Temenos Lecture 2015

Death, the Gothic, and popular music:
Some reflections on why popular music matters

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In my recent book, *Music and Mortality* (2015), I began with the following quotation from a *memento mori* plaque in Ely Cathedral, England. They are the words of a dead person, a skeleton, addressing visitors to the cathedral:

> All you that do this place pass bye,
> Remember death for you will dye.
> As you are now even so was I,
> And as I am so shall you be.

I pointed out that in previous centuries *memento mori* exhortations, while popular, were hardly necessary. One's mortality was all too obvious. However, things are rather different in modern Western societies. Modernity has made the Grim Reaper *persona non grata*. Death and decay are sequestered in hospitals, hospices, mortuaries, and cemeteries, and much cultural energy is expended developing strategies to obscure and to sanitise the brutal facts of mortality. But still, we are, of course, haunted by the inevitability of death. How could we not be?

I

Researching the issues discussed in *Music and Mortality*, some of which I am going to address in this lecture, has led to me thinking quite differently about my life, about my family, and about my work—about what matters and also about what really doesn't matter. Certainly, as I get older and as I reflect on the fact that most of my life is behind me and less than I like to think is probably in front of me, certain things come into focus and others drop out of focus. Again, as I mentioned in the Introduction to *Music and Mortality*, music has been very important to me in this respect. For example, the title of George Harrison's album *All Things Must Pass* (1970) is increas-

ingly a *memento mori* challenge to me. While the words themselves struck me as profound when I first bought the album in the mid-1970s, now the music itself immediately draws me into reflection on the passing of days and the fact that 'there'll come a time when all of us must leave here.' ('Art of Dying', 1970) Of course, it's not the only album that has had this effect on me and you will also, no doubt, be able to think of music that has a particular meaning for you—a particular existential impact. Numerous albums, songs, melodies, and even musical phrases transport us to significant moments in our past and, as such, to reflection on the passing of time.

While reflection on death is, of course, of ultimate significance to us as mortals, as beings who will have to experience it at some point in our lives, only the unwell and the foolish will spend much time thinking about the temporary nature of personal existence and the short time we have to experience life. Indeed, the contemplation of one's own impermanence is probably not possible for extended periods of time without becoming unhealthily morbid. As the psychiatrist Robert Wilkins has commented, 'the only reason that we are able to lead productive lives is because most of us, for most of the time, ward off such anxieties by marshalling our defence mechanisms. Psychodynamic forces such as denial and repression push down the disturbing reality of our own mortality into the eddying nether regions of our subconscious minds' (1990, 13). This, of course, is an important point. While we quite naturally avoid serious reflection on the extinction of the self, nevertheless, its inevitability haunts us and fascinates us. We cannot but think of the terminus towards which we are progressing and which others have reached. As such, it needs to be dealt with. We do this in a number of ways that surface in social institutions and culture. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, 'culture is the sediment of the ongoing attempt *to make living with the awareness of mortality liveable*' (quoted in Jacobsen 2011, 382). That is to say, much of the cultural work we do as humans and the value we place on that work relate to our awareness that life is short. Because we haven't got much time, the time we have is precious and what we do in it is significant. There is, moreover, a niggling need to address the suspicion that existence is absurd. There is, as Albert Camus discussed (1975), a legitimate and necessary question as to whether life has meaning. In short, mortality raises a number of important issues, which are routinely addressed in human culture, particularly in religion. This lecture is simply intended to be a look at mortality through the lens of popular music culture.

While the same ideas are articulated in more or less profound ways throughout the arts, my argument is that because of its peculiar ability

to create 'affective space' and, as such, to function as a 'soundtrack to our lives', popular music is a particularly powerful medium for drawing us into reflection on mortality. That is to say, it is often, whether we realise it or not, more than simply 'entertainment'. For many people, popular music is central to the construction of their identities, central to their sense of self, central to their wellbeing, and therefore central to their social relations. Consequently, it has become a key feature of the everyday personal lives of most people (see Hesmondhalgh 2013). As such, it constitutes one of the principal ways in which we make living with the awareness of mortality bearable.

Moreover, because popular music is typically rooted within the liminal cultures of youth, within which death tends to be viewed at a distance, it often confronts the taboos of mortality with an uncompromising explicit-ness censured elsewhere in Western societies. Indeed, to a large extent, I want to suggest that it is helpful to understand popular music's treatment of mortality in terms of the Gothic, in that terror is viewed at a remove. More particularly, there is something of Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime here, in that death is viewed at a distance and, as such, it engenders a fris-son of dread without immediate risk. From a position of safety the listener can emotionally 'delight' in the excitement of contemplating the terror of death. For Burke, of course, 'terror is the ruling principle of the sublime' (1998, 54). However, in Burkean aesthetics terror and the sublime are not synonymous. That is to say, if we are actually threatened by that which is terrifying, we are unable to appreciate it aesthetically. Actual terror simply overwhelms our judgement and, as such, it is 'incapable of giving any delight whatsoever', it being 'simply terrible'. This is the position of the individual threatened with immediate annihilation. However, and this is key, 'at certain distances, and with certain modifications', terrifying events and objects 'are delightful' (Burke 1998, 86). Indeed, 'delightful horror' is, he suggests, 'the most genuine effect and truest test of the sublime' (Burke 1998, 24). For Burke, 'delight' is not 'pleasure' as such, but rather it is the experience of being removed from the awfulness of the 'terror'. This brings us close to Julia Kristeva's notion of 'abjection', in that there is something both allur-ing and repellent about death and decay—but the allure can only be fully experienced at a distance. The point here is that this obsession with mortal vulnerability, which is central to the Gothic imagination, is comparable to the youthful treatment of mortality in popular music. As such, while many of the discourses of depression, decay, and death in popular music might (often with good reason) worry those of us who are older and concerned about the wellbeing of our children and the cultures shaping their minds,

