Goth and Industrial Cultures: Differential Interpretations

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Following the Columbine High School tragedy, news media widely reported the teenage gunmen to be adherents to the Gothic and Industrial cultures (GIC) (Arciaga 1999; Brooke 1999; Dority 1999; Purdum 1999). The members of these cultures are often stereotyped as prone to depression, violence, and Satan worship (Gunn 1999; Porter 2003; Robinson 2003). More recently, in Southern California, a teenage girl was killed by her friends who were later described as “Goth teen killers” (KCAL 2004) and were believed to be in a deadly “Goth love triangle” (Reitman 2004:62). Additionally, those involved in GIC have been cast as anti-social and rebellious (Hodkinson 2002; Tait 1999). This paper presents an ethnographic exploration of GIC, comparing results with perceptions of said culture held by the larger society. Kantian philosophy and symbolic interaction frames this comparison.

Transcendental Deduction and Symbolic Interaction

In exploring processes of knowledge, Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason suggests we make sense of our social world by categorizing the observed. Kant refers to this process as transcendental deduction (1781/1929). We are able to understand the world due to the presence of mental categories that exist prior to (i.e., a priori) encountering experience (Friedrich 1949: xxix-xxx; Strawson 1966). Through the use of these mental categories, one is able to understand a disorderly world (Jaspers 1957:33)

Addleson (1990:120) argues philosophers should adopt the tools of the symbolic interactionists as this method is well suited to the study of meaning. As a philosopher, Kant (1781/1929) did not explicitly address the processes of transcendental deduction. Such processes are found in symbolic interaction (Cooley 1962; Mead 1969). Symbolic interaction posits meanings are attached to symbols and we develop our “self” through interpreting and categorizing these symbols. The processes of development of the self can be extended to understanding the larger world. As one forms their self through the interpretation and categorization of symbols, they also develop their a priori worldviews via the same mechanism.
We suggest the process of transcendental deduction by those involved in GIC differs from that of the larger population. For members of GIC, a priori categorizations exist which give the culture meaning by virtue of their familiarity and experience with GIC. Such experiences, and the resulting categorizations, do not exist for the larger society. Due to the larger society’s need for meaning, it categorizes GIC as deviant. The history of Goth’s affiliation with things viewed as deviant dates to the eighteenth century.

**Goth and Industrial**

Historically, the term “Gothic” was most commonly used to characterize the pointed arches and flying buttress styles of medieval barbaric architecture (Germann 1972:181-182; Gunn 1999; Robinson 2003) and a literary genre of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fiction featuring themes of sinister darkness, gloom, and horror (Botting 1996; Gunn 1999). The modern Goth culture had its beginning in the United Kingdom in the late 1970s as it emerged from the rebellious punk rock scene (Porter 2002; Robinson 2003). Along with the successes of bands such as Bauhaus, Joy Division, and Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Gothic label became popular with music fans and the artists. Self-identified Goths lay claim as well to more contemporary bands such as Autumn, Lycia, and Christian Death (Gunn 1999). The music is generally dark, ambient, melancholy, haunting, angst-ridden, and often contains depressing lyrics (Gunn 1999; Hodkinson 2002; Porter 2002).

Hodkinson’s (2002) study on Goths in the United Kingdom found that music and its performers were most directly responsible for the emergence of the stylistic characteristics of Goth. One of the most notable starting points of the Goth subculture came with the success of the Bauhaus 1979 single “Bela Lugosi’s Dead.” It featured dark and mysterious lyrics with a funereal-tone music tempo along an androgynous style that eventually was adopted by many among the band’s following. Hodkinson notes that Siouxsie Sioux’s stylistic onstage appearance in 1981 was characterized by “black back-combed hair and distinctively styled heavy dark make-up accentuating the eyes, cheekbones and lips;” and, for the next two decades, both male and female Goths would imitate Siouxsie’s style (2002:36). Some variances to Siouxsie’s presentation of dark femininity and Bauhaus’s androgyny appeared with the addition of ripped fishnet tights and shirts. Overall, the most obvious and important element used to define Goth fashion and style is the color black (Hodkinson 2002:36; Khalili 2003:16-17; Porter 2002; Robinson 2003).

Early on, Goths generally wore a white foundation on their faces that highlighted thick black eyeliner, cheekbone-accentuating blusher, and dark lipstick (Porter 2003). Also associated with Goth are the various images originating in macabre fiction such as crucifixes, bats, vampires, and elements of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fashions. These Victorian period fashions of corsets, lace or velvet tops and dresses, and frilly white shirts are often worn by both sexes. Goths of both genders wear considerable amounts of silver jewelry, including earrings, nose rings, bracelets and necklaces along with the more recent additions of piercings to lips, eyebrows, tongues, and navels (Hodkinson 2002; Porter 2003).

