'I am not a goth!'

The Unspoken Morale of Authenticity within the Dutch Gothic Subculture

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ABSTRACT   Notions of authenticity and identity in Dutch gothic subculture focus on the paradox of being a subcultural insider, i.e. being simultaneously an individual and a member of a homogenous group. This paradox also triggers the problem of authentic identity. Gothic insiders emphasize that they are not goths, but that they identify with what they describe as gothic, only to explain later that that is not authentic gothic. I will argue that this denial is a subcultural strategy, a way to 'ward off' classificatory strategies of dominant, non-subcultural culture. Namely, as soon as criteria for sub-cultural identity are conceptualised, they can be copied by outsiders, and this should preferably be avoided. Empirical material will display how gothic subcultural identity is practiced within the monitoring and conceptualising processes prompted by outsiders like the media, and how authenticity seems to be a void, nothing but an abstract, unspoken, sub-cultural morale.

Introduction

It is quite exciting to enter a gothic party and find oneself in a world full of mystery. Most visitors I interviewed told me they find it dark, magical, fantastical. Strangers to this subculture told me they were struck by the politeness and the enhanced practice of etiquette at those parties. The music that is usually played within the gothic subculture works well on the senses, as it often contains a certain sadness or anger. However, the atmosphere at the parties was not the only feature of gothic subculture that intrigued me in an almost 'physical' way. Wearing a corset, for instance, feels as if someone is holding you all the time; it changes your body stature, in fact, it makes you aware of your body. Within the gothic subculture, everything is dressed in a cloud of mystery. Most importantly, it makes me, and many with me, feel at home: the smells, attitudes, clothes, colours, tastes and visual aspects of a party and its visitors tell us we find ourselves amongst our kind, in a familiar place.

For years, exactly this sense of feeling at home within the gothic scene fascinated me. Considering the mysterious, uncommon and exceptional features of gothic subculture turns this sense of home into a striking feature. And what is even more peculiar is that they often refuse to be called gothic. The following quotation is from a certain Mister Y. Rose, who is an insider to gothic subculture. Please note his evasive tactics regarding the gothic identity:

> ...You share some point of views, you know. I was always attracted to this DARK THING, but I would never call it gothic. I knew Charles Baudelaire, I knew Edgar Allan Poe [he names some of the writers that are appreciated in the gothic subculture], I read all these things when I was a kid, but it didn't interest me to give these things a name. These things were just a part of me, you know. I knew Bauhaus, I knew the Cure [some of the bands that are often listened to within the gothic subculture], but I wasn't interested to give these interests a name, a place, a sticker. This is what happens nowadays, but I didn't do that! It is not my fault!!
> [...] Are there certain things you appreciate especially within the gothic?
> Yeah, A LOT! The imagery, I love the imagery. It has always appealed to me. I always wear something black, you know. Even if not consciously because I want to be gothic, you know. And some part of the philosophy [dark romanticism] appeals to me. [...]. As much as I got into the gothic scene, I lost that!
> Really?!
> Yeah. You have to get away from the gothic scene itself to be in a gothic way, you know?
> ...ya... okay... but then explain all these goths that are together then...
> I am NOT talking about them. I am talking about me.

Mister Y. Rose's words contain a paradox that recurred in many conversations and interviews during my research: gothic party visitors (from now on I call them gothic insiders) state that they are not goth,[1] but identify with what they describe as goth, only to tell me later that that is not authentic goth. Is this 'negativity' some kind of subcultural strategy? Is it a way to 'ward off" the classificatory strategies of dominant, non-subcultural culture?

I think it is important to try to grasp this paradox in all its complexity. Detailed use of empirical data will show that what is at stake here is, first, related to the more general problem of being an individual, while at the same time being a member of a group; And, second, it is related to an attempt of guarding some kind of subcultural authenticity in the all-absorbing context of commerce and dominant culture. Goths themselves do not use the term authenticity explicitly. But, as I will show below, notions of authenticity seem to morally hover above everything they do. Being 'authentic' seems to be a subcultural necessity; it seems to be some kind of unspoken morale. One will find that subcultures and notions of authenticity and identity are intricately intertwined. Before I will turn to my ethnographic data, I feel inclined to elaborate on subcultural theory and the anthropological history of the term authenticity.

Thinking about homogenous subcultural 'others'

Subcultures always differ from the dominant culture or mainstream culture within which they exist. There are two schools famous for their research on, and theories about, subcultures. I will only very shortly introduce these schools. The Chicago School focussed on small groups that have trouble 'fitting in' because of their social, or economic differences. The second school, the Birmingham School, even narrowed down the focus on subcultures in general to the specific study of youth subcultures.[2] Subcultures were not only placed outside the social conventional norm, they were placed outside the general adult world. Along with this 'othering' came the idea that within subcultures, different behaviours were practiced. These youth cultures (mods, rockers or punks and skinheads) were seen to practice deviant behaviour directed against their parent culture, and this brought up an interest in alternative cultural knowledge and (sub)cultural resistance. Anthropologists started treating subcultures the way they had treated cultures in the non-western world, as homogenous, traditional, continuous cultures, and subcultural insiders came to be seen as western 'others'.

In *Resistance through Rituals* (1976) different authors study themes of negotiation, resistance and struggle connected to subordinate youth cultures.[3] Influenced by Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, the authors portray how dominant classes exercise their power by 'coercing' subordinate classes to conform to their interests. They describe how subordinate cultures continuously find themselves between 'giving in' and practicing resistance to dominant culture. In what way, then, can subcultures be autonomous and, as such, 'authentic'?

Hebdige, also part of the Birmingham School and the CCCS, and heavily influenced by the spectacular punk subculture, elaborates in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) on how dominant forces of mass media and commerce work to incorporate, regulate and negotiate subcultural 'looks', fashions or styles. Hebdige's argument is that no subculture can be authentic because as soon as it's look, style and fashion are incorporated in the dominant capitalist culture; it loses its *raison d'être*, that is, resistance through a particular style. In reading Hebdige, one comes to understand that the authenticity of subcultures is to be found at the spectacular level of fashion and style.

