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Rituals of Gothic Recreation: an analysis of the personal and social significance of Whitby Gothic Weekend.[?]

1 Abstract

1 In contemporary theorising and the popular imagination “youth cultures” are often seen as providing relatively trivial and transient forms of identity for the comparatively affluent young people of western societies. However, for those who belong to such cultures they are often important sources of identity which provide social, political, symbolic and personal meanings for their members. In addition they often transcend the age usually referred to as youth. To belong to a contemporary youth culture involves buying and wearing specific clothing, listening to appropriate music, having similar friendship groups and frequenting particular venues. However, in a world in which the members of such cultures are geographically spread, regular visits to common or symbolic places have become increasingly important source of identity. Youth cultures have their own places of pilgrimage and visits to such places offer ritualistic opportunities to affirm a sense of identity and belonging. The oral testimonies which inform this paper were collected during Whitby Gothic Weekend (GW) a bi-annual event. They are used to explore the way that age, gender, sexuality and bodily values are reversed or dissolved in this ritualistic context. The role of clothing and place in facilitating this “ritual” situation is evaluated.

2 Introduction

This paper is based upon pilot-study research carried out at Whitby Gothic Weekend (GW) a three-day biannual event held in April and November, which attracts approximately one thousand “Goths” to the town of Whitby, along with other tourists who come to spectate. Gothic culture is characterised by the wearing of largely black clothing, listening to gothic music (which involves a range of styles but there are agreed boundaries) and attending venues and events specifically for the culture. Increasingly Goths communicate through the internet belonging to groups like netgoth a British website which has 9,876 members from the United Kingdom and Ireland and over 3,000 from elsewhere in the world (netgoth.org.uk March 2002). Whitby is a small seaside town (population 14,000) in North Yorkshire which is located on the North East Coast of England. This event is conceived of and run by a female Goth based in the North West of England (Hodkinson 2001). It is designed to attract “Goths”, a contentiously labeled “youth culture” (Fornas, 1995) or a subculture” (Hodkinson, 2001).

In this paper we draw upon Turner’s (1969) analysis of rituals of status reversal as well as our observations and interviews. GW does not straightforwardly involve status reversal and the situation is complex. We suggest that GW can be seen as ritual. We argue that the event symbolises an idealised set of Goth values in which some of the social divisions of contemporary consumer culture are broken down or reversed. Namely, those divisions based upon age, gender, sexuality and body type. These are diffuse and processual social structures which emerge from relations of production and consumption (Savage, et al 1992; Bordo, 1993; Abbas, 2000). Our analysis of the interview data suggested that values of *communitas* (Turner, 1969) are expressed at

WGW. This involves people relating to one another as humans rather than incumbents of roles and a focus on equality rather than difference and hierarchy.

Turner (1969) suggested that rituals of status reversal served the purpose of reinforcing the existing social structure. However, the degree to which WGW reinforces or has the potential to challenge social structures is a complex issue. Postmodern approaches which suggest that such events are meaningless and social structures absent (Pakulski and Waters, 1996), and subcultural views which assert that youth cultures are largely impotent expressions of discontent (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), both seem inadequate. Turner's later work indicated that he believed that individuals and groups might have power to change the meaning of symbols during rituals (Turner, 1975) and other "social dramas" and posited a dynamic and processual relationship between social structures and individual actors. If alternative values are expressed in bounded spaces and times through ritual their relationship to broader society is important to consider.

For Van Gennep (1960) spatial transitions were important aspects of the ritual experience and the notions of pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal referred to space and time which were seen as important to rituals because they take place in:

"units of space and time in which behaviour and symbolism are momentarily enfranchized from the norms and values that govern the public life of incumbents of structural positions." (Turner, 1969, p.166)

We suggest the size, the boundedness, the general role of tourism within Whitby and the cultural landscape (Bale, 1994) of Whitby is important in characterising and enabling WGW to become what we suggest (with some reservations) is an example of a contemporary ritual.

Our methodology consisted of taped qualitative interviews with ten Goths at WGW eight of these were interviewed in pairs. We also took observational notes on the interrelationship between Goths and the space of Whitby. Goths walked around in the daytime and in the evening attended events in Whitby Pavilion. Photographs were taken of some Goths and some scenes of Whitby in order to help with our analysis and to demonstrate some of our findings from observational data. Although we cannot make definitive claims about "Goths", youth cultures or the interrelationship between the social construction of space and identity on the basis of such a small study we believe it raises important questions and issues which warrant further study.