they remain basic to the human condition. They can, therefore, function as healthy *memento mori* in societies that taboo the fundamental fact of existence that 'all things must pass'. In other words, as with eighteenth century English Graveyard poetry (see Parisot 2013) or cultural events and celebrations focused on death, such as the Day of the Dead in Mexico, popular music can provide a space within which we are able to reflect on mortality and, as such, come to terms with the inevitability of death and its implications. Indeed, because popular music is so entwined with the subjective lives of listeners, it is able to create spaces in everyday life within which they can express and think about what matters most to them. From reflection on oppression and aggression within hip hop, extreme metal, and hardcore to meditations on depression and suicide within black metal, darkwave, and Goth music, spaces are created within which the often disturbing facts of mortality can be thought about and come to terms with. Again, this is important cultural work.

II

No tradition or sensibility has done more to inspire popular reflection on mortality than the Gothic. From Horace Walpole's 1764 novelette *The Castle of Otranto* through to Gothic rock and the perennial interest in vampirism, imaginations have been drawn to boundary-crossing themes, ambivalent discourses, perverse religion, occult knowledge, hauntings, revenants, dark secrets, profane sex, death, decay, and Romantic constructions of the past. Peering through the cracks of the everyday into the dark recesses of human experience, Gothic occulture is rooted in liminality, transgression, and the impure sacred. 'Gothic reveals the shadow within, the skull beneath the skin.' (Mintz 2012, 1) From its inception the Gothic has, as Patrick McGrath comments, 'disturbed and subverted all that is certain, singular, rational, balanced, established. Its *raison d'être* is transgression. It identifies limits so as to assault them.' (1997, 157-158) As such, it is hardly surprising to find it flourishing in the liminal spaces of popular music culture, encouraging reflection on death and decay. Of course, as I've already suggested, this is typically done at a distance. Articulated within postsecular youth cultures, it offers a safe approach to the sublime ideas and experiences that disturb us. As such, it can be understood in terms of a largely modern strategy for dealing with mortality. Drawing on religious strategies that have lost much of their theological cogency and cultural weight, it suggests that death is not final. Death is a permeable boundary, a state from which one can re-

turn. It is not the terminus of the self. Within much 'Gothic popular music', therefore, the graveyard, the funereal, and decay are treated as fashionable interests for the acquisition of subcultural capital by those who give themselves, if only sartorially, to darkness: 'The bats have left the bell tower/ The victims have been bled/ Red velvet lines the black box/ Bela Lugosi's dead/ Undead, Undead, Undead.' While Bauhaus's 1979 genre-defining classic, 'Bela Lugosi's Dead', is typical of a fashionable, 'Goth' sensibility in its construction of immortality, we should not think that it is, therefore, trivial or wholly detached from the brutal reality of death and decay. It is not. However, because it is an approach that is allied to religious strategies for denying the finality of death and coping with mortality, it can be framed theoretically in terms of the postsecular.

Now, while this lecture is organised around 'the Gothic', my interests are rather broader than 'Goth' music and subcultures. That is to say, I am concerned *both* with the Romantic articulation of death and decay in popular music *and also*, perhaps more significantly, with the way music *per se* is able to recover the past, to haunt the present, to summon revenants, and to awaken the undead in our memories. Of course, within music much of this framing is done using the standard genre conventions with which academics and fans are frequently preoccupied: graveyards, Victoriana, haunted houses, vampires, moonlight, mist, gloom, the flamboyant funereal, neo-medievalism, and the antique futurism of steampunk. However, the point to keep in mind—as far as this lecture is concerned— is that the Gothic is a lens through which to look at the way popular music is able to create 'affective spaces' within which memories are evoked and we are drawn into reflecting on mortality in a way that conflates loss and longing, life and death, mortality and immortality. As Isabella van Elferen puts it, 'Gothic forces its readers, viewers, and listeners to identify the ghosts that haunt them…' (2012, 15). This is essentially what I mean when I refer to 'popular music Gothic' (as opposed to 'Gothic popular music'/ 'Goth music'). Although I want to explore a number of ideas, particularly 'the uncanny', I want to argue that popular music Gothic is able to function as a *memento mori*. It coerces us, as listeners, in gentle and brutal ways, to reflect on the passing of time and on the inevitability of personal extinction—although, again, it does this in a way that protects us from the full impact of the awareness of death.