Muggleton, on the other hand, states that Clarke, Hebdige and the whole CCCS fall into a trap: they tend to reify subcultures. By posing the following rhetorical questions, he tries to prove the uselessness of describing subcultures as authentic:

> How do we identify the point at which innovative style becomes incorporated fashion? On what criteria can particular subculturalists[4] be regarded as authentic or inauthentic? Where can we draw the line that separates the originals from the followers? (Muggleton 2000: 24).

Muggleton states there is no 'true' subculture. According to him, all subcultures are manifestations of self-expression, individual autonomy and cultural diversity. There are but 'subculturalists': groups of people that share the same sensibility, be it post-modern,

working-class, or something else. This development can be traced back to the beginning of the 1960's (ibid: 164).

Muggleton opts for more generalizing, grand theories applicable to all subcultures in general, whereas Hebdige and others focus on the different styles of subcultures, and consequently, reify them. Either way, scholars moved from doing participant observation to observation of styles and the writing of grand theory. For now, I would like to turn to someone who remained very close to his empirical data, and even studied the same (gothic) subculture, although in England: Paul Hodkinson.

Gothic subcultural substance

Contemporary gothic subculture does not consist of a group of people with the same homogenous economic, social background. Neither is it a youth-culture, since subcultural practitioners age from early teens up to mid-forties. Nevertheless, their 'spectacularity' (the typical black clothes made from PVC, velvet, leather or satin, and the light skin and dark make-up) turns gothic insiders into 'others' in the bright light of dominant culture. Whether resistance is what lies at the core of gothic subculture remains to be seen.

Paul Hodkinson (2002), like me an insider to gothic subculture,[5] pointed out that so called 'spectacular' aspects of gothic subculture are in fact substantive aspects, because they have been more or less the same for more than a quarter of a century. In a way, he blesses gothic subculture with an aura of authenticity. This stands in stark contrast with Hebdige, who shows us that any subcultural authenticity is in fact a contradiction in terms, because as soon as subcultural styles emerge they will be copied, and all subcultures, according to Hebdige, will thus be incorporated into dominant culture. Gothic insiders, however, have contained a similarity over more than a quarter of a century, since the late '70's up till today. Gothic culture has always been dark in music, symbolism, fashion and attributes like sculls, dead flowers, macabre paintings, et cetera. Of course, new technology brought new music and it brought the Internet, but gothic remains fairly true to its origins in the late '70's, early '80's. Also, most gothic insiders have been frequenting the subcultural arena for years and years.[6] This all seems to confirm Hodkinson's idea that subcultures in general have a kind of authentic substance. According to him, this substance conforms to the following criteria: the first three, consistent distinctiveness, shared identity and commitment highlight the interplay between the individual and the social (Hodkinson 2002: 30-3). But the fourth needs some elaboration here. Hodkinson calls it 'autonomy' and describes it as follows:

> Our interest is to distinguish between internal or *subcultural* forms of media and commerce – which operate mostly within the networks of a particular grouping – and external or *non-subcultural* products and services, produced by larger-scale commercial interests for a broader consumer base (ibid: 33).

A subcultural insider has to inform him/herself constantly on what the specific subculture in question is actually about. He/she has to be socially active and in constant dialogue with the subculture. Hodkinson's description of autonomy is very important; for it distinguishes the role of media and commerce in the subcultural world from the role they play in the non-sub cultural world. Hodkinson explains how gothic insiders have created their own, autonomous media and commercial networks, and he proves that Hebdige's theory of dominant culture destroying subcultures is incorrect. The gothic subculture has survived and remained autonomous (homogenous?) regardless of the dominant forces to incorporate subcultures.

One could wonder whether it is not merely Hodkinson's insider affinity with his subculture that motivates him to rescue subcultural theory from the affronting ideas of post-modern nihilism. I do not think so. I want to present, ethnographically, the complex interplay between insiders to gothic subculture who are at the same time autonomous individuals, and part of a subcultural group that one refuses to be personally identified with. It is in the light of this paradox that, I think, it is easier to comprehend why goths state they are not goth; why they identify with gothic, and simultaneously deny that that is, what they are.

Mister Y. Rose's words, in the example I used in the introduction, motivated me to study the gothic subcultural world, not purely from within, nor purely from the dominant outside perspective. I wanted to focus on the liminal, undefined, interactional area where these two worlds come *together*, and to use this focus as a starting point for ethnographic research. In the next section I will focus on the following questions: when is something or someone considered subcultu*ral*, or non-subcultural, by whom, and why? What is the role of subcultural and non-subcultural commerce – and media-networks? How do they handle the paradoxes sense of identity and authenticity? I decided to research websites, articles in the media on gothic, and the symbolic work that comes along with identity, with explaining one's position in life.

Subcultural authenticity: a negative dialectic?

When I asked my informants to co-operate with my research, their reaction often was defensive or distant. Informants would claim, at first, with almost no exception, that they were *not* gothic. One explanation could be that my status as researcher caused my informants to practice overly protective behaviour towards their culture. However, I do not think this is the case, because I already was an insider. For years, I have worked as a volunteer at gothic parties. I still organise gothic parties, I am a performance artist, I play in a gothic band, and I have many friendly or semi-professional contacts with a lot of people in the gothic subculture. So I know for a fact that this position has been an advantage to me as a researcher, because, as Sarah Thornton would say, I have access to a lot of 'subcultural capital' (1995: 200-9).

94

Nevertheless, at the start of my research period, I sensed a sudden distance between me, now insider-turned-researcher, and my acquaintances, now informants, which fortunately diminished rather quickly. I felt a great need to state that I did not intend to write a journalistic and sensationalist story, knowing this is a common subcultural fear that causes protective behaviour towards the subcultural in-group (see also Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995). To avoid this subcultural fear of being 'freezed' or 'pinned down' (ibid.), I started to explain my research as a study on the 'dark world' that they (my informants) feel related to and that some of them might call gothic and others not. I explained my informants that I wanted to take a serious and genuinely interested look inside this so called 'indefinable world', and adopted some of the evasive tactics my informants applied and that I was so familiar with.

I thus had to almost deny that I saw my informants as typical goths, in order to 'trick' them into giving interviews. Regardless of my successful efforts of *not* identifying my informants as goth, they *still* felt the need to distance themselves from the gothic label. I even noted a heightened outspokenness about material and personal features that are *definitely not* goth. In spite of being well equipped to describe their idea of gothic culture, they *at the same time* insisted that they *themselves* were not goth. I emphasize their resistance against a labelling process, because this is truly the issue that I am dealing with in this article. I think this could be recognised as, what Widdicombe and Wooffitt have called, 'the moral code language' subcultural insiders adopt to remain seen as authentic. Their method of conversation analysis enables them to conclude that 'being seen to conform to the criterial features of a subcultural group is taken to be a sign of in-authenticity' (ibid.: 226).