3 Gothic Identity and Meaning

According to Turner (1969), in order for rituals to serve their purpose there must be a relatively stable and coherent set of social roles, meanings and values within a culture. This was seen as a problem for complex and diverse and contemporary societies. Many social theorists adhere to this view. For example, Shields (1992) and Polhemus (1995) both suggest in different ways that young people have 'postmodern persona' typified by 'multiple identifications' chosen 'like tins from a supermarket shelf'. They also claim that styles adopted through consumption are largely meaningless and the cultures themselves ephemeral. We wish to challenge the view that Goth, a representative contemporary culture, is meaningless, depthless, ephemeral and without values.

Our interviewees indicated that the styles and other sub-cultural artifacts Goths adopted did have

meaning for them. For example, when asked about the wearing of black which is a key aspect of Goth culture that facilitates and creates identification within the group and by others (Hodkinson, 2001) interviewees articulated the meaning they attached to it. This woman saw black as constituting and symbolising a values which she saw as being in opposition to mainstream culture:

“Do you think there’s any significance to the black because you do see mostly the black colours don’t you, rather than other colours associated with Goth”. (Researcher)

“Yes it’s like some people love the sun, they love colours. We are different and we love different things. I love the rain, I love having a little fever, I love things that are opposite from other people”. (F6)

Although meanings attached to black differed between individuals the idea that Goth clothing constituted a rejection of a mainstream culture or cultures was common to all:

“It was a rejection of what I was supposed to like and the way you’re supposed to dress and I wanted to express my individuality and um thought that Goth was quite an interesting way of doing it. (F2)

“I mean especially these days. I mean most people these days tend to dress I think it looks like the same. Although I mean Goths dress the same it’s all like dark colours but everything’s different. Like every single person has got different clothing on whereas most people these days its very kind of like everything’s the same.” (M1)

Dress was not a uniform style because the diversity within Goth styles was seen as important, as was being individualistic. Those interviewed both acknowledged the different styles of Goth and saw themselves as legitimately choosing between these styles to create a series of individual looks:

“I have two styles one is more nostalgic and velvet like this, very nostalgic ... The other style is more rough with PVC and er, because I like rough things, tough things.” (F6)

“You’ll find that if you’ve got something like this and its across (styles) each just takes their own and it can change from day to day as to what they’ve actually dressed in ... You’ll often see the same sort of person in a full cyber outfit one day and a full Victorian the next.” (F5)

Goths chose styles in black (with splashes of a limited range of colours) which they saw as being distinct from other Goths and from non-Goths. However, they also acknowledged a dress code and the bounded nature of their choice if they were to stay within Goth.

“I think for me that is the important thing about Goth culture is these people who try and express themselves individually and I know we all wear black so you think, they can’t all be individuals if they wear black and that is one of the problems that tends to come with it, is that some people, even within Goth see it only as about being trendy or fashion and some people who don’t fit in will actually be rejected.” (F2)

“Such a small subculture they seem to be chopped up into even smaller bits. So ah, we want to be a bit different from those different people.” (M3)

“ But different in a similar way to all my mates.” (F5)

They also noted the way that the boundaries had been transformed by new Goths coming in and in interaction with other elements of youth culture.

“And then you get the new spooky sort of kids and stuff. You know the ones which are the new-metal crossover. They are so young .. they do their make-up badly.” (F5)

As is indicated above in the description of different styles of Goth, this transformation of the culture adds to the range of options rather than replacing the obsolete. Hence, although it is complex the clothing seemed to symbolise a rejection of mainstream consumer culture and many of the values associated with it whilst at the same time symbolising belonging to an alternative, fairly diverse but nonetheless bounded culture.

Further evidence of their being substance to Goth culture was provided by peoples description of the development of it:

“Well what you’ve got is originally Goths were part of the vampire society and obviously members of the vampire society have an appreciation of the literature. Because of the historical basis of the vampire tradition you tend to find that they would dress in more of an antiquated way and some of them are Goths and some of them aren’t Goths. ... Stylistically its changing again. I mean I call them cyber kids. I don’t mean to be offensive. What I by that is you have got very much from the London scene, the culture there tends to be gravitating more towards electronic music, industrial, techno music. ...” (F2)

There was sufficient convergence in the accounts of development for it to seem that a similar culture was being referred to. All the older Goths we interviewed indicated a relatively longstanding commitment to the culture, indicating that one of the ways the culture retains its coherence and substance is temporal and that this is facilitated by the longer-term attachment of some older Goths to the culture.

