



## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW


# Goth's Wan Stamina

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN* | JUNE 15, 2007 ✓ PREMIUM

As an undergraduate, I liked to annoy the dons at St. Hilda's College by turning up at my tutorials in a leather biker jacket, a miniskirt, ripped fishnet stockings, and Doc Marten boots. My hair (which has never recovered) was crimped and sprayed into black and pink spikes. "Épater le bourgeois" was the idea, I suppose. I never identified myself as a goth, nor do my own students today who dress in a similar way, but they'd probably accept the term as a fair description of their style and sensibility, as, in retrospect, would I.

Now, of course, I realize the dons at St. Hilda's had seen it all before. Goth style has been around since the 1970s if not in full bloom, then in hints and gestures, from dyed black hair and pale makeup to Doc Martens, crushed velvet, black nail polish, and fingerless gloves. When I was at college, we added Crazy Color hair streaks and motorbike leathers; my own students add body piercing and tattoos. Goth obviously emerged from punk, but punk didn't last. The same is true of most subcultures: Hippies are old hat; skinheads have come and gone; grunge is yesterday's news. Why does goth alone remain undead?

That question is one of many considered in two new books on the subject: *Contemporary Gothic*, by Catherine Spooner (Reaktion Books), and *Goth: Undead Subculture*, edited by Lauren M.E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby (Duke University Press). Both books situate the goth movement as a post-punk phenomenon, emerging from the socioeconomic decline of late 1970s Britain. The authors in Goodlad and Bibby's volume restrict their analyses to contemporary manifestations of the subculture; whereas Spooner's book, despite its title, is much broader in focus, and considers the cultural and historical influence of the arts, media, and commerce on the goth aesthetic. The two

 volumes actually complement one another rather well, though the Goodlad and Bibby volume is livelier and more fun to read, a result of its wide-ranging contributions.

As both books point out, there's nothing new about goth culture, which goes back — well — to the Goths, the Germanic tribe that was dissed by mainstream culture (i.e., the Romans) as uncivilized and barbaric. The term was later applied to a style of medieval architecture by critics who regarded it as similarly uncultured, and subsequently to a late-18th- and early-19th-century style of literature dwelling on death and the supernatural. The modern goth movement emerged from the Batcave, a popular London nightclub, and as punk faded away, goth developed from an aberrant offshoot into a subculture of its own. Today the influence of the original goth bands — Fields of the Nephilim, Joy Division, Sisters of Mercy, the Cure, Bauhaus — can be heard in the dominant bass lines and gloomy lyrics of bands like Mephisto Walz, London After Midnight, the Birthday Massacre, and Android Lust.

In their preface to *Goth*, Bibby and Goodlad comment on the "long duration" of their book project, which, they reveal, first took shape at a conference panel when they were in grad school (both are now associate professors). It's difficult to think of any other subculture that could have remained current for so long, or that would permit so many different avenues of approach. The essays in this collection discuss all the traditional areas of cultural studies — performance, community, self-representation, gender relations — but also consider some of goth's more oblique elements, such as literary styles, song lyrics, nostalgia, fetishism, and its connections with religion and apostasy. Authors include ethnographers, sociologists, creative writers, cultural historians, and literature scholars, many of whom are (or were) self-identified goths. Spooner's book, on the other hand, focuses more particularly on how and why goth aesthetics have played such a consistent role in everyday commercial culture. A bonus: Both books are refreshingly free of the kind of heavy theoretical jargon that would make even the palest goth blanch in dismay.

According to Spooner's book, the consistent allure of goth lies in the way it achieves a balance between different kinds of contradictions — "the grotesque and incorporeal, authentic self-expression and campiness, mass popularity and cult appeal, comfort and outrage." Bibby and Goodlad put it differently, pointing out that goth has a "complex

relation to subculture," or, in the words of one contributor, the self-proclaimed Modern Goth Rebecca Schraffenberger, "there are as many ways of being goth as there are goths out there." In other words, goth can be anything you want it to be, from the theme of tonight's party to an entire way of life.

In general, youth culture tends to be tied closely to the mood of the time (hippies, punk), to a certain kind of music (hip-hop, mod, reggae), to a sport or activity (skate punk, surf rock), or to a social or ethnic group (rastas, skinheads). Goth, on the other hand, is completely flexible. There are goth clubs and pubs, goth movies (anything by David Lynch, Tim Burton, or Ed Wood seems to fit the bill), goth jewelry and fashion, goth-friendly home décor, even goth lingerie. Within its own confines, too, goth embraces contradictions; it contains multitudes. Hair can be long or short, flat or spiky; shoes can be heavy boots or light slippers with pointy toes. And while individual goths can be totally asexual or polymorphously perverse, goth itself breeds peacefully with other subcultures, producing such independent offspring as gothabilly, doom metal, gothic Lolita, cybergoth, and goth 'n' roll.

Goth isn't only for the young, either; if it suits you, you can be a goth all your life (which is certainly not true of punk — there's surely no more depressing coiffure than the receding Mohawk). In fact, if you're trying to look like a corpse, a gaunt face and figure can be an advantage rather than a drawback — although, after a lifetime spent avoiding the sun, some eldergoths (as they're respectfully known) remain surprisingly wrinkle-free; just look at Nick Cave, Robert Smith of the Cure, or Marilyn Manson. For women, the Morticia Addams look is age-appropriate for stylish goth matriarchs like Vivienne Westwood and Anne Rice.

Although they may look scary, goths tend to be unusually tolerant and peace loving. It's a truism that, despite their fringe status, rejection of social norms, and interest in death, most of those who dress in goth styles tend to be shy and withdrawn, though not necessarily depressed. Anyone can be a goth; you don't need to run in a pack (goths are traditionally loners). And, as teenage subcultures go, it's unusually quiet and friendly. Goths are generally hygienic; their piercings are clean and discreet; they don't stick dirty safety pins through their noses or ride around on motorbikes spitting and swearing.

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Goth's consistent popularity does not mean, as some curmudgeons assume, that young people today are becoming increasingly nihilistic and alienated. Anyone who feels that way doesn't understand the essence of goth, which is really all about self-acceptance, self-expression, and creativity. Taking for granted the misery of the human condition, goth turns depression into an aesthetic, a semi-ironic pose — a perfect style for the awkward and self-conscious. Pale makeup, for both sexes, perfectly conceals bad complexions; goth clothing tends to cover, rather than display. And although its dark style was originally taken up as a backlash to the colorful disco music of the 70s, it may, in the end, be goth's most successful feature. After all, who doesn't look good in black?

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