On the basis of empirical data, I will show how insiders practice gothic subcultural identity. I will show in what ways authenticity and subcultural theory are part and parcel of the knowledge of the media and subcultural insiders. I will show as well that insiders are very much aware of the double paradox inherent to subcultural authenticity.

Goths: 'ordinary' people, or a 'natural state of being'?

Time and again, my informants explained how ordinary they actually were. I give a couple of examples. Jeanette, who has a secretary job, has played in several gothic bands, and is a video-DJ at gothic parties, said to me: 'I am just an ordinary person with an ordinary job! And I have a family and I even like Dance music!' Christine, who works with computers and organises gothic parties, put it this way: 'I am just like anyone else, I also do my groceries at the Dirk van de Broek and Blokker'.[7] Patricia and Anton, who both have jobs, but also DJ at gothic parties and have several gothic Webpages that are considered to be very important for the gothic subculture, use a slightly different way of saying the same:

> Actually, we are very 'burgerlijk' [a translation that comes closest to this Dutch word would be 'petit-bourgeois', AJ], because we get together at home and simply play ordinary board games. This is not gothic at all!

Every time I persuaded my informants to talk about their personal subcultural identity and that of others, or about issues of authenticity, they did their utmost to explain how 'ordinary' they actually were. They seemed to feel more comfortable showing me their ordinary status than proving me how perfectly they fitted all the subcultural criteria, criteria they themselves just had defined as being gothic. The question arises whether gothic authenticity is usually denied in a gothic context. Can authenticity be affirmative as well within the same context?

In conversations and discussions, on Webpages and at parties, gothic insiders do emphasise some kind of 'authentic' state of goth-dom, which can be found in its 'naturality' and in its individuality. Gothic insiders explained in what ways they carry their goth-existence within themselves. Being a goth is something one simply cannot resist. It is just there, natural, even genetic (!), and authentic. Patrick, a photographer (both at gothic parties as in the non-subcultural world) explained it as follows: 'when I take other [non-gothic] pictures, they are made through a gothic filter. It just happens. I can't help it'. George, an artist, performance artist, and fashion designer within the gothic subculture, tells me about one of his 'ordinary' jobs: 'I worked as a window-displayer, and even that came out dark. It is just me, I can't help it'. Marco, a gothic party visitor, defines a goth as follows: '. . .nevertheless, it is a type of person, definitely. . .' And George suspects genes to play a role in being goth:

> [Gothic] is just something that is part of your mental chemistry. You're warped in a little way. [. . .]. Your mind chemistry is different. Doctors haven't yet found the trace of it.

Peter and Joyce even define people who are not 'goth' as 'naturally' gothic. Peter, who works in a gothic-oriented bar: 'I have a friend who is not gothic, although he is even more gothic than anybody I know'. Joyce, singer in a Dutch gothic band:

> Arend hates gothic, but he is the most gothic person I know. It is just inside you, regardless if you wear a rubber outfit or not. He had a very heavy childhood and keeps escaping into a fantasy world. He has an ordinary office job, but what he does. . .when you hear him sing. . .there is darkness in his lyrics. It has to come out in some way; it just becomes a creative niche. You carry it inside you.

It is obvious that gothic, to gothic insiders, contains a natural essence that goes beyond styled identity. 'Naturality' is timeless, has been around forever. The gothic insiders mentioned above emphasise that they always have been goths, thereby trying to give examples of their long history of subcultural participation. More generally, some will even explain that there always have been goths throughout history, like Lucille (student, gothic model, designer of her own gothic clothes):

96

> . . . this day and age, our style is called gothic. But at other times, there have been people like us. They were just called differently. It is not new. It has always existed.

Gothic insiders seem to gladly identify with natural and historical features they find truly gothic. Goths authenticate their own identities by saying it is their nature, they cannot help it, it has always been there. These quotations show that gothic insiders do what traditional ethnographers have done when they described non-western cultures as 'natural', homogeneous, and timeless, authentic. In this sense, it is only understandable that they find themselves normal, or 'ordinary'.

Nevertheless, by stating that they are ordinary people, goths do not deny their gothness. What they mean by emphasizing their ordinary status is not denying their gothic identity, but implying the fact that anybody, even someone who is not taking part in gothic subculture, can be a goth (as the quotations above make clear). Clearly, what is the matter here is the ambiguity around gothic identity: on one hand, gothic is seen as something natural that you just 'are', a state of mind; on the other hand, it is something that is 'lived' and shared. It is a group practice, it is cultural practice, and as such debateable.

Insiders as authenticators?

Appadurai stated that 'authenticity today is becoming a matter of the politics of connoisseurship, of the political economy of taste, and of status discrimination; beyond that, it is a matter of power, of who has the right to authenticate' (1986: 44-5). The question rises what gothic insiders have to say about labelling or authenticating someone as a goth. Lucille, a well-known and respected insider, told me:

> There were a lot of young girls who asked me whether they were goth enough. I think that is sad. . .like, oh girl. . . you know. I never ever wanted to pose that question myself.

It is not only common amongst insiders to deny gothic identity, but the wish to be able to properly display gothic identity is perceived as negative. Lucille calls it 'sad'. When gothic insiders get identified as 'goths' by other insiders, or when they ask to get 'gothed' by them, they almost become outsiders. We have to take into account that the subcultural ideal is somewhat romantic and adventurous: individuals are free to manifest themselves, everything is allowed, there are no boundaries, one can go for any personal adventure, one is 'free to be'. Initiation ceremonies are non-existent and there is no regulated system for authentication. The only condition is that all insiders see and treat the culture as their personal and individual home.