III

So, what do I mean by 'the uncanny'? To return to Bauman's helpful analysis of mortality, 'culture is precisely about *transcendence*, about *going beyond* what is given and found before the creative imagination of culture set to work; culture is after that permanence and durability which life, by itself, so sorely misses. But death (more exactly, the awareness of mortality) is the ultimate condition of cultural creativity as such. It makes permanence into a task, into an urgent task, into a paramount task…' (1992, 4) The Gothic use of the uncanny can be understood as an attempt at this task. It is a cultural strategy for dealing with our impermanence, for transgressing the inevitability of that final boundary between being and nothingness. As with religion, it introduces us to intimations of transcendence and the beyond. If death is, to quote Bauman again, 'a *ghost* haunting the *totality* of life' (quoted in Jacobsen 2011, 386), then Gothic exorcises or, at least, tames that ghost with intimations of the self's permanence. It is this, I want to suggest, that helps us to understand the social and cultural significance of the uncanny, which has become a useful and popular lens through which to read the Gothic (see Punter 2007, 129-36) and which is so powerfully evoked by sound.

Drawing on Freud's well-known 1919 essay, 'The Uncanny' (2003, 121-62), the concept has become a broad, flexible, and increasingly popular one in contemporary cultural theory (see ffytche 2012, 63-81). There is no doubt, says Freud, that the uncanny (*das unheimliche*—'unhomely') 'belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread' (2003, 123). These feelings are unnerving because they emerge from a confluence of the familiar and unfamiliar. More specifically, we experience the uncanny when that which is familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar. 'The uncanny is ghostly', says Nicholas Royle. 'It is concerned with the strange, weird and mysterious, with a flickering sense (but not conviction) of something supernatural. The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced... The uncanny is a crisis of the proper…' (Royle 2003, 1). Such notions, of course, are those of enchanted worlds. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Freud understood this common feeling of the uncanny in terms of 'infantile complexes which have been repressed, or when primitive beliefs are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' (Freud 2003, 149). That is to say, the uncanny identifies dark and primal fears that lie not far below the surface, those insecurities regarding the impermanence of the self. As such, we are encouraged to move in the direction of discourses that address that

impermanence—discourses of the supernatural. The uncanny tends to concern, says Freud, 'anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts', for 'in hardly any other sphere has our thinking and feeling changed so little since primitive times or the old been so well preserved, under a thin veneer, as in our relation to death' (2003, 148).

The uncanny is primarily used in Gothic discourse as a strategy of defamiliarization through the creation of disturbing affective spaces. Imagine, for example, that you are lying in bed at night, relaxing in the darkness, thinking about the day and surrounded by everything that is homely and familiar to you. Gradually, the silence is disturbed by the faint sound of steady breathing. Barely audible though the sound is, it seems to fill the room. A familiar space has been defamiliarized, the everyday is haunted, the homely is made *unheimlich*. Again, my point is simply that the use of the uncanny, while frightening, also functions as a life strategy for dealing with mortality; the Gothic re-enchants death and the dead through its use of the uncanny. Death cannot be the end of the self, because selves from the past are revealed in the present. The whisper of air, the creak on the stair, the metronomic tick of a clock marking the passing of time, the barely heard voices, both defamiliarize and also enchant. As such, the boundary between the known and the unknown is eroded. Hence, on the one hand, the Gothic evocation of the uncanny functions very directly as a *memento mori*, in that it exposes the fear of death, which is a more or less repressed part of our mental furniture. That which is hidden away in our culture, locked deep in our unconscious, is exposed. We are brought face to face with mortality: the bleak graveyard, the cemetery statues of mourning angels, the house haunted with memories of the departed. On the other hand, peering through the cracks of the everyday into unfamiliar haunted spaces, the Gothic introduces us to the possibility of immortality. The very revenant itself, that which frightens and disturbs, also meets our fear of mortality with the suggestion of immortality. It is that intimation of the permanence of the self in Gothic that functions so effectively as a modern strategy for dealing with the self's impermanence.

IV

With all that in mind, I want us to think more closely about music as an invisible, spectral manipulator of emotion, which resurrects memories and creates mood. As van Elferen says, music's 'capacity to stretch time and space and to dissolve subjectivity ties in with Gothic's distortions of reality

and the self, and music-inducted transgression is an important factor in the genre's performativity'. In particular, she says, 'the immersion in Gothic music can move listeners into the liminal spaces of Gothic, between past and present, between God and the devil… Gothic music is a journey into the uncanny.' (2012, 8, 10) But, what does that mean? What does it mean for an individual to 'journey into the uncanny'?

In order to understand the dynamics and the significance of 'popular music Gothic' in this respect, I want to briefly introduce a few points that I have developed elsewhere regarding music's unique power to construct 'affective space' (see Partridge 2014, 37-59). This term is important, because it refers to music's prosthetic ability to manipulate emotion and, thereby, to create internal worlds within which meaning is constructed. This is the key to the power of the sonic uncanny. Music is able to unhinge and to disturb because, firstly, it has a fundamental relationship with emotion and, secondly, human emotionality is directly related to meaning-making and to the individual's 'lifeworld'—the latent, taken-for-granted core values, beliefs, and understandings about who we are, how we relate to others, what the world is like, and how we fit into it (see Habermas 1987, 113-98).

But how does music create meaningful affective spaces? Like all such technologies, music is often affectively linked, as Tia DeNora has shown, 'through convention, to social scenarios, often according to the social uses for which it was initially produced—waltz music for dancing, march music for marching and so on' (2000, 11). In other words, music often contextualises and gives meaning to situations because of what might be thought of as its 'intertextual' relationship to compositional conventions. That is to say, it creates affective spaces shaped by feelings, which have been evoked by memories of previous times when the music has been heard. Of course, certain melodies, rhythms, beats, and so on are composed with particular activities in mind, so that, even if we have not heard the music before, we know how to respond emotionally. While this raises a number of issues, it is important to note that our emotional investment in a piece of music is directly related to its meaningfulness.

