Goth: Undead Subculture

LAUREN M.E. GOODLAD AND MICHAEL BIBBY (EDS), DUKES UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007

Twenty years since it sprung from the dark loins of British punk, Goth shows no signs of relinquishing its stranglehold on the popular imagination. That it has outlasted once-as-popular equals (grunge, for instance) comes as little surprise: the very name ‘Goth’ is retrospective. The broader category of the Gothic negotiates contemporary and future fears and desires through an exploration of the shadowy past.

It is at this intersection of past, present and future where the recent glut of books about Goth may be explained. Paul Hodkinson’s Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture (Berg, 2002), Gavin Baddley’s Goth Chic: A Connoisseur’s Guide to Dark Culture (Plexus, 2002) and Catherine Spooner’s Fashioning Gothic Bodies (Manchester UP, 2004) mark a significant juncture not only for the subculture but the Gothic as a whole. The breakdown into sub-subcultures (Industrial, Old-School, Gothabilly) suggests not a fracture, but an ability to evolve while maintaining a central sensibility. Goth cannot be killed because it rejects life to begin with – it is undead.

It is an exercise in futility to suggest that music was anything but paramount in the formation of the subculture, as supported in this book with chapters on The Cure, Joy Division and David Bowie. As a critical text, however, Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie are as beatified as Siouxsie Siouxs and Bauhaus. Other aspects are also explored – the look of Goth is as much a part of its pleasures as music, as demonstrated in Jessica Burstein’s interview with noted fashion historian Valerie Steele, and a reprint of Catherine Spooner’s ‘Undead Fashion: Nineties Style and the Perennial Return of Goth’.

Approaches within Goth: Undead Subculture can be divided into three positions: proud subculturalists, orthodox researchers and a combination of both. Representing the first category, Trevor M. Holmes (‘I’m a Goth-identified subject’, p.77), Joshua Gunn (‘some-one who has frequented the Gothic scene for almost fifteen years’, p.41) and ‘dyed-in-the-wool Goth’ (p.121) Rebecca Schraffenberger acknowledge their own subjectivity (as all researchers perhaps should) as they discuss what Gunn describes as ‘Goth performativity’ (p.48). There is a sense that the emperor may be at best scantily clad – Schraffenberger in particular neglects to refer to her own pursuit of (sub)cultural capital through the unrelenting sense that she is Goth Enough to impart the secret of True Goth to mere Muggles. As the title of her article ‘This Modern Goth (Explains Herself)’ suggests, one is relegated to the role of mere audience, rather than receiving any concrete insight. Given that this book will only be of interest to members of the subculture or academics interested in the field, one is curious as to how the former will react to such a position.

The drawcard for Australian readers is Ken Gelder’s ‘The (Un)Australian Goth: Notes Toward a Dislocated National Subject’. Gelder – whose recent book, Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice, was released in 2007 – needs little introduction. In stark contrast to Schraffenberger’s approach, Gelder’s textual analyses of Goth identities in films such as Angst (Daniel Netheim, 2000) and the literature of Kim Wilkins and Nick Cave are an engaging deployment of the skills that have placed him in the top echelons of international subculture studies. However, the introductory exploration of the local Melbourne Goth scene at the time the article was written has an air of confusion as to what lies between ‘too Goth’ and ‘not Goth enough’ when undertaking ethnographic research in this area: ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the enigma of the Goth subculture. It is this haziness, this mystery, that haunts Goth: Undead Subculture but manifests too rarely in concrete form.

Regardless, many critics perfectly straddle the line between first-hand involvement with the scene and solid critical discourse. Michael Du Plessis’s ‘“Goth Damage” and Melancholia: Reflections on Posthuman Gothic Identities’, Kristen Schilt’s ‘Queens of the Damned: Women and Girls’ Participation in Two Gothic Subcultures’ and Anna Powell’s ‘God’s Own Medicine: Religion and Parareligion in UK Goth Communities’ all embody the Gothic subcultural experience in a way only those living la vida spooky could. Crucially, these positions are not fetishized, but are used to launch into debates pertinent to the wider field of cultural studies.

Most fascinating in Goth: Undead Subculture are the text-based analyses, particularly Carol Siegel’s discussion of author Poppy Z. Brite, Jason K. Friedman’s exploration of...
postmodern instances of Southern Gothic literature, and Robert Markley and co-editor Lauren M.E. Goodlad’s foray into Goth in film. Here, the self-consciousness that permeates some of the ethnographic analyses vanishes and is replaced by a more orthodox approach perhaps fitting for a subculture defined by retrospect. Like Goth itself, this book displays its weaknesses and guards its strengths ferociously, but fails to answer the question: will there ever be a day when academics run out of things to say about \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer}?

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