*

*Explore the ideas and dreams that you have and make them real.*

*Make music and art that is not bound to a genre or scene.*

*"Glamour is made of a substance called 'incredibly hard fucking work'" - Angelspit*

*THINK*

*Think for yourself.*

*The overwhelming majority of information forced down our throats is sponsored, fabricated, edited and watered down.*

*Throw your television away, it is the mass opiate.*

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<sup>6</sup> Here, however, we can once again consider the link between the machine and the woman, expressed in the earliest cinematography: *Metropolis* of 1927, based on script and novel, written by a woman, Thea von Harbou and directed by a man, Fritz Lang.

*Tune your radio to your local community station.  
Don't spend too much time on the web....the internet is the greatest  
form of "Creative Procrastination".*

**CHANGE**

*Be educated in the decisions that sculpt your world and local area.  
Be motivated and vote.  
Be prepared to attend protests if required. Learn your rights and do it  
peacefully.*

*If you don't like this world, help change it.*

*"Money comes and goes. Time just goes - Spend it wisely" -*

*Angelspit*

*You only live once, make it count (Angelspit, 2011).*

While we may reasonably consider the “manifesto” with a grain of scepticism, it would be a mistake to ignore the statement about glamour within feminist context, as the band represents an independent female-driven strongly visual quality product successful both commercially and culturally, demonstrating political awareness, and emphasising in bold peaceful means of protest. In sharply attacking superficial perspective of the “consumerist” glam appearance, Angelspit stresses that their image is not an idle fancy, but hard work and means to self-realization, an artwork. By continuing the manifesto with Neomarxist slogans, they illustrate how their work, their looks and their music serve to deliver a liberating message to the audience.

### **1.6. The Steampunk Goth**

While Steampunk subculture has its own distinct roots in classical science fiction of writers like Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, Mary Shelly, as a subculture, it is a fairly recent offshoot from the Gothic subculture, combining the victorianesque attire with decorative elements, representing the latest technological advancements as if humanity never invented electricity and gunpowder and just continued research into steam-powered machines. Brass machines and various clockwork devices are the main technological fetish.

Growing popularity and influence of Steampunk can be seen in music video of such major mainstream bands as Panic! At the Disco “The Ballad of Mona Lisa”, or with major Hollywood productions like “The Golden Compass”, “Mutant Chronicles”, “The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen” and even the latest take on Arthur Conan Doyle’s classics “Sherlock Holmes” of 2009 to name a few.

Within our framework, this subtype is interesting as creating another fictional space for female fantasy and self-realization and imagination. In organically combining such opposites as the Victorian Goth and CyberGoth with a sprinkle of Dark Cabaret Goth, and even Romantic Goth, whilst taking itself a little less seriously, it permits for a more carnevalesque

(Bakhtin, 2002) less restrained expression, retaining and emphasising creation of a fictional persona.

In this sense Veronique Chevalier (Berenice Chloe Sztuczka), stands out as a self-fashioned Steampunk, adopting a fictional persona<sup>7</sup>, and making subculture the core of her career as an award-winning American mistress of ceremonies, singer-songwriter, music producer, comedienne and parodist.

It might be too early to mark role of women in this subtype, as it is fairly new and, while influential in mass-media, is comparatively small as a subtype. What can be currently deduced is that women enjoy the same liberal treatment as with most subtypes of Gothic subculture, allowing for self-realization as stage performers or general participants. A possible constraint might be in the link to traditional classical science-fiction, limiting symbolic range of available character roles (captain Nemo is a man for example), which is however easily overcome by feminizing and reconstructing them (illustration shows Veronique as a Steampunk pirate, an otherwise commonly male profession).

### **1.7. Dark Cabaret / Burlesque Goth**

Curiously, the majority of Steampunk Goths would likely identify with the dark cabaret and possibly Victorian Goth subtypes as well. Rasputina band, mentioned earlier fits within each of these categories, as well as Unwoman, and the Dresden Dolls to name a few. It is not uncommon to find performers disassociating themselves with Gothic subculture; Jordan Harper explains it as follows:

*“Nowadays, when Goth kids are listening to Marilyn Manson and his musical progeny, dark clothes and darker attitudes might seem like something that belongs to people still surprised by armpit hair. The trappings of a once-fun style are now the window dressing of teenage angst. No thanks”* (Harper, 2004).