In referring to intertextuality, I am thinking, in general terms, of the ways in which 'a text', as a signifying practice, to quote Kristeva, 'presupposes the existence of other discourses… This is to say that every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it.' (quoted in Culler 2001, 116; see also Kristeva 1980) Thinking of music as 'text'—a coherent set of signs, which can be read for meaning—it is clear that it is influenced by other texts, discourses, and affectively sig-

nificant moments. For example, one person I spoke to during my research related to me a sense of the uncanny occasioned by Gregorian chant. She had travelled to an old theological seminary to run an art workshop. She arrived the previous evening and although it was twilight, prior to settling down for the evening, she decided to walk around the cloisters. As she did so, she heard a faint chanting through the silence, which she described as both beautiful and 'eerie'. When I asked why she thought it was 'eerie', she immediately replied that it reminded her of Jean-Jacques Annaud's film *The Name of the Rose*, which, based on the book by Umberto Eco, is set in a shadowy Benedictine monastery in Northern Italy in 1327 and relates the story of an investigation by a Franciscan friar into a series of mysterious deaths. This memory of unease, which she related to the Gregorian chant in the soundtrack to the film, shifted her into an uncomfortable affective space. It was, she recalled, 'creepy'; it 'made my heart race'. Tranquillity was transformed into unease. Music that is regularly used to relax and evoke contemplation now provoked a sense of the uncanny. The intertextual relationship between the music, the cloistered setting, and the monks was, to paraphrase Kristeva, subjected to the jurisdiction of another discourse (*The Name of the Rose*), which imposed a universe upon it. The result was an affective space defined by the eerie and the creepy.

It's worth noting, of course, that, although used for relaxation and spiritual contemplation, the relationship between Gregorian chant, haunted space, and the Gothic runs deep within Western occulture. This makes it very useful for those musicians wanting to evoke the medieval uncanny. As the central tradition of Western plainchant, it is culturally associated with a particular form of devotion and a particular ecclesiastical setting. As such, it is difficult to detach it from that context when we hear it. We therefore respond accordingly, in that, again, because it is a gentle form of music associated with the sacred, the affective space it creates is, for many people, calming and 'spiritual'. This is evident in, for example, many of the chant-based pop releases by Gregorian (Frank Peterson). However, more is, of course, usually conveyed than simply relaxation and spirituality. Readings of Gregorian chant will typically include feelings of reverence, informed by, perhaps, Gothic notions of medieval ecclesiastical life and processions of chanting, cowled monks. This, of course, is why some contemporary esoteric groups make liberal use of cowls and liturgical chant in seeking to construct affective spaces conducive to the perception of sacred gravitas. For example, the soundtrack to a video of a ceremony of the esoteric Order of the Solar Temple, seized by police in Quebec following a mass suicide, included

Gregorian chant and showed members performing their rituals in cowls (see Palmer 2006, 48; Hall & Schuyler 2006, 67). Similarly, in popular culture the gravity of occult ritual is often conveyed visually with cowls and candles and aurally with liturgical chant. Indeed, it is because of these affordances that it is used to great effect in films such as Roman Polanski's *The Ninth Gate* (1999) and Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). The soundtrack to the latter, for example, includes Jocelyn Pook's haunting 'Masked Ball' (1999), for which Romanian liturgical chant was sampled and played backwards. Again, just as cowls and candles are used in music videos by bands wanting to evoke a sense of Gothic gravity, so Gregorian chant is employed for similar reasons. Of course, again, intertextuality is key here. That cowls and chant are used in film, that they articulate a Gothic sensibility, and that they are linked to esoteric ritual is highly significant, in that musicians are now able to use them in the knowledge that their meanings are relatively stable.

Music also has a conspicuous intertextual relationship to sonic structures evident in the natural and social worlds. For example, echo can give the impression of space, as in Bauhaus's 'Bela Lugosi's Dead', and lightly playing the keys of a glockenspiel or brushing crotales can communicate the impression of a stream, a gentle breeze, or, depending on the other musical and cultural texts involved, the ghostly. Apparitions, hauntings, and intimations of the occult are, for a number of cultural reasons, often evoked through the use of recordings of creaks, howling wind, thunder, rain, or a tolling church bell. For example, such effects are carefully used on Black Sabbath's 'Black Sabbath' (1970), inspired by the novels of Dennis Wheatley. I remember first hearing this song in the 1970s. Before placing the needle on that initial track, the construction of affective space within which I would hear the record had already begun. The sacred-profane ambiguity of the name 'Black Sabbath' and the cover of the album—an eerie photograph of an old mill, haunted by a strangely profane figure dressed in black—indicated very clearly the occult context within which this album should be interpreted. I still remember my heightened feelings about that album, which, fetishized, translated into a perception of it as being *more than* just a record. As the first song begins, almost immediately a very particular affective space is created: the sound of torrential rain, a rumble of thunder, and the tolling of a church bell. The use of the church bell as a signifier of religion and the Gothic takes the imagination to the graveyard, the funereal, and, therefore, to Christian doctrines of the afterlife, all of which challenge the final termination of the self and provide the raw material for inversion into explicitly profane spiritual discourses. Hence, not only does the album immediately draw the