Like Goth, Industrial music developed around the mid-1980s. Unlike Goth, Industrial culture was not an offspring of punk, but was born out of performance art, most notably through the group Throbbing Gristle (Dugiud 1995). The term “Industrial music” is attributed to Throbbing Gristle’s recording label, Industrial Records. Early Industrial groups pursued the idea of “transgressive culture” where noise was music (e.g., train locomotives, factory sounds, jack hammers, etc.). Since these early years of pre-Industrial history, the genre has evolved into two distinct classes: experimental (or noncommercial) and dance (or commercial). In the former category, performers are more aligned with the original incarnation of Industrial music. The latter group incorporates power rock, techno, and EBM (electro beat music). In the early to mid-1990s, groups such as Ministry, Skinny Puppy, and KDFM were at the forefront of Industrial music. More recently, groups such as Funkervogt and VNVNation have contributed to the genre. Industrial music (and, by extension, the culture) emphasizes the theme of responding to living in a de-humanized, subservive society with paranoia and aggression. Goth and Industrial music are often listened to at the same venue as both share themes of dispossession, alienation, and fear.

**Methods**

**Site:**

McCall and Becker (1990:5) argue questions are answered by “going to see for yourself, studying the real world, and evaluating the evidence so gathered.” Heeding this call, a Goth-Industrial nightclub located in Hollywood, California, served as the research site. The nightclub Blue operates as one of the locations for the promotion company Evil Club Empire (ECE). On Thursday nights, Blue transforms into Perversion. Situated just south of Hollywood Boulevard in the heart of that city, Blue is a mid-sized club with main and back areas (i.e., rooms). The rooms are separated by a wall. Two hallways on each side of the wall allows patrons to easily travel between each room. Both rooms contain full bars, DJ booths, and dance floors. Perversion is advertised as featuring an “Industrial Room: EBM, Electro Tec, Dark Techno” music and a back area “Gothic Room: Goth, Ethereal, Dark Eighties” (see Appendix A). The club is patrolled by in-house security. Capacity ranges from 200 to 500 people on any given night.

**Data:**

The categorization of Goth and Industrial by the larger society as deviant has been well established in the literature (Gunn 1999; Hodkinson 2002;
Tait 1999) and reinforced by the media (KCAL 2004; Reitman 2004). Ethnographic fieldwork, informal discussions, and photographs were used to assess categorization of GIC among those involved in the culture.

Between January and June 2004, Perversion was visited once weekly. In addition, Perversion sponsors a forum web page where patrons share thoughts on the club experience, fashion, current events, and commentaries. Along with the forum postings, several club “regulars” spoke informally with the researchers over the course of the observation period.

The forum also posts photographs from the week’s Perversion. A club photographer walks about and selects patrons, in his estimation, that capture the essence of Perversion, and/or are fashionably consistent with GIC. The photographer is employed by ECE. He approaches patrons and requests permission to be photographed. The photographer has been active in ECE for approximately three years. Written permission was obtained by the photographer to use his copyright protected photographs in this study.

These photographs were the basis of our “shooting script,” a conceptually developed structure driven by a “grounded theoretical development process” (Suchar 1997:36). Shooting scripts are a tool employed by visual sociologists, a method designed to investigate social reality by testing and comparing experience with theoretical assumptions (Ball and Smith 1992; Wagner 1979). The shooting script frames the focus of inquiry such as establishing the presence of immigrant (sub)-cultures (Gold 1994; Lopez 2000; Lopez 2001). Our script in the present study was the representation of Goth and Industrial cultures. The authors viewed weekly photo postings on Perversion’s web page and those that best represented GIC (as based on prior research) were downloaded. From these, eight final photos were selected to be included in the study. In the tradition of symbolic interaction, interpretation of meanings attached to the symbols presented were based on the literature and informal discussions.

Results and Interpretation
The Scene:
Club patrons (self-labeled as “peeps” [for “people”] and referred to as such hereafter) tended to be in their 20’s, but ages ranged from 18 to 45 (and in one case, 50). Most were Non-Latino White, about a third Latino, a small number of Asians, and a smaller number of African Americans. Occupations represented were: bank teller, sales representative, business manager, travel consultant, software consultant, hairstylist, model, waitperson, and student. Consistent with the predominant age of peeps, occupations were concentrated in service or entry level management/professions.