This subtype incorporates the burlesque cabaret aesthetics with the darker Gothic image and lyricism, and while there is no specific reason, this subtype is most avid in discussing women’s issues. Emilie Autumn, American singer-songwriter, poet, visual actor and violinist, currently working on her new album “Fight Like a Girl”, is the best example to illustrate the subtype for our angle.

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<sup>7</sup> “Mademoiselle Veronique Marie Therese Antoinette de Chevalier (formerly Cyphyre) is reputed to be the long-lost “illegitimate” granddaughter of Maurice Chevalier, as well as the former Etoile (Prima Ballerina Assoluta) for Les Ballets de la Salle de Bain de Paris. Her career was tragically cut short while the company was on the Tehachapi leg of their most recent US tour, when she took an unfortunate tumble into the orchestra pit during her solo, due to a sudden blackout, caused by a drunken cowboy shooting out the headlights of the pickup truck that served as the stage lighting. After she came to, some weeks later, she had lost all memory of ever having danced, as well as having also forgotten her native French tongue. She can now only speak in – what is considered by all who hear it – her own charming version of accented English” (Chevalier, 2006).

While utilizing highly sexual, exposing looks to their full extent, Emilie Autumn is perhaps the missing link between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists. Notably different from 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminists in focusing on exposing the problematic of women's place in society, sexual and emotional abuse, objectification and ignorance, in lyrical at times Shakespearean way, she reaches out to the audience by merging her stage persona with her own identity (of a rape survivor, child abuse victim and former mental asylum patient). She does bring highly aestheticized and sexualized (mocking male gaze) feminine into her performances and image, but it is a strong, although wounded, fragile, delicate self, problematizing the women place and role in society as opposed to revelling in the girl power image.

In her "Thank God I'm Pretty", she subjects the male gaze and the patriarchal society to sharp satire and criticism, disparaging much of what third wave pop feminism would downplay (exposed feminine beauty as a difficult burden): degrading favours (free drinks), derogatory treatment (seedy bar and stranger's car invitations), lack of recognition for her talents (every skill will be in question), being treated as a sex object (ability to rend a grown man tongue-tied, masturbation at her image instead of listening to her music, slaps on the bottom), rape threats (when it's dark outside she has to run and hide), a common rapist defence criticism (every ill that I must suffer merely brought on by myself), lack of recognition (I hate to be taken seriously) and unfair treatment of patronizing unjust privileges (police will come for someone else).

Another good choice in the category is Amanda Palmer, vocalist, performer, artist musician, most known for her work in Dresden Dolls (as she remarks, not Goth, but Brechtian style dark cabaret) and solo albums. She is much more of a third wave feminist, yet, as well in tune with truly liberal atmosphere of Gothic subculture, she gives a more holistic perspective on capitalist-corporate-consumerist hegemonic global value system, identifying it as a problem which touches not only women, but men as well:

*"What's your personal opinion of being feminine and feminism?  
And finding the line in between them?"*

*"I could write a book about that. Feminism is a trap lately - it's very hard for girls to negotiate it. I love making random choices every day. I love the feminine power of "I CAN MAKE YOU ORGASM WITH MY HIGH HEELS," and I love the feminine power of "YOU CANNOT TELL ME WHAT TO SHAVE, YOU F\*CKER."*

*I love the feminine power of sex in bed and sex in the street, and the choice to play with it when I want it. I get very sad when I see women trapped inside the 2-inch ideas of what they have to be and buy and look like to be acceptable and happy. But it's not just women*

*trapped in that damn box. It's just a smaller box. Men, they got the big box. They're psyched. But still f\*cked'* (Bradley, 2009).

### **1.8. Japanese Goth or Gothic Lolita**

Another interesting example of Gothic subculture is its export and now reimport Japanese flavour version. The main difference with European/American version is exclusive focus on aesthetics. Allegedly started (but in truth rather popularized) by Mana, a cross dresser, musician, stylist, model, leader and guitarist of influential Japanese rock visual kei band Malice Mizer, Japanese Gothic Lolita image draws main inspiration from European Victorian dresses, French maid dresses, Alice in Wonderland image, all resembling antique dolls. It has developed into a set of distinct sub styles (however not of behavioural, but visual kind): Gothic Lolita, Sweet Lolita, Casual Lolita, Hime Lolita, Shiro Lolita, Kuro Lolita, Classic Lolita, Country Lolita, Sailor Lolita, Wa Lolita, Guro Lolita, Punk Lolita, Ero Lolita, Cosplay Lolita, Kodona, Qi Lolita...