listener into a particular affective space oriented around mortality, but the intertextual affordances are all profane. The spectral figure on the cover, the church bells, the thunder, the rain are joined by the opening slow, dissonant heavy riff, which serves to confirm the uncanny, ghostly, and occult nature of the album. This is what I mean by music's ability to evoke quite complex affective spaces, emotional environments, which then provide a framework for meaning-making. The evocation of Gothic affective space in popular music, as on the track 'Black Sabbath', is significant precisely because it evokes the uncanny and deconstructs mortality. Moreover, the opening chord confirms the presence of the profane. Oriented around the dissonance of the 'Devils interval' (see Scott 2003, 130), the riff gradually softens and the thoughts of a clearly disturbed and anxious mind, evocatively articulated by the young Ozzy Osbourne, make clear the *unheimlich* nature of the space into which we have been invited: 'What is this that stands before me?/ Figure in black which points at me… Satan's sitting there, he's smiling… Oh no, no, please God help me.' Of course, one may conclude that this is all juvenile and trivial, but it is classic Gothic. As such, an affective space is evoked, which both evokes fear relating to the vulnerability of mortality and reinforces discourses of immortality.

V

With that in mind, I now want to shift the focus and look at the implications of a growing body of research examining the relationship between memory and music. As David Hesmondhalgh has discussed, it is indisputable to most of us that music is 'powerfully linked to memory… It allows us to remember things that happened, how we felt, and what it is like to move, dance, and feel to a certain set of sounds, rhythms, and textures.' It has, in short, a peculiar ability 'to get stuck in our minds' (2013, 53). Hence, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of us can provide our own examples of music's exceptional power to evoke memories and instantaneously to place us at some point in our past. There is even evidence to suggest that musical intervention has a positive effect on the autobiographical memory of dementia patients (e.g. Vasionytė & Madison 2013, 1203-1216). Again, as Michael Thaut discusses, 'musical memories often appear to stay more intact and accessible to recall than nonmusical memories in disorders affecting memory functions' (2005, 76). While there are a number of reasons this might be the case, it is likely, says Thaut, that 'the affective context in which most musical materials are learned may… contribute to more resilient memory functions, since emotional

context enhances learning and recall' (2005, 76). Unsurprisingly, therefore, as John Sloboda's psychological research demonstrates, 'music is used to trigger emotionally laden memories of past events as sources of reflection on life' (Sloboda & Juslin 2010, 88-89). Although Matthew Schulkind (2009) shows that, as we get older, memory struggles with the particular details of popular music (such as lyrics and song titles), this doesn't undermine the point I am seeking to establish here. It matters little whether we can remember all the words or titles of songs, because music has an ability to create similar affective spaces to those created when it was first heard and, consequently, it is able to resurrect similar meanings and emotions.

In short, 'sounds are', as David Toop says, 'woven with memory' (2004, 42). This is largely why music is so intimately related to the uncanny, in that it is able to transform the everyday by shifting us into affective spaces that feel both familiar and unfamiliar. Because it has a peculiar ability 'to get stuck in our minds', almost immediately on hearing a familiar piece of music we enter a very particular emotional space that often merges our past and present. In this sense, music is able to haunt us by drawing us back through our personal histories to relationships with the lost and to places long forgotten. For example, quite unexpectedly, on hearing a piece of music, we can experience those who have died returning to us in sometimes profound and disturbing ways. I was recently moved by a beautiful short documentary for which the musician Emily Levy sorted through a number of mix-tapes compiled for her by her late brother, Gus (2014). The pieces of music were discussed with close friends and clearly had the effect of evoking significant moments in their shared histories. As such, Gus was made present in the affective spaces created by the music. He was in a sense immortalised in his choices of music, through which he had shared something of who he was.

As emotional beings, the everyday and the mundane can be transformed simply by the introduction of a piece of music, which stimulates memory and draws us into particular affective spaces. More than this, not only can we think of music as a medium for 'the returned', the revenant, but, because music is able to evoke powerful emotional responses through its peculiar ability to summon the past, the affective spaces it evokes often function as reminders of mortality. Particularly as we get older, they become, in a very powerful sense, *memento mori*. In evoking memories of childhood and youth, of liminal identities we once valued, of places that have changed, and of those friends and family who are no longer with us, meaningful affective spaces are constructed within which we are drawn into reflection on the passing of time and on our own impermanence.

VI

I want now to think a little about the nature of 'sound' itself. By virtue of being 'sound', rather than simply compositions that we remember, music has the ability to evoke the uncanny and to draw us into reflection on mortality. This is essentially David Toop's thesis in his idiosyncratic book *Sinister Resonance* (2010). All sound, primarily because of its immaterial and fleeting nature, is, he says, 'a haunting, a ghost, a presence whose location in space is ambiguous and whose existence in time is transitory. The intangibility of sound is uncanny—a phenomenal presence both in the head, at its point of source and all around—so never entirely distinct from auditory hallucinations. The close listener is like a medium who draws out substance from that which is not entirely there. Listening, after all, is always a form of eavesdropping.' (2010, xv) As such, sonic environments *per se* have a peculiar ability to deconstruct dominant readings of 'reality'. This has long been recognised in the arts. As Toop comments, 'through sound, the boundaries of the physical world are questioned, even threatened or undone by instability' (2010, 24). This is why, he argues, music 'was a reminder of the transience of life in the didactic vanitas genre of seventeenth-century still life paintings' (Toop 2010, 25). Silence, of course, is also able to evoke reflection on mortality and the meaning of life. Just as sound terminates in silence, so, perhaps, being ends in nothingness. This is why sound and silence can be used to great effect in film and literature for evoking the uncanny, as, for example, has been masterfully done by authors of the classic English ghost story, such as M.R. James and, more recently, Susan Hill. Susan Hill's subtly complex story, *The Child's Hand*, is a good example:

> …[A]s I stood in the gathering stillness and soft spring dusk, something happened. I do not much care whether I am believed. That does not matter. I know. That is all…
>
> I know because if I close my eyes now I feel it happening again, the memory of it is vivid and it is a physical memory. My body feels it, this is not only something in my mind.
>
> I stood in the dim, green-lit clearing and above my head a silver paring of moon cradled the evening star. The birds had fallen silent. There was not the slightest stirring of air.
>
> And as I stood I felt a small hand creep into my right one, as if a child had come up beside me in the dimness and taken hold of it. It felt cool and its fingers curled themselves trustingly into my palm and rested there, and the small thumb and forefinger tucked my own thumb between them (Hill 2010, 6-7).

Here, the references to stillness and silence are carefully used to create an affective space within which the encounter with a transgressive presence that questions mortality and sanity is introduced. In the 'gathering stillness', in which 'the birds had fallen silent', there was not even 'the slightest stirring of air'. That silence is pregnant with the uncanny, with references to death and nothingness. Something is not quite right, unhomely, unfamiliar. To quote Colin Davis, we have been introduced to an 'essential unknowing which underlies and may undermine what we think we know' (2005, 377). Sound, silence, and the spectral are very closely related. And, as noted above, the move from sound to silence is particularly evocative of the move from being to nothingness, from activity to emptiness, from life to death.

VII

Having discussed the general notion of 'popular music Gothic' in terms of popular music's ability (like all sonic environments) to evoke the uncanny and to encourage reflection on mortality, I now want to focus more closely on 'Gothic popular music', on music that is shaped around contemporary Gothic tropes and betrays a preference for minor keys, descending melodies, and foregrounded bass. Although, because contemporary Gothic has been so ubiquitously hybridised, it is somewhat artificial to restrict it to a particular movement, subculture, or genre of music (see Spooner 2010, xi), nevertheless, it does identify a particular 'field of discourse' (see Stuckrad 2005, 7) within which there are a number of core themes and musical ideas that make the concept a useful one.

As we have seen, central to the Gothic field of discourse is reflection on the nature of mortality. As the Finnish band H.I.M. put it in their song, 'Join Me In Death', 'This world is a cruel place/ And we're here only to lose/ So before life tears us apart let/ Death bless me… This life ain't worth living… Baby join me in death/ Won't you die' (1999). Again, Gothic discourses are fundamentally transgressive, in that they can be understood as a refusal to respect the socially constructed boundaries that distinguish death and life, sickness and health, past and present, profane and sacred. 'I am so tired, please just take me away,' sing Lycia in their song 'Sorrow Is Her Name'. 'Just let me lay down here for awhile... Come to me, be with me, sink with me, die with me… I'm so alone, please won't you come and be with me… I breathe in this air, so humid and dark… Loneliness adds to our beauty and our decay' (1993). 'I'm a doomed drug addict/ And I always will be,' sing Type O Negative. 'Don't want to live atrial fib, from neurosis, cirrhosis... The

pickup's easy, but the put down's rough/ Up the nose or tap a vein… I can't believe I died last night, Oh God I'm dead again… Recently buried deep in Greenwood Cemetery…' ('Dead Again', 2007) As these lyrics indicate, Gothic functions as a useful lens through which to examine some of the most unsettling themes relating to mortality, such as depression, morbidity, abuse, and suicide. As The Smiths put it many years ago, 'I wear black on the outside/ Because black is how I feel on the inside' ('Unloveable', 1987).

What became the 'Goth subculture'—a term now frequently contested (see Elferen 2012, 128-29)—initially coalesced around the confluence of a particular music, sartorial style, and sensibility (see Hodkinson 2002). Emerging in the early 1980s, from the outset it was a development of the dark, urban, post-punk of bands such as Joy Division and Throbbing Gristle. As Dean Lockwood discusses, to a large extent the principal features of this embryonic British influence has its roots in a 'claustrophobic Northern [English] Gothic… foregrounding a diabolical, vertical inheritance of corrupting, intoxicating and maddening forces'. As such, it is, he suggests, 'an important tributary of twenty-first-century Gothic, flowing into what is an increasingly pervasive and commodified current of "extreme" culture. Both post-punk and Gothic exult in extremes, in ruination, in dislocation and disquietude.' (Lockwood 2010, 99-100) Distorted, down-tuned guitars, foregrounded basslines and earnest vocal delivery conspired to produce 'an aural melancholia that has since become central to Goth style' (Goodlad & Bibby 2007, 1-2). However, rather than trawling through the short history of Goth rock, its antecedents, its associated cultural tributaries, and the contested boundaries between the increasingly refined and esoteric subgenres, we are interested here simply in the social significance of Goth morbidity in popular music.