The idea of a standard gothic identity is perceived as frightening and repulsive to gothic insiders, and opposed to the ideal of being 'free to be'. To get 'gothed' is considered a bad thing. Keith, a well-known DJ within the gothic subculture, once explained to me, in a very cynical, disapproving tone, that he and his girlfriend were called '*Übergoths*'.[8] He repeated several times that he did not see himself as a goth. I assume Keith thought

it important to state his '*Übergoth*'-ness because it implied some subcultural status, ('our names were on all the guest lists, we always jumped queues, had all the backstage passes, waved with drink tickets...') which is, in a way, a positive personal feature. It is, however, also a negative feature, because it shows that hard work for the subculture (they organised parties, DJ-ed, made gothic art, helped with promotion and booking of bands) gives one a goth-tag, while all one is subculturally supposed to do, is what one is 'naturally inclined to do'. As the romantic ideal of subcultures calls for equality and freedom, one should not be '*Übergothed*'. The fact that the '*Übergoth*'-tag has probably arisen out of jealousy from insiders, who do not have this subcultural status, emphasizes the negative connotation even more.

Inside identity jokes

Gothic insiders experience the ambiguity inherent to identity. After the first wave of negative '*Übergoth*' identity tags, a young girl, gothic insider, claimed the '*Übergoth*' identity tag. She started handing out flyers at gothic parties with her name, a nice picture and a declaration of her '*Übergoth*-ness'. Her self-imposed '*Übergoth*' status was, subculturally, seen as a funny joke. She became a well-known insider. This example shows the subcultural hypersensitivity that surrounds notions of identity. Gothic insiders are aware of the ambiguity that surrounds subcultural identity, and like the '*Übergoth*'-girl, they play with it, make fun of it, and by doing this, they make fun of the emphasis they themselves put on naturality and ancient goth-dom. The following cartoon is made by a gothic insider-cartoonist in a book called *Oh My Goth!* (see fig. 1).

This cartoon ridicules young Goths that claim to have a centuries old gothic experience, and claim to have been to parties they could never have witnessed unless they were approximately eight years old at the time. It illustrates the fact that gothic insiders are very much aware of authenticity claims, or authentication-practices, and that a so-called 'gothic identity' can often be fake and incorrect. Goths are very much aware of the roles of their fellow insiders at a party or a web forum on the Internet. They are aware of the performative aspects of their culture: people who dress up specifically for a party, take upon themselves a role or character they will adapt to.

I have seen, for example, young boys dressed like ancient vampires, (teeth, contact lenses, walking sticks and top hats, all there to match the character). I have seen women in their 30's, 40's dressed up like little girls (complete with ponytails and outfits that resemble school uniforms). I have seen girls dressed like witches, playing the femme fatale; or people dressed up as if they came straight out of the movie *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, wearing white cotton clothes splattered with fake blood.[9] Gothic subculture is full of role-play and other performative aspects. But it is exactly this feature of gothic that has a direct effect on so-called true gothic identity: it becomes ambiguous, it can be faked, lied about, exaggerated, it is open for interpretation by everybody.

Fig. 1. *Bernie Weinstein-Vlad the Impaler, Voltaire 2003*

Fig. 2. *At the Mall, Voltaire 2003*

There is no official system of regulatory authenticators who determine who is a goth or who is not. As I have said before, gothic identity is considered a natural state and a styled identity at the same time, one that can be manufactured, made to fit any insider's personal taste. This is ambiguous, and therefore a source for inside humour. The picture below, also from *Oh My Goth!* shows the subculture's well-known stereotypes, and it shows how goths take pleasure in making fun of themselves (see fig. 2).

This picture is directed to the American goth. It is situated in a mall, where insiders from different subcultures gather to shop for things that fit their stylised identity. Though in Holland we are not that familiar with 'the mall', the picture shows a general sense of disgust that different subcultural participants feel towards each other. Goths do not like ravers, for example, because it is believed that they take drugs like XTC; ravers, in turn, do not like goths, because it is thought that they pretend to be evil but are, in fact, a depressed group of people. This actually points to different layers of identity struggle, amongst gothic insiders, amongst insiders from different subcultures, and amongst insiders and outsiders.

The picture above sketches the different stereotypes that exist within gothic subculture. We find the ancient vampire, 'Baron Maloderous', the boy called Bernie Weinstein who pretends to be two hundred years old. We find 'Lenore', the little girly girl that is ruining her sunny future (here with the spiral eyes).[10] We see 'Morticia Addams', the witchy femme fatale, who comes straight from the *Addam's Family*.[11] She illustrates the importance of subcultural commitment, by stating that she only listens to the darkest music and that she is suicidal.[12] We see the little adolescent freak that rebels by opposing conformism: he states that he laughs at funerals. And, finally, the picture shows a boy who is actually too young to be a goth, and has shit his pants. His character enhances the strangeness of the combination of very young goths who deal with a so-called very old culture and death; things children are generally not concerned with.

Thus, general identity jokes are popular among insiders. These tell them about themselves and reproduce, reshape or reframe their view on their culture. At the same time insiders try to avoid those stereotypes. This evasive practice is worth noting. Laughing about subcultural stereotypes means that insiders distance themselves from their stereotypical identity. Self-jokes can contain subcultural resistance against the dominant stereotypes that exist within wider, non-sub cultural society:

This figure of *Oh My Goth!* offers 'double' jokes to its gothic readers: it jokes about their gothic identity and all its stereotyped aspects, and it jokes about outsiders that make fun of stereotypical gothic identity (with outsiders I mean people from other subcultures who are familiar with the gothic subculture, or people who are interested in goth, but who do not have insider-status). In the first joke, insiders can laugh about and acknowledge the visibility of goth and how they have to cope with aspects like suffering from being stared at and yelled after. But as soon as one goes to the mall for 'goth-spotting', this person is called a retard, not a goth. The second joke makes insiders laugh about, and appreciate at the same time, the theatrical aspects, the suggestiveness, and
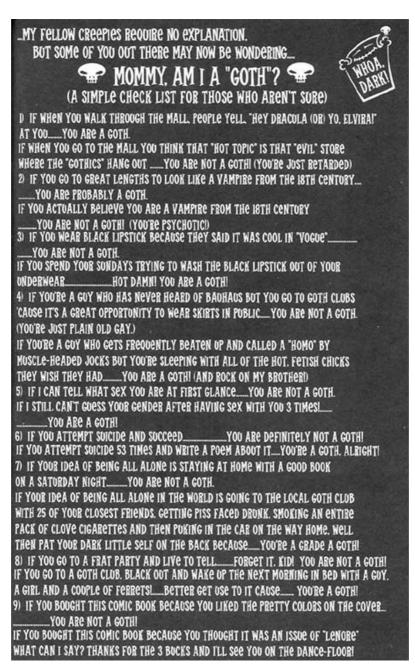
Fig. 3. *Mommy Am I A Goth? Voltaire 2003*