4 Whitby and ‘The Ritual Process’

We cannot claim that WGW is straightforwardly “a ritual of status reversal” in the way that Turner, (1969, pp166-203) described such rituals in the context of nineteen-fifties Africa. Literature that looks at the experiential and social aspects of carnival (Cohen, 1991), play (Caillois, 1962) and ritual is relatively neglected in terms of considering contemporary leisure and tourist phenomena (for exceptions see, Cohen, Abner, 1991; Couldry, 1998).

We endeavor to explore the utility of Turners concept of “ritual of status reversal” by considering key aspects of WGW in terms of its relationship to this form of ritual.

Status Reversal

WGW does not involve Goths taking on the role of others considered socially superior as is the case with some, but not all the African rituals of social reversal described by Turner. At WGW Goths adopt extreme clothing and are distanced from their work and family roles by physically relocation and through the costumes they wear. Both bestow a form of anonymity and Goths become more powerful experiencing temporary dominance.

One of the ways that WGW takes on some of the characteristics of a ritual is through the adoption of extreme Goth clothing. This emphasised Gothness may be more akin to carnival than role reversal[?]. The interviewees suggested that they wore Goth clothing in their leisure time outside of WGW but this was often toned down and modified:

“I can’t quite go into work in full corset and feathered hat much as I would like to at times. Its not practical at times and they’d probably tell me to get changed.” (F4)

“I mean when we’re at home and we’re relaxed we wear like the same type of clothes anyhow. But obviously through the work we do we have to kind of dress-up” (M1, 30)

The Goth clothing adopted at WGW was seen as more extreme than they might wear on a typical night out.

“I think Whitby it would be quite daunting for someone to come to because its like everyone ... gets out their finest clothes and they make far more of an effort, and you know I don't make that much of an effort when I go out at home ... but I always do here and its like everyone does.” (F4)

Although ritualistic reversal may take place to a lesser extent outside of WGW during leisure time, WGW involves more extreme costume suggesting greater ritual significance. This would vary for individual Goths who would generally dress more or less extremely but the costumes worn at WGW are both more dramatic and powerful in their appearance than would usually be worn by Goths on the street. Turner suggests for Halloween in America that such costumes “mask the weak in strength”(ibid, p.176). Within the context of WGW a range of factors give Goths power.

The Goths we interviewed perceived themselves as having low status as far as other groups were concerned. For example most had received negative treatment as a result of being Goth.

“yeah, well its not too bad in Bournemouth you tend to get all that 'oh goths, which can hurt quite a bit anyway and its very dismissive. When I lived in Manchester though the scene was a lot bigger and we did get a lot of unpleasantness because a lot of men were wearing make-up and if you are wearing make-up you are obviously gay ... and should have your lights punched out. However, if you were a woman you are commonly perceived as some kind of slut or you have some kind of loose morals. I used to go out and as far as I was concerned I was wearing a dress to my ankles and yet I would be called a slut. ...” (F2, 28)

“Well back home they shout Satan after me and the funniest thing is I don't believe in Satan.” (F5)

They also felt that others outside the Goth scene had a low opinion of Goth which largely arose from misunderstanding the culture:

“I think they all think it is strange and obsessed with vampires and death.” (F4)

“Yea my Mum thinks that actually” (F3)

However, within the context of WGW Goths felt themselves to be accorded high status.

“Its funny we've been stopped one or two times today by people, who obviously are visiting Whitby., saying its really nice seeing everybody really dressed up. They seem to like it they think its great. I mean last year when we came down there was this old woman who stopped us in the street and said its really nice to see all young people dressed up. Its really, really accepted. I think perhaps if you go into other cities its not. (M1)

“There was a little girl in one of the streets yesterday who was walking along and every Goth she sort of stopped in front of every Goth and was like [sighed in awe] all down the street. (F3)

Interviewees also reported that their Bed and Breakfast proprietors had told them that other tourists came to WGW to spectate. Hence, WGW reverses the daily experience of Goth identity in relation to status. This bold assertion of Goth identity involves both changes in power relations and a reversal of values.