There are few better musical moments to focus on than the 1980 album by Joy Division, *Closer*, their most ethereal and claustrophobic work. It was described by its producer, Martin Hannett, as being 'kabbalistic', because he felt that it appeared to be 'locked in its own mysterious world' (quoted in Reynolds 2005, 187). The listener doesn't have to spend much time with the album to understand what he means. There is something troubling and uneasy about *Closer*—uncanny. From the moment of its release it was embedded within a Gothic field of discourse. Ian Curtis, the band's troubled lyricist and lead singer, hanged himself on 18 May 1980, shortly after the album was recorded and two months prior to its release on 18 July. As soon as the band's grieving and shocked fans sat down with the album, it was clear to them that they were essentially listening to a suicide note, a document detailing the thoughts of an unhappy and conflicted man. Having

said that, Joy Division fans were not unused to Curtis's morbidity. Reading through all his lyrics—which have been helpfully reprinted by his widow, Deborah Curtis, in her book *Touching From a Distance* (1995, 145-201)—it is clear that he rarely shied away from reflection on mortality. For example, 'She's Lost Control', a popular single from Joy Division's debut album, *Unknown Pleasures* (1979), draws directly on his friendship with a young epileptic girl at a rehabilitation centre in which he worked and who later died during a fit: 'And she screamed out kicking on her side and said/ I've lost control again/ And seized up on the floor, I thought she'd die/ She said I've lost control.' (see Reynolds 2005, 187) A couple of points are worth noting here. Firstly, Curtis was himself an epileptic who clearly identified with her suffering. Secondly, it is interesting that Freud described the condition as an 'uncanny disease'. It can, he reports, take the form of 'brief periods of *absence*, or rapidly passing fits of vertigo or… short spaces of time during which the patient does something out of the character, as though he were under the control of his unconscious' (quoted in Royle 2003, 151). Curtis was haunted by this condition, which denied him control over everyday life and which threatened to deny him of life altogether. It is also important to understand that epileptics were, in the early 1980s, burdened further with a level of social stigma that is not common today. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that he decided to flaunt the imperfection as a way of kicking against the pricks, so to speak. Not only did he sing about epilepsy, but his remarkable stage performance, his fit-like movements, his stare into the distance evoked precisely this sense of the uncanny. It was as though he was performing epilepsy, providing a controlled re-enactment of what, sadly, he could not control.

On *Closer*, however, his focus seems to have narrowed and, looking for inspiration, he increasingly immersed himself in literature that encouraged his morbidity. As Deborah Curtis recalls, 'it struck me that all Ian's spare time was spent reading and thinking about human suffering. I knew he was looking for inspiration for his songs, yet the whole thing was culminating in an unhealthy obsession with mental and physical pain.' (1995, 90) His morbidity on *Closer* is distilled into a particularly dark and melancholic example of 'northern Gothic': 'I fear every day, every evening… Isolation, isolation, isolation/ Mother I tried, please believe me/ I'm doing the best that I can…' ('Isolation'); 'This is the crisis I knew had to come/ Destroying the balance I'd kept/ Turning around to the next set of lives/ Wondering what will come next' ('Passover'); 'A cry for help, a hint of anesthesia/ The sound of broken homes/ We always used to meet here' ('Colony'). Although

the evocative cover artwork for *Closer* by Peter Saville and Martyn Atkins was produced before his death, it was central to the Gothic aesthetic of the album, being organised around a photograph by Bernard Pierre Wolff of the Appiani family tomb in the Staglieno Monumental Cemetery in Genoa. The tomb—which includes Demetrio Paernio's sculpture of the body of Christ surrounded by mourners (*c.* 1910)—the classical monument typeface used for the title, and the tragedy behind the voice on the record all served to fetishize the album, to transform it into a powerful *memento mori*, an important text that encouraged earnest reflection on mortality. Dave Simpson's comments on why *Closer* became so important to him are worth noting here: 'My dad had died when I was young, and I'd always been susceptible to songs with references to mortality such as Terry Jacks's "Seasons in the Sun".' However, he says, 'there was something more real and troubling about Joy Division's 'New Dawn Fades' [*Unknown Pleasures*]. What kind of 22-year old writes lyrics such as 'a loaded gun, won't set you free'? By the time their second album, *Closer*, was released only a few months later, Curtis had taken his own life. The clues were on the record in Colony's "The sound of broken homes/ We always used to meet here" and 24 Hours' "Destiny unfolded, I watched it slip away".' (2011) Although devotees may quibble over whether Joy Division are musically 'Goth' or 'proto-Goth' or nothing of the sort, the argument is that the affective space into which that album cover, that music, those lyrics, and that tragic life take us is one that it is fundamentally Gothic, bringing us face to face with mortality and the existential struggle for meaning.

Even now, as Mark Fisher argues, the music of Joy Division seems to capture 'the depressed spirit of *our* times… From the start, their work was overshadowed by a deep foreboding, a sense of a future foreclosed, all certainties dissolved, only growing gloom ahead.' (2014, 50) Popular music consistently reflects the dominant discourses and everyday feelings of the masses. And there are few of their experiences that engender reflection on mortality and the meaning of life more than the experience of being disenfranchised, abandoned at the bottom of the social food chain, patronised by successive governments, terrorised by their systems of control, and treated less as a person and more as an object, a problem requiring a solution.