102

the endless efforts that goths put into looking 'good'. This point addresses the extreme preoccupation of goths with image and style, and it fights the stereotype that goths believe their fantasies to be true. In fact, if that would be the case, one will be called psychotic, instead of gothic. The third and fourth jokes are made to laugh about stereotypical outsiders that attempt 'to be gothic'. The outsider's 'look' (the black lipstick, the skirt) that is promoted in mainstream, non-subcultural magazines like *Vogue*, and bought in the 'Supermarket of Style' (Polhemus 1996), is seen as superficial, without subcultural knowledge (no knowledge of music like the band *Bauhaus*) versus the insider look that is incorporated, not bought. The lipstick or the skirt are either bought and applied (by outsiders), or they are almost tattooed, worn into clothes, beaten into sexuality, into the body (by insiders). If one incorporates gothic, one is an insider. If one buys gothic, one is an outsider. The fifth joke contrasts subcultural androgyny and highly sexually active life with 'ordinary' (male or female) non-goth sexuality, seen as very boring, mundane, and 'over in a glance'. The sixth joke also contrasts gothic suicidal maniacs with harmless subcultural acknowledged obsessions: goths do not actually want to kill themselves; on the contrary, the ones that do kill themselves are not goth. 'True' goths direct their suicidal tendencies towards poetic practice, thus in this sense the joke reflects the subcultural ideal of creativity. The seventh joke is about the subcultural ambiguity of the concept of 'being alone'. The 'proper goth' that thinks he/she is all 'alone and goes out with 25 friends' emphasizes the subcultural paradox: on one hand, it praises the commitment it takes to be a 'proper goth' (the subcultural practice of going to parties), because that is better than staying at home alone and reading a book, and on the other hand, it makes fun of this 'proper goth' that thinks he/she is all alone, but lives a subculturally, waste-full social life (he ends up suffering from drinking too much alcohol) and adheres to all the proper criteria that make one a goth (in other words: he is just copying stereotypes). This goth is sarcastically called an 'A-Grade-Goth', and is belittled ('then pat your dark little self on the back because. . .'). In fact, this joke makes fun of the subcultural gothic reader by asking something like: what are you doing, are you taking this list serious? Then we will make fun of it, because this list is not at all meant to be serious! The eighth joke makes fun of the ideal gothic life that is supposed to be 'different'. It describes a goth sharing his or her bed with guys, girls and ferrets (it insinuates a very awkward sex life), while at the same time it shows gothic life is actually a lot 'healthier' than going to frat parties and having serious deadly aversions. This last joke is actually not so much of a joke, but it is important, since the author took this space to show his insider position. By explaining his insider position he legitimises his sense of humour. He even emphasizes the fact that he will see his readers at the subcultural, gothic dance floor.

As you can see, this list has to do with different levels of identity-struggle. It seems that gothic insiders try to remain free of the weakening effects of the processes of stereotyping exercised by outsiders. Through the adaptation of humour, insiders can laugh about those stereotypes, incorporate them, and supply them with their own,

Fig. 4. *Goth for One Evening, Viva 2003.*

epistemological, inside humour. They take a strange sadistic pleasure in making fun of themselves; Voltaire is a true artist in this field. Thus, it seems gothic insiders threaten their own subcultural identity. Why do insiders do this? This question calls for a closer look at the world of outsiders.

Outside identity descriptions

As I have shown above, even though all gothic insiders identify their natural state as gothic and thereby claim 'authentic' status, gothic is not an uncontested, natural status at all. The difference between 'goths' or 'non-goths' is that, when insiders try to authenticate themselves through the adaptation of standardised criteria of goth, everyone laughs. But this awareness, that identity can be faked and bought, does not only stem from the subcultural group of insiders like Baron Maloderous. It also stems from a group of outsiders, like journalists, researchers, and wannabe's. Let me first take a look at the Dutch media. I found the following picture in an article in the Dutch women's magazine *Viva*[13] (see fig. 4).

The article is called *Goth for One Evening*, which probably sounds impossible to a gothic insider, for either one is goth, or one is not. The *Viva* article offers a classificatory

104

list of gothic origins; of how to recognise a goth, of the kind of music and films goths listen to and watch.

The *Viva* article shows goth's historical origin, by tracing it back to renaissance architecture, and dark aspects of romanticism. It states that modern goths are the dark version of punk and new wave. The *Viva* says that a goth can be recognised by features like antique fashion, black clothes, white make-up with black lipstick, and its different styles like fetish or punk or fairytale. The article points out the importance of musical knowledge (it names the bands like *Siouxie and the Banshees, Joy Division, The Cure*), and it hints at the subcultural importance of movies like *Interview with the Vampire, Sleepy Hollow, Edward Scissorhand*s, which according to the article were created by filmmakers who got inspired by the gothic subculture.

I do not want to explain the rights and wrongs about the contents of this list. I only want to show that the article provides a blueprint for *Viva* readers to turn themselves into a pre-conceptualised goth. If they like, they can take on a gothic identity for *one night*. The comment of Daniel, one of my informants, on the gothic 'look', was as follows:

> These young people that take their dress so seriously! You see these kids with lots of make-up, those boys with skirts on, and they walk in the streets and you hear [non-gothic] people say 'hey look, there is a goth!!' It is pathetic. They give goth a bad name.

I have shown that it is considered negative when one fits all the subcultural criteria that makes one a goth. When outsiders define a goth as a goth, because they seem to be aware of a certain set of criteria that make him or her a goth, it is even worse for the subculture. It is called 'pathetic'.

On gothic Internet forums and in conversations, articles like the one above undergo serious subcultural scrutiny. Not because *Viva* readers might become gothic (very likely, goths would not be all too thrilled by this idea), but because gothic identity as a natural state becomes a stylised identity, one can be copied, and manufactured. People are only 'shopping' for culture without being authentic, and gothic insiders literally experience this process.

Inside identity jokes as a subcultural defence system against outsiders

Just look at the irony of the situation. It almost seems that, because of normalising processes caused by commerce and the media, gothic insiders start making fun of their own identity. If they take themselves too serious, they are 'pathetic'.