Contrary to the EU/US subculture, however, Japanese Gothic Lolita is tightly integrated with hegemonic patriarchal capitalist discourse with common emphasis on being and looking cute (*kawaii*). The woman is self-fashioning herself into an underage innocent, yet eroticized product of male gaze (particular interest in this sense are *qi* and *wa lolitas*, merging traditional costume with Lolita fashion, providing avid illustration to the case). The costumes are mass-produced and available even in department stores, not unlike infamous among "real" Goths Hot Topic section in Wal-Mart. It is common for Gothic Lolita girls to dress up in imitation of male Japanese cross-dressing rock stars.

As mentioned before, much like within oldest European theatrical tradition, most of Japanese rock performers, the inspiration for the image, are male cross-dressers, therefore finding an influential female Gothic Lolita performer in the media (although you are certain to find elements of this fashion with general tier pop stars on occasion). This places the few exceptions into almost underground category. Of the few exceptions is Kana Moon (born 1982), gaining public recognition through modelling in Mana's journal "Gothic Lolita Bible", boosting her popularity as a rock musician/singer as well. Her other talents include toy design, modelling, illustrations/graphic art, dresses design, and acting". Although a self-made successful independent celebrity, Kana's role in reshaping patriarchal order is minimal with her lyrics conveying cute consumerist indulgence "Chocolat", generic sad beautiful imagery "Moon ~wings~" or directly defining dependence on her lover's caresses "I want you to comfort me so much that I break, sweetness is sought even by red ants" (lyrics.time, 2011), all of which fit in well within the framework of common pop and rock music. However, even within such tight environment, she manages to break

through with her very exotic original harsh choking vocal, sharply contrasting with her sweet, erotic Lolita image. Within feminist theory much consideration is given to the “the voice” of women, here it is literary the voice, which sharply contrasts and breaks the boundaries of male-dominated musical genre, even if it bears no verbalized message of patriarchal paradigm transgression, it achieves it by not fitting the frame of cute, sweet, pleasant.

### **1.9. Corporate Goth**

A minimalistic style, attempting to integrate the Gothic look with the corporate office environment (prevalence of black, soft corsets, subtle decorations, dark minimal make-up, silver pins: devil is in the detail) and eventually developing into a style of its own, widely embraced for its general audience friendliness and appeal. The style has been used by many bands. One can hardly link this clothing style to certain behaviour trends or subcultural ideology (which makes it similar to Gothic Lolita style).

For our purposes mentioning this style is important to illustrate merging of subcultural liberating elements with hegemonic structure of male-dominated corporate environment. One would have to take sides and consider this either giving in, limiting female freedom of appearance by letting small, appealing to male gaze elements to be worn in public offices, or see it as a small rebellion against soulless grey environment of cubicle offices.

### **1.10. BDSM Goth**

Last but not least comes the BDSM Goth. As follows from the title, this subtype is focused on Bondage Domination Sadism Masochism aesthetics and is most closely related with CyberGoth due to the love for latex and vinyl, industrial music elements, as well as strong dominant energetic female performers. Although BDSM presupposes both master and slave personae, the concept of dominatrix – powerful dominant female, wielding the sexual power, subduing and commanding men is very common. Within general pop rock subculture, we can see traces of it with Pink, No Doubt and Garbage to name a few, landing it in the middle of girl power debate. However, unlike with the mainstream versions, where “*artistic discourse of helpless, innocent girlhood simultaneously functions as a strategy of feminism and a strategy of commerce*” (Wald, 1998, p. 589), the untamed dominant sexual feminine power reigns supreme, which leads to success with both male and female audience, contrary to the claims of male hegemony hardwired values, which would suggest fear of strong female.

The band of interest here is Genitorturers, an American band founded by Gen, its vocalist and leader. With her sharp lyrics and shocking performances, she bares the gritty unpolished “dirty”, yet powerful sexual

transgressive feminine energy. As in case with CyberGoth, her “rebellion” is in tune with second wave feminists, despite having the looks and tools of the third wave. “Public enemy number one – targets on my head – better get a gun”, Gen is clearly not a damsel in distress: she is a conqueror of both men and weaker women. The illustration image is telling in itself – it is now men who bear her cross, curiously alluding to The New Testament, but all inverted. With Gen standing strong before the blooded cross, - she is not here to sacrifice, but to conquer and command.