More peeps frequented the Industrial room than the Goth room. Both rooms were dimly lit in black-blue light with occasional spinning color bursts from spotlights and artificial fog. In the back, tattered couches lined the dance floor; while, in the front, heavy black “boxes”—where peeps could stand atop and dance—lined the front, back, and one side of the large dance floor. In addition, in the front room, video projections were shown. Most of the projections were humorous, satiric, artsy, but all were adult-themed (i.e., sexual activity and nudity were common in the video projections). The music was loud in both rooms.

The preferred color of dress was black, but peeps also mixed in various colors in splashes. Stylistically, fashions were generally consistent with previous research (Gunn 1999; Hodkinson 2002); however, “pancake” white face make-up was not as prevalent. Women tended to dress sensually (e.g., corsets, stockings and garters, low-cut tops, etc.). The men ranged from suits to bondage pants and t-shirts (or no shirts). Welding goggles were popular in the Industrial room and Tartan plaid skirts or pants were also sported. A look not reported elsewhere but seen at the site was a variation on the schoolgirl theme (plaid skirt, knee socks, white button down shirt, and red tie). Also in style during the observation period were stockings or knee socks with horizontal stripes (reminiscent of the type worn by the deceased witch squashed by Dorothy’s house in Wizard of Oz). Assorted bondage clothing and accessories were present (PVC skirts, tops, etc., collars, and an occasional mask). On more than one occasion, a peep wore a Nun (e.g., see the “Bondage Nun” on the Perversion flyer), or Priest outfit.

Although alcohol was consumed, no one ever appeared intoxicated to the point of incapacitation or had to be escorted from the club. The use of drugs was not observed nor were fistfights. Peeps reported being drawn to the club for the music, fashion, and overall scene. A “meat market” vibe or mentality was not present as “hitting on” the opposite sex was not the primary activity, nor necessarily encouraged. In fact, “Monolith” (a regular) described the scene as “sexually ambiguous.” This was manifested in the dance ritual, or lack of it.

In many clubs featuring dancing, generally the ritual involves a male approaching a female and asking to dance. The couple proceeds to the dance floor, dances, and then there may or may not be further interaction (e.g., talking or having a drink). This was not the case at the research site. The norm was to dance singly. Couples dancing was rare, if not non-existent. Dancers, both Goth and Industrial, were in their own worlds driven by self-expressive catharsis. Also, not commonly seen at the site was the sexually charged “dirty dancing” where couples grind against one another or the lap dance variation popular among mainstream college aged club patrons. However, the few times this did occur, in every instance, it was a female with a female.

Dandies and Skulking versus Rivetheads and Stomping:
Goth and Industrial are related, but distinct. Although present in the same venue, Goth affects in music, style, and scene differ from Industrial affects. What adherents to both genres share is a sense of self-expression. Gaths
tended to be more artistically inclined as seen in their style of dance and attire. Industrials were more aggressive and hard-edged. This is seen in the different types of dancing. In Goth dancing, movements were flowing, dramatic, and ballet-like (see Photo 1). During Industrial dancing, limbs jerk in geometric patterns, arms making circles in the air, hands pointed to the sky, and legs kicking kung fu-like or pounding into the ground (see Photo 2). One regular, “Delilahh,” referred to Goth dancing as “skulking,” and Industrial as “stomping.”

Generally, peeps would spend the majority of their time in either the backroom (Goth) or front room (Industrial) and this was consistent with their style. In other words, “Dandies” (see Photo 3) were more common to the backroom, while “Rivet Heads” were more likely to be found in the front (see Photo 2). However, peeps ventured between each room depending on their mood (ethereal versus aggressive), or, the music that was playing. To better understand the difference, in the forums we posed the question: “What is the difference between Goth and Industrial?” The responses that emerged portrayed Goth as more introspective, solemn, and gentle while Industrial was “aggro” (i.e., aggressive), apocalyptic, and energized. Below, some selected responses that articulate well the difference:

- I have always heard other people call Industrial “Angry Techno.”
- Goth rock (esp. Darkwave stuff) is like emerging from a shelter and finding that the entire world has been destroyed, so you weep, but suddenly you discover the most beautiful flower you ever saw, which you had previous overlooked . . . Industrial rock goes over and stomps on the flower then looks for radiated mutants to dance on.
- Take chamber music, now add a healthy dash of evil. That’s Goth. Take electronica, and add two parts evil, and a healthy mix of the sound of two angry Germans having a fight with a washing machine full of car parts [That’s Industrial].
- Gothic = Music to pet butterflies to. Industrial = Music to stomp ants to.