The following examples are taken from a Dutch gothic forum on the Internet, accessible to outsiders that have questions about gothic.[14] But do they also get answers from the gothic insiders that frequent these websites? I found the same kind of jokes that I showed before, still directed to the insiders that read along, but this time, it contains a message to the outsider as well:

What is gothic?

H: ... that I am about to **cry**!! I am going to have a coffee and promise to be the *ordinary* Hobbes when I get back. ;-).

'H' uses one of the stereotypes on gothic: that goths are always depressed and cry a lot. At the same time, he states that he feels like crying because of another 'silly' question by another 'silly' anonymous person, of whom everybody on the forum is sick and tired. Note the emphasis he puts on being 'ordinary', most likely meant as opposed to 'gothic'.

K: This is definitely gothic:

The cartoon is about *Asterix and Obelix* and the historical Goths. 'K' is a well-known gothic insider. The picture is taken from his *Uncle Harry's Über Gothic Lifestyle Magazine*, a webzine made by and for gothic insiders, that displays gothic and all its stereotypes and clichs in a humoristic and sarcastic way, and that every goth seems to enjoy a lot.

T: only posts this picture, as a response to the question 'what is gothic?'

The picture is an inside joke, and contains a lot of 'authentic' goth opposites; a picture of five happy (as opposed to serene, reserved), old, bold men (as opposed to the ideal of youth or eternal youth and beauty), smiling for the picture (as opposed to freezing for a picture, bewitching the viewer of the picture), positive thumbs-up (as opposed to a cynical and sarcastic stance in life), colourful (obviously as opposed to black, leather and velvet) ... posted by a very popular gothic insider, known for her sarcasm and irony. By making fun of the way they themselves are stereotyped, gothic insiders distance themselves from their so-called gothic identity, and prevent subcultural knowledge to become known in the wider, non-subcultural world.

As I have shown, goths are well aware of the power of *media* and *commerce*, and their attempts at labelling goths. They are repulsed by so called authenticators, monitors and recorders working on 'their' subculture. As soon as journalists or photographers try to get information on gothic websites, anything that they might see as authentic will get corrupted, gothic identity will be denied, and a defensive action will be undertaken, that will most likely discourage or even scare outsiders away from the forum.

Subcultural authenticity: always a negative dialectic?

Notions of authenticity within Dutch gothic subculture are positively affirmed when they are ineffable and ungraspable. Gothic is strongly reflected as something that one simply *is*, that is natural. Gothic is mostly described as a feeling, and gothic insiders resolve to aesthetics when they try to explain what that feeling is. They imply an understanding with the senses, not with the mind. In this way, authenticity, or 'natural gothic identity' is subculturally 'kept', or rather 'guarded' as something ungraspable, even holy. It implies

Fig. 5. *'Asterix en de Gothen'*

Fig. 6. *Thumbs-Up!*

a kind of knowledge that does not adhere to the lines of logical conception or rational understanding. It points to an *a priori* understanding, or perception, that is inaccessible to outsiders, like a secret code. To me as a researcher, gothic authenticity in itself seems to be a void. It has no set pattern of features. But to me as an insider, I 'know' exactly what it is. Mary Douglas states that 'sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement' (Douglas 1966:7). In a sense, the gothic is the holy, the core of the subculture, and should thus remain hidden, untouched, unnamed.

How does this work? I already noted the negative dialectic, and showed a paradox of identifying with gothic but denying it at the same time as identity: definitions should be evaded, but processes of authentication are abundant. This paradox gives gothic authenticity a spiritual aura. Authentication can be seen as some kind of subcultural code-language through which insiders seem to be continuously obliged to show each other their natural state and conviction. I recall a situation of my research, at a party, when several long-time gothic insiders discussed with one another whom of the visitors was 'real', and who of them was fake. When I asked about their judgments, Maria answered like this:

> A boy with a Scottish skirt, quite heavily built, black and red legwarmers, a white blouse like a pirates blouse, open, chest hair coming out, eyes made up, and I thought in the daytime, you just have an office job or something. . . . A guy like him takes clothes as an excuse to go to such a party, to dress like he does, and to look at monkeys in a zoo.

108

– But how can you see when it is real?
I don't know. It is just a feeling . . . like it has been collected out of a catalogue or something.

Denials of authenticity like this one are widespread. They show us subcultural authenticity is relational. What happens, is that Maria actually authenticates herself without saying anything about her personal self, but by disclaiming the boy's authenticity. The condition for gothic authenticity lies in its negative dialectic. The process of gothic authentication, or of labelling an identity as gothic within the subculture, is only allowed when the insider speaks a certain code-language.

After all the examples above, let me resume. Authenticity is the subcultural norm by which gothic insiders show their true gothic nature by remaining ungraspable in a couple of ways. Firstly, they describe 'true goth' by emphasising its naturality, which is, in the end, indescribable. Secondly, they describe 'true goth' through personal historical accounts and experiences. Those accounts in themselves are already in the past and personal and, thus, untouchable. Thirdly, they claim ordinariness by rationalising their general status as human being, and by, at the same time, 'radiating' their gothness. This contains a lot of symbolical and sensual work. Fourthly, before claiming gothic identity they make fun of typical clichs of gothic identity. This implies that they pretend not to take their gothic identity serious. In other words, identity remains ambiguous, and not affirmed, and can, as such, not be understood by others. Finally, they say they dislike to be labelled goth by other goths or by outsiders. Informants themselves often deny they are goth. Being 'gothed' by gothic insiders does give a certain kind of status, but being 'gothed' by outsiders, media, journalists, non-subculturalists takes away this status. Sixthly, they indirectly identify themselves with gothic through labelling someone else as *not*-Goth, without claiming gothic identity. This implies that the non-definition of an 'other' could be read as a definition.