### **1.11. Gothic Metal/Alternative/Rock**

This category is not included in analysis, even though it is worth noting and worth a separate wholesome research project, being of the most influential contemporary mass-media Goth representations and being most well-studied within pop-rock music feminist academic studies context. It is neither a mistake nor a joke that the subtype is defined by a lengthy title consisting mostly of music genres: this most known subtype is itself merely an eclectic music genre, not a subtype of the subculture! It is defined primarily by an attractive almost always female vocalist in generic Gothic attire and accompanying “Gothic metal” (which can include alternative rock, nu metal, power metal, symphonic metal, post-grunge, heavy and thrash metal) music<sup>8</sup>. The genre is absolutely dominated by female vocalists as follows from definition, with such bands as Evanescence, Nightwish, Lacuna Coil, After Forever, Leaves Eyes, Within Temptation and countless more. The closer the representative band is to mainstream, - the more embedded it is in stereotypical representation of melodramatic “damsel in distress” overwhelmed by her emotions and lovelorn suffering. With getting further from mainstream, the lyrics and image get enriched with fantasy-imagery, become more complex and abstract. While the provided description is disparaging, the genre can certainly boast great vocals, memorable lyrics and quality musical arrangement.

Following Balanck’s classification, one would likely make this the main genre for the Baby Bats – younger people and members (very likely fleeting) of Gothic subculture, whose tastes and involvement are not yet deep and well-defined. “Gothic Metal” is the most likely “pointer” to the subculture, a starting point of introduction from which a curious individual may find her own way within Gothic community or leave her interest at that.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion it would be most useful to summarize the findings of the paper, skipping the descriptive element. According to the research, one may deduce that Gothic subculture provides an own alternative kind of

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<sup>8</sup> There are, however, exceptions to this definition with influential male vocalists/bands in this category as well, such as HIM, Rasmus and Amorphis.

hegemony, “flirting” and mingling with globalized capitalist corporate culture hegemony in curious and ambivalent ways. It partakes in consumerism and is arguably defined by mass-media (and older forms of media). However, it is arguably based on women (as members and inspiration), and its aesthetics and worldview are clearly feminine (eclectic complex definition of feminine combining such “patriarchal” and “feminist” qualities as emotional, aesthetic, withdrawn, beautiful, intellectual, romantic, idealistic, naïve, determined...). In developing the notion of eclecticism further, one may note that the Gothic subculture borrows a lot of empowering elements from patriarchal hegemonic culture, feminist ideology as well as mass media, it reconstructs them and hands them over to women. To elaborate – the subcultural “scene” breaks gender constraints and stereotypes, yet permits women to enjoy safely and liberally numerous elements of patriarchal art, literature and culture (on a range of layers including symbolic concepts of feminine beauty or literary fictional personalities with their traits used as prototypes to material objects such as attire). As Emilie Autumn illustrates, Gothic women can be feminine, attractive, strong, yet deeply conscious of women issues and problems, speak of them very openly.

Another hint to the subculture constructing a kind of own hegemony is its multifaceted distributed structure with different subtypes in a way performing different ideological functions with industrial/CyberGoth being the “muscle” and “thinker” of the system, Romantic Goth being its “sensitive soul” and Corporate Goth being its “spy” into corporate global culture, Steampunk being its “playground”, Vampire and BDSM Goth being its “adult playground”, Victorian Goth and Japanese Gothic Lolita being its “haute couture fashion houses”, burlesque Goth being its “voice”... This way Gothic subculture can be seen as a complete evolving superstructure.

Contrary to common academic focus on its consumerist side, it is noteworthy that within subculture itself, it is rather a producer of creative industry kind of system with endless music, costumes, literature, art, all generated by the members, suggesting that it might make sense to separate its origins from its nature.

Furthermore, one may note tremendous progress that Gothic subculture has provided to female performers, contrary to observation one the rock scene of 1960ies “The counter culture’s marginalisation of women in rock is therefore particularly disturbing” (Whiteley, 2000, p. 23), present day Gothic scene (both mainstream and underground) is dominated by women.

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