The photographs not only offer a visual representation of the scene at the research site, but they also corroborate the perceptions expressed in informal discussions and presented in the literature; namely, the difference between Goth and Industrial. The media often refers to Goth and Industrial synonymously. However, this categorization is inaccurate and contributes to the misrepresentation of the cultures, especially Goth.
In Photo 4, the subject epitomizes the classic look of a “Goth Chick” (the self-selected moniker). Her hair is straight, raven black. She wears black lace, silver jewelry, and her make-up is darkly accented. She appears sullen. The bright, light colors worn by the woman in Photo 5 sharply contrast with those in Photo 4. Color is more common among Industrial adherents, and in fact this woman dances primarily in the front room. Her posture is open, seductive, and less restrained than that of the Goth Chick.

As Goth Chicks, are part of the culture, so is the “Goth Dandy.” The Goth Dandy takes great care in establishing his look (Dandies are primarily males, although not all male Goths are Dandies). Photo 3 provides an example of this look. Tuxedo shirt, smoking jacket, skull-capped walking stick, top hat, and white gloves “dandyfied” this club peep. In addition, he holds a fruity-drink, wears red lipstick, and eyebrow pencil. His costume, props, and the studied manner of his pose present a feminine quality. This is quite different than the Industrial in Photo 6. A black leather jacket compliments the rugged, factory look of the peep. He exudes masculinity as emphasized by the goggles atop his head. On the forum, peeps were asked the meaning of goggles.

Goggles are generally a fashion choice. The also serve to keep the hair out of one’s eyes when stomping. Differences were expressed on the genesis of the headgear. Some viewed goggles as developing out of the “rave” scene, while others attributed them to the influence of “anime” (a type of cartoon animation originating in Japan whose characters wear them on their heads). Most agreed they were representative of a post-apocalyptic wasteland (think the 1979 film Mad Max). This was articulated by one peep when she wrote, “They’re to keep that pesky nuclear fall-out from getting in your pretty little peepers.” Strict standards existed for types of goggles and how they were to be worn. A “Newbie” (a peep new to the scene) who violated these expectations was subject to ridicule. Only welding goggles were acceptable. One peep wrote, “If I see anyone wearing swimming goggles, I’m going to rip them off their Newbie head!” Although goggles are designed for eye protection, this is not how they are to be used at the club; they were to be propped up on the head or hung around the neck (see Photos 7 and 8, respectively).

Photo 8, like Photo 4, captures the Goth Chick style. However, the look is more vampire-like, and burgundy (a popular Goth color) is present in both women’s hair and the boa one of them wears. The averted eyes contrast with the full frontal smiles of the Industrial peeps in Photo 7. In addition, the bright blond colored hair of the woman peep is more common to Industrials than Goths. The male peep bears evidence of energetic stomping as seen in the perspiration that covers his body whilst the ubiquitous goggles hang around his neck. The woman in Photo 1 is not stomping, but skulking, the dance style consistent with her choice of wardrobe (i.e., Gothic). She ethereally flows whereas the Rivetheads in Photo 2 are in full stomp mode: geometric, aggressive, and pounding.

Contextualized in Kant’s transcendental deduction (as processed through the mechanics of symbolic interaction), the data suggests that how GIC is categorized (i.e., transcendently deduced) by its participants differs from the categorization common in the larger society. The meaning (or lack thereof) of symbols for participants in GIC differ from the meanings attached to the same symbols by the larger society. For GIC participants, the symbols and rituals associated with the culture are associated with a passion for the music, an identification and attraction to the scene, and an opportunity for actualization through self-expression. This interpretation is quite different than that of the larger society’s categorization of GIC as being socially deviant and whose members are prone to violence and Satan worship.

Conclusion

Data from ethnographic fieldwork and visual sociology, among this population at this site, was inconsistent with representations of GIC common in the larger society. Involvement in the culture was motivated by a fondness for the music, the club atmosphere, and a desire for self-expression. Criminal activity was not present; in fact, those observed presented themselves as orderly, expressive, and tolerant. We suggest that GIC is not the deviant subculture prone to violence as depicted in the media and categorized as such by the larger society.

We do not wish to suggest that GIC is not without those who may act violently or be perceived as deviant. Like any culture or society, GIC has its share of misfits who serve to reinforce negative conceptions. There are some aspects of GIC that may deservedly be categorized as deviant. For example, on at least three occasions a club patron was observed wearing a Nazi SS uniform (complete with swastika). Although on the periphery of GIC and not embraced by most members, there does seem to be a “Neo-Nazi” contingent. In addition, on the margin of GIC is a bondage, dominant/submissive, sadomasochistic sexual theme that even the most accepting person may categorize as “deviant.” Just how these two ideologies/lifestyles attached to GIC and their significance vis-à-vis the culture remains unclear. That is a topic best left to another study.

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Works Cited


Sage.