Commerce, sub cultural authenticity and criticism

I showed that insiders distinguish people that *are* goth from people that *wear* goth.[15] This brings us to the role commerce plays within subcultures that try to keep their naturality. The gothic subculture is ideally supposed to be something natural, it evokes a 'homely' feeling, considering home is a space where you can completely be yourself. This is a very romantic idea. But this 'home' is actually a consumer culture that is situated in a subcultural, underground world. Ideally, it has to remain untouched by the outer world, but even goth insiders realise that the outside world is not something they can do without. George, a gothic insider, put it this way:

That the gothic market has become more widespread is simply because they are not really goths. They are wannabe's. [. . .] it has become more popularised, fashionable, [. . .]. But these are the people that in two or three years will grow out of it because it is too miserable. Those

109

are the people that will say: 'oh, I used to be a goth myself'. . . but they never have been. Either you are, or you aren't. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to dress in black; you can dress in jeans and be blond, but as soon as you start talking to them you immediately know that they are. But I suppose it is good to have a lot of fashion victims as well. They open up the market and create a lot of possibilities that otherwise we would not have. If the numbers wouldn't be so big, nobody would design for us. A party would not happen, bands would not play on good sound systems, and bands like *Rammstein* and *Marilyn Manson* are good for attracting new people. That way the culture stays alive. The true goths sometimes don't know there are other people. But by being more popularised, and buying some introduction into it, they can find a way towards the others and find out whether it is for them or not! If one out of ten is worthwhile, it is good.

In between all those 'fashion-victims', there might be a few true goths that will find their way to gothic subculture. In other words, commercialism, media, systems of mass-production are seen as tools, means to get in touch with those lost true goths out there that have not yet found their home. It is fascinating that George tells us that sometimes 'true' goths are misled by 'fake' goths who did a good job at stylising their identity:

One of my [performers] told me she met a boy who looked perfectly goth. They hung around together; she got to the guy's apartment. But then she ran away. She told me the guy had every record that he was supposed to have. Every book! She freaked out! She was looking for something that gave him a little more identity, but it was like the guy went shopping to go for all the bits and pieces to look impressive [gothic]. Her reaction was: 'you're fake!'

These quotes show the fear, or even abhorrence of non-authenticity. Non-authenticity is seen as non-identity. The way to become non-authentic is to adjust yourself correctly to the criteria that make one a goth.

Why do these criteria for authenticity have to remain a subcultural secret? Scholars like Hebdige wrote a lot about the quality of western society to absorb everything into a capitalist, commercial system. Every idea should be made into something consumable, something marketable, and something for any potential buyer. Gothic insiders experience this absorbing process and criticise it. Here are a couple of examples:

Patricia:
Take for example the story of *Lord of the Rings*. We used to read this long time ago already. But nobody else did! Nobody liked it! Then, it wasn't visualised so incredibly plastic as now in a beautiful movie. When you read the story, it is all in your head. In the cinema, everything is bite-size and juicy with special effects and stuff. It becomes easy!

Angela:
Now you have *After Forever, Within Temptation* [popular bands that are in the charts and on television and sell a lot of records]. . .but I hardly see any personalities. They are all little doll-faces. If somebody asks for their opinion on their shows, I get the feeling there is not much behind it except for some nice singing and being good at singing. [. . .] You can sing, but you can also sing with a certain amount of depth, meaning. I just don't see that in their show. . .

Arnold:

Gothic is a lot more aesthetic and a lot less of resistance. It is much more relaxed. You know who the enemy is. The surroundings are your enemy: consumerism, the government, hypocrisy, and society. When you go the other way, you have nothing to do with it, you do your own thing, what you like, what you feel like, then: your life is free...

Stephen:

Society is like a washing machine. It washes everything crystal clear, washes off the magic, and only then things can be sold.

Maria, in a cynical tone about the teenagers that know gothic only from television and mainstream shops, told me:

When they call themselves gothic they play games like War games, LARP [Life Action Role Play Games, AJ], Kolonisten [some kind of board game, AJ], but also Lord of the Rings, Lara Croft, Tomb Raider... and they listen to Within Temptation and Marilyn Manson, Korn [bands that do not necessarily have any popularity within Dutch gothic subculture, AJ] and stuff like that...

All these products, Maria mentions, have been influenced by the dark romanticism that gothic culture has had at its core since the late '70's, but they are directed to a mainstream audience. The gothic fashion has influenced a lot of designers and manufacturers.[16] Everyone can wear gothic clothes. However, the music still remains underground, non-commercialised, and this is the reason why gothic parties and gothic culture still exist. But even with parties, one treads a thin line between what is considered gothic (subcultural) and what is considered non-gothic (mainstream).

As a last example, I will give one of my own, personal, insiders-accounts. My parties used to be in an old factory.[17] This was an old building, with lots of little corridors, a graveyard inside, walls made out of bricks that looked like ruins. It was situated somewhere in an unknown area in Amsterdam, outside all the nightlife areas in the city. I rented the place, and we had to take care of everything from the bar to the sound, from decoration to the toilets and the volunteers. It was a big success. The party grew from 150 people to up to hundreds and hundreds of people from all over the Netherlands and abroad. The crowd included some 'goth-spotters', but mainly gothic insiders. Because the location was taken away from us (the city council planned to turn it into a sports or shopping centre), I had to move the party to a different area. With nowhere else to go, I moved to the *Leidseplein*, a standard nightlife area in the centre of Amsterdam. To organise a party there, was a lot easier, because I did not have to arrange that many volunteers, sound, or the bar. The place was square and big, with a good sound, good lights, nice staff and only a little more expensive. The party only pulled a couple of hundred visitors. Financially, I could barely keep my head above water. Extraordinary were the rumours, the talks about the party 'going commercial'. This was obviously considered negative.

'Going commercial' subculturally stands for participating in the dominant consumer society and the loss of norms and values and of authenticity of gothic subculture. The

Leidseplein area is therefore considered a 'bad' area. Other gothic organisers like Daniel (who works in a gothic bar) said about the *Leidseplein* that 'when I just got to Amsterdam, I wanted to open up a bar at the *Leidseplein*. Thank god that never happened!!' All the examples show the same abhorrence of consumer culture, of commercialisation of goth subculture. In doing so, gothic insiders clarify the processes that endanger 'authentic' subculture.

Goth but not goth

Subcultures exist due to a certain social criticism. I think that the negative dialectic connected to gothic identity shows us what kind of criticism is inherent to Dutch gothic subculture. The criticism of gothic insiders on wearing or creating a formulised and conceptualised identity, the evasive tactics they apply every time someone tries to formulise goth, and the emphasis they put on gothic naturality can be read as a sub cultural criticism on commercialised society, on non-authenticity, on being fake. Gothic insiders practice this criticism through the use of subcultural, moral, sensual codes. They do a lot of symbolic work in order to 'beam' their gothic identity across, while at the same time they constantly try to avoid being normalised. Being 'authentic' and natural is the subcultural norm, but this norm has an ineffable and ungraspable character that consists of a moral code: a goth can only be real if he or she is indefinable, which makes authenticity in itself a void.