Value Reversal and Communitas

Turner saw *communitas* as a feature of ritual and of some subcultures. However, WGW also involves *communitas* in respect to the increased power experienced by Goths. Turner (1969) suggested that “Crudely put, the liminality of the strong is weakness – of the weak strength” (p.200). Although Goths are not generally weak in society because they are largely middle-class (Abbas and Shildrick, 2002), it is as Goths they are accorded low status, as can be seen from the quotations above and this which is reversed during the weekend.

Dress at WGW contravened usual British dress-codes. At evening events dress is particularly elaborate although costume is worn throughout the day on the streets of Whitby. On Friday night virtually everybody was in extreme costume. Walking in the room was a stunning experience because it was like a costume party with the thousand or so revelers wearing disguises. Men and women wore dramatic make-up, predominantly dark eye-make up, dark lipstick and pale faces but each person adopted an individual style which could incorporate a range of colours. Some men had a kind of Dracula look often with very long fake metal fingernails. Men and women wore cyber-punk styles which were largely black with splashes of bright pink, purple and green. There was an antiquated style which involved long elaborate dresses of velvet and lace and wigs with elaborate coiffures. There was also a high prevalence of people in fetish wear. For example, one woman wore fishnet tights with no underwear and scanty leather and chains. There was a lot of tight fitting leather, chains, rubber and plastic. The clothing was designed and fitted to reveal parts of the body which were sexualised through it. Although a lot of clothing worn by clubbers uses similar techniques to sexualise, this was different in that the bodily parts highlighted often contained high-levels of fat. Hence, the event seemed to challenge the notion prevalent in the media and in other youth cultures that fat makes the person unattractive or unaesthetic and should be hidden.

The historical style particularly emphasised women’s breasts not uncommon in broader culture, but props, typified by a woman carrying a bottle of beer between her breasts throughout the evening, were used to subvert the values of the clothing. The quantity of fetish wear and bodily parts on display also had the effect of de-sexualising clothing that in another context would be seen (often wrongly) as sexually provocative and indicative of potential sexual activity. People stood around and chatted in the foyer in a very genteel way. The display of bodily parts seeming to have more to do with challenging aesthetics than sexual behaviour. The overall impact of the event was to challenge the relationship of body fat to aesthetics.

Men’s styles were largely feminised incorporating make-up, often long dyed hair of many colours, some wore fetish wear normally worn by females in British culture. There some men in black jeans and T-shirts and other smatterings of British masculine styles usually subverted with make-up particularly eye-liner. Several of the interviewees commented upon the feminisation of men within Goth:

“More make up” (M3)

“On the boys.” (F5)

Another commented on the way some men might be drawn to Goth by the clothing:

“I suppose they do, the opportunity to dress up and you don’t bat an eyelid if there’s a bloke walking by in a dress because that’s about the tenth one you’ve seen all night so it doesn’t make any difference and its acceptable.” (F4)

WGW had the effect of challenging notions of sexuality and masculinity. Behaviour observed was rarely overtly homosexual. The clothing made it difficult to identify people in terms of their sexuality and their gender suggesting a situation of *communitas*, in which the values of segregation and easy identification of gender and sexuality are reversed or dissolved.

WGW seemed to reverse youth culture values in terms of the age range of the people involved and the values attached to age. In club-culture, the biggest youth culture in Britain, people beyond thirty would be considered old and the eighteen (or younger) to twenty-fives would dominate most clubs. At WGW ages ranged from approximately eighteen to fifties. Our interviewees ranged from eighteen to forty-six. This might not be surprising for a youth culture which began in the nineteen eighties in Britain. However, two things make this significant. First, many of the bodies clothed in sexualised styles and celebrated were older than would be usual within Britain especially within a youth culture. Second, the older interviewees indicated that younger Goths might have less status within the group. The term "Baby Goth" was used by some to describe those new to the culture.

I mean these days we tend to refer to them as baby Goths, which unfortunately tends to be a term of derision which I don't think is fair." (F2)

"You get ... and baby Goths who get carried out really early because they've fallen asleep." (F4)

In general younger Goths seemed to be viewed as novices by the older Goths

"And then you get the new spooky kids stuff, Which are all the new metal cross overs, because they are so young, they do their make-up badly." (F5)

And one eighteen year old interviewee indicated that he accepted this status:

"I'm called a baby Goth because of my age and I think also because my style is not typical of younger Goths which tends to be more industrial punk." (M2)

This may or may not reverse the values of Goth culture outside of Whitby but it does reverse those ordinary to youth culture and those prevalent in society more broadly (Featherstone, 1993).