Emerging out of this culture of decay, as Gothic rock began to take shape during the 1980s, it increasingly indicated a boundary crossing fascination with the dark corners of modernity, with ruin, with atrocity, with taboo, and with depression. While a funereal corner of the foppish 'new romantic' dressing up box was regularly raided in an effort to embody these ideas

sartorially, as it progressed into the 1990s, and as its discourse became increasingly influenced by themes articulated within 'industrial music', there was a heightened sense that, as Nick Cave put it, we are 'entwined together in this culture of death' ('Abattoir Blues', 2004; Cave 2007, 397), a culture of hopelessness, addiction, exploitation, and depression. While the playfulness of horror increasingly shaped identities and contributed to the commercial potential of Goth culture, the original substratum of morbidity has remained enormously important. Society was viewed in stark terms as—to quote Joy Division (following J.G. Ballard)—an 'Atrocity Exhibition' (*Closer*, 1980): 'Asylums with doors open wide… the horrors of a faraway place… mass murder on a scale you've never seen…' These ideas have become memetic, spreading throughout popular culture.

Overall, while much Gothic rock makes good use of Goth occulture (vampires, Victoriana, decadent aristocracy, profane religion, etc.), it is rooted in discourses about meaninglessness, death, and decay. This, of course, is not to say that fans of Gothic-oriented popular music are somehow, by nature, biased toward melancholia, morbidity, and transgression. That would be ridiculous. They're not a separate species with distinct genetic traits—although some might imagine themselves to be so. While, of course, some Goths may be pathologically morbid (just as any person might be), most are only culturally attracted to 'the dark side'. They have a penchant for the gloomy, which is expressed through material culture and taste, from coffin-shaped earrings to stuffed toys of the undead and from songs about vampires and faux occult rituals to music reflecting depression and suicide. This conflation of morbidity and playfulness is indicative of Goth culture. As van Elferen notes, 'Goth, like Gothic, involves dwelling in the twilight zone enabled by the transgression of binaries, and making one-sided choices would un-Goth the process. Therefore Goths are not suicidal, Satanist, or nihilist—if these widely circulating prejudices regarding Goth reveal anything, it is the fact that the anxieties and desires surrounding such extremes signal social forms of the uncanny, an *Unheimlichkeit* that Gothic addresses.' (2012, 131–2) Nevertheless, while their interests might be more or less cosmetic, they are exposing themselves to affective spaces within which issues relating to mortality can be reflected upon.

While few young people think about death from a narrowly religious perspective any more, thinking about it cannot be avoided. Postsecular popular music Gothic creates affective spaces within which to observe death and decay at a safe distance. It allows both serious reflection and play. As Allan Lloyd Smith has noted of Gothic, it parallels postmodernism, in that both

are examples of 'an aesthetics of the surface, dominated by depthless image, divorced from attendant complications of reference' (1996, 8). Focused on affect, it sanitises mortality with intimations of the supernatural, with fashionable identities formed around bereavement, with poetic articulations of the grave as an aspirational bijou residence, and with the conflation of life and death. Mortality is deconstructed. There is a sense in which, as in religion, the finality of death is subtly evaded, in that it is acknowledged as the *continuing experience* of the self.

VIII

What on earth has this rather convoluted meditation on morbidity been about? Firstly, I wanted to make the general point—which really shouldn't need making—that popular music is not trivial. It does important cultural work in the post/secular world of late modernity.

Secondly, an important aspect of this work is to open up affective spaces within which fundamental human concerns can be considered. In particular, we have seen that 'popular music Gothic', in its countercultural, liminal struggle to pull away from the mainstream, to shock, to offend, to create a culture that is Other—a culture that feeds on the forbidden, that bends the gaze of its listeners towards death, decay, and excess—challenges the hegemonic fetishization of health and happiness in Western societies. 'Death looms large', says Nick Cave, 'because it should' (quoted in Boer 2012, 44). Popular music creates affective spaces within which the awareness of this mortal vulnerability can be thought about.

Thirdly, these spaces created by popular music are relatively safe, in that reflection on mortality typically takes place at a remove. Even if the songs themselves emerge from the depths of an artist's melancholia and depression, as in the case of Joy Division's Ian Curtis, the listener is still located at a distance and thus able to process the brutal facts of mortality. Indeed, even if listeners are themselves struggling with personal vulnerabilities, the sense of a shared experience and the space to reflect on it can be meaningful. Moreover, both popular music's ability to manipulate the emotion and to play with the Gothic enable it to operate, in a similar way to religious discourses, as an immortality project. It erodes the finality of death (see, Becker 1973).

Fourthly, regardless of lyrical content and any subcultural baggage, music itself functions as a powerful *memento mori*. Any piece of music to which a person is emotionally attached has the power to engage the memory

and evoke a transcendence of the everyday. Listeners are instantaneously transported back to significant moments in their histories, to earlier affective spaces and to the meanings that were constructed within those spaces. These are often enormously significant moments, which typically engender not only strong emotional responses but also reflection on the passing of time and its brevity.

Finally, and very briefly, I wanted to draw your attention to the fact that sonic environments *per se* (as opposed to composed music) have an ability, by means of, for example, intertextual affordances to evoke the uncanny. Again, the very impermanence of sound, its passing from existence to nothingness, is evocative of mortal vulnerability and the terminus of the self.

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