The unspoken morale of authenticity is in this light very much connected to power and power-relations: the negative dialectic ('I am not a goth'), the deconstruction of ideas (old men in colourful clothes, thumbs up and happy faces are gothic), the discontinuousness within discourse (the example of Mister Rose), these are all applied for the sake of guarding subcultural autonomy, subcultural space, subcultural terrain, and individual, personal freedom. It is not authenticity one seeks, as that would entail that subcultural insiders are content with journalists describing their culture, and outsiders labelling them 'gothic'. No, it is power one seeks, the power to control personal and subcultural space within the context of the normalizing, incorporating factors of dominant society (or more precisely so within the context of formulising, conceptualising strategies of commercial enterprises). Gothic subcultural insiders attempt to continuously restore this individual and subcultural power by evading and avoiding classifying strategies.

In this sense, subcultural knowledge has an aesthetic character. I take aesthetic here in the sense of 'things perceptible by the senses, as opposed to things thinkable' (Little et. al. 1973: 32). It seems to be this kind of aesthetic, a sensual knowledge and cultural practice that gothic insiders celebrate more than any other kind of knowledge, in order to guard their 'space', and to prove to one another their individual authenticity. It creates the impression that meaning can only reside in the 'sensual', which turns the world into a dream where perception is the only 'door' for an individual on his/her lonely

112

path towards another dream. Nevertheless, it is also very typical to the gothic aesthetic in literature, where the world is a solitary, individual place of transgression, where boundaries are there to be crossed, and standard norms, values and ideas are there to be corrupted.

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Notes

1. I use the words gothic and goth together. Gothic is used as an adjective, like a gothic party, a gothic insider, and goth is used when one talks of a person: a goth. The subcultural choice for the word goth instead of gothic is probably based on the fact that the term goth is less well known by outsiders. I must emphasize on the wide variety on the word gothic in Dutch gothic subculture: gothic, goth, gotisch, gootje, goten, gothen, goffik, godje, etcetera. Then, I have not even mentioned the different ways of pronunciation. This wide variety probably reflects the importance of individuality, originality and authenticity.

2. The Chicago School: the first department of sociology and anthropology formed in 1892 of which Robert E. Park was one of the leading forces and Howard Becker, Paul E. Cressey were students, focussed on small social groups (like, for instance, Howard Becker's Jazz musicians) (see Becker 1963: 55-65).

   The Birmingham School (location of the well known Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies) was established in 1964 and influenced by British Marxist critics like Raymond Williams, E.P. Thomson and Richard Hoggard and by theorists such as Louis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci and the early Roland Barthes (See Clarke 1975).

3. To name a couple of the scholars from the Birmingham CCCS (Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies) group: Phil Cohen, John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie (see Gelder 1997: 83-9).

4. Muggleton uses the term 'subculturalists' to describe members of certain subcultures, and people that move between subcultures; people involved in subcultural life, whether this is only one subculture, or several.

5. Hodkinson was active within the English gothic subculture as a DJ, and party visitor.

6. My questionnaires, part of my research conducted at the Meertens Institute for Martin Ramstedt from March 2004 until September 2004, show that the duration of personal subcultural participation is between 2 and 20 years.

7. *Dirk van den Broek* is a chain of supermarkets in the Netherlands, and Blokker is a household store chain.

8. *Übergoth* is not a Dutch term. It is German, but used in the Dutch gothic subculture. Gothic subculture, especially European gothic subculture is partly rooted in Great Britain, partly in Germany. A lot of bands, magazines, clothes and other products come from Germany. Dutch gothic insiders often go to German festivals. I do not know whether this term is used by German goths as well. Nevertheless, the usage of German language in lyrics and magazines, the interest in German painters and history, explains why German words are used in Dutch

gothic subculture. The term *Überbergoth* is by now something of the past. It evoked strong discussions and jokes because of its ambiguity. On one hand, it reminded of Nietzsche's *Überbermensch*, a term stained by the experience of the Second World War, while on the other hand, the term *Überbergoth*, used by a young, happy, friendly goth girl that laughs all the time and licks lollypops, takes the punch out the negative connotation of the term, though it never truly destroys it.

9. *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974. Horror-slasher movie, directed by Tobe Hooper and starring Marilyn Burns about a group of hippies getting slaughtered by a character called Leatherface. There is a 2003 remake.

10. A character invented by Roman Dirge, originally printed by Slave Labour Graphics. Lenore is the 'cute little dead girl' that everybody gets fond of, but should not get too close to for she might bite you!

11. The *Addam's Family* was a television series that later has been made into a film: *The Addam's Family* (1991) with Angelica Huston playing Morticia Addams. Written by Caroline Thomson and directed by Barry Sonnefeld. The *Addam's Family Values* (1993) is a second film made on the dark family that is normal in their abnormality.

12. Dark romantic painters and writers who have a strong influence on contemporary gothic subculture have always combined sex and death.

13. Article from *Viva* magazine (no. 16, 2003), written by Anna Schrofer. Pictures by Annelore van Herwijnen. Illustrations by Maaike Hartjes.

14. http://www.network54.com/Forum/66144 accessed many times during research and still now.

15. 'Wearing goth' can sometimes enhance true goth identity as well. I have not observed it in the Netherlands, apart from the case of the young *Überbergoth* girl, but I know a German gothic mail-order service sells a t-shirt with the text: 'Sad Old Goth'. In the USA, there are t-shirts for sale with texts like 'Gother than Thou', 'Goths 'R' Us'. I have not seen these t-shirts for sale in the Netherlands, but they display a globalizing subcultural awareness of the relationship between subcultural 'identity' and marketing-products.

16. For more information on this topic, read Spooner (2004: 159-204).

17. As an insider, I have been organising gothic parties since the start of 2002. Since 1995, I have been a volunteer at other gothic parties. These parties are mainly in Amsterdam. Since 2003, the organising of parties, performances and other activities involving aspects of gothic subculture has become a part of my professional income.

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