The styles displayed at WGW incorporate a range of fetishised imagery and symbols that would usually be accorded low status. However, the costumes use expensive materials, leather, silk, satin and lace and are often tailor-made by Goth clothing specialists indicating within the culture they are accorded high status. It is possible that a form of competitive dressing dominates (Hodkinson, 2001). However, lack of competitiveness was highlighted at WGW:

"I think it's a very tolerant culture as well. It doesn't matter whether you're fat or thin you know nobody bothers at all." (F1)

"Its like when we were out last night they had like these em. There was a lass in a wheel chair and there was a kid there and there was all young teenagers ... When you are in a night club you just wouldn't get that at all. Anywhere else. All sharing the same conversations and type of music. I guess you wouldn't get that anywhere else at all." (M1)

Which in some cases was seen as something that was unattractive about club or dance culture, the

main alternative mentioned. These values of non-competitive communitas may be restricted to WGW.

Place and WGW

The status elevation of Goths is made possible through their tourism to Whitby, which allows them a significant presence rendering the space safe for alternative values dominate for one weekend:

“Its like you are invading in a way. It’s a very positive thing. Goths all over the place. ...Its really great to be able to go out because there are so many of you. There is safety in numbers. There are people who might usually feel threatened or may usually feel isolated they are the only Goths. To actually see large numbers of goth, just great trust gets going, like minded people.” (F2)

“Its nice to see everybody dressed up. And there’s no yobs going – hold us back. It just makes a change being in a different place with load of people that you don’t know but can feel relaxed with.” (M1)

Goths have economic power in otherwise quiet weekends in the year. The interviewees were very aware of this and the way this shaped their reception in the town:

“Certainly business communities are very, very positive. I remember there were some some people who were a little annoyed that we were congregated on the street (outside the Elismore). ... There was some concern on the part of the local clergy. ... I remember one Vicar ... He actually turned up to talk to us and to say hello to us all and to talk to us and he was actually very positive. But I was quite disappointed to read in the Whitby gazette this week, a vicar saying that as far as he I concerned Goths are Satanists. But then he actually goes on to qualify it and what he actually says is from a tourist point of view yes obviously its very good, not all goths are the same. (F2, 28)

WGW is held just prior to and just after the main holiday season contributing to the economic power that Goths have within Whitby.

Turner’s (ibid) descriptions of ritual of status reversal tend to also involve those who are high in status taking on the role of the low in status for the duration of the ritual. This does not happen at WGW and probably would not be possible because there is no single well-defined “superior” group to Goths. However, Bed and Breakfast proprietors, shop-keepers and others involved in the Tourist industry welcome Goths at WGW. There are signs in the windows of local businesses saying “Goths Welcome”. The relative wealth of Goths for “youths” is important in enabling a significant subsection of them to be able to go to Whitby.

The isolated nature of Whitby on the coast and surrounded by moors allows Goths to dominate the town without fear of other groups who may be hostile intervening and makes for a coherent experience of place and the event.

“It wouldn’t work in a city because everything is so spread out and Whitby is so small it focuses everything... It’s the location not that its Whitby so much but it is small.” (F3)

The town is also associated with the author Bram Stoker who wrote the famous novel Dracula. Only a few Goths acknowledged that this contributed to the atmosphere for them:

“Well for your traditional “ubergoth” then there is bound to be the attraction of, you know, the historical literacy

relevance and stuff and it does mood in very well and we've been quite fortunate with the full moon as well. ..." (F5)

Most denied its relevance. It is likely that the way the costumes of Goths blend in with the architecture and general atmosphere in the town is important in their gaining acceptance by the tourist industry and the town in general. It possibly encourages other tourists into Whitby during this weekend.

Conclusions

Our pilot study perhaps raises more questions than answers, but it is the purpose of such a study to do this. The meaning we found attached to Goth culture by our interviewees and by us in our observational data contradicts assertions by contemporary theorists that youth cultures are meaningless and ephemeral. We suggest that WGW is best set in the context of meanings, values and social structures outside of the event and hence we chose a ritualistic analysis. The implication being that youth culture analysis that ignores social structure is inadequate.

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