

Goths Don't Kill Themselves; People Do (Essay on Sex and Violence in Popular Culture)

When examining the relationship between Goth culture, suicide and the media we can choose between two possible topics. I think if one would ask people—who do not have first hand experience with Goths and gained all their knowledge from the popular media about it—what comes first to their mind about Goths, they would mention black clothes, the Columbine incident, the rock band Marilyn Manson and suicide. The last one maybe in connection to the penultimate on the list. Thus one theme for this paper could be the image in the general population about Goths. This could be summed up as Goths are antisocial, aggressive, and suicidal. It would be exciting to analyze this misconception; however, the focus of this paper is only the last point. Are Goths suicidal? (Or to be more precise, are Goths more suicidal than other groups of people.) And if yes, what is the connection between suicidal Goths and Goth culture? I believe and would like to prove that the answer for the first question is negative; thus, the second one is non-existent.

The assumption that Goths are suicidal comes from several sources. For a lot of people, black clothing is associated with grief and death. The main color of choice for Goths tends to be black, although they also like burgundy, deep blue, green, and white, and lots of others. So black is far from being the only color they put on themselves. On a psychological level, the association between black and death can be understood, but concluding from this that Goths are suicidal or violent would be quite far fetched. Catholic priests and nuns—and priests belonging to most other Christian denominations—wear black habits or cloths but nobody would assume the same about them as they do about Goths. Indian gurus and Buddhist monks quite often are covered from head to toe in red, but nobody thinks that they would be as bloodthirsty as their preferred color would suggest. Wearing black—or any other color for that matter—is little more than a fashion statement.

Before going further, I have to apologize from my readers for the generalizations I have already made. I lumped together all Goths as one coherent group. In doing research for this paper, I asked for input about its subject from the local (Santa Cruz) Goth emailing list. The vast majority of the informal feedback I received strengthened my assumption. Goths highly value their individualism. They may be Goths, but they are also much more as human beings. Being Goth is just one aspect of their existence. May not even be the most important one. This was communicated to me several times informally, but I also found it in a formal sociology study:

„Many of my own open-ended interview respondents were also keen to emphasize their own individuality rather than talking about their conformity to a clear and consistent set of group-specific symbols...” (Hodkinson 39).

My point is that—as it is with all gross generalizations—it is a mistake to take one or just a few individual and come to a conclusion for a whole group that may share very little with those individuals.

Unfortunately, I did not find comparative statistics about suicide rates in the general population and Goths. One reason for the lack of such studies may lie in the fact that it would be difficult to define who is a Goth and who is not. I would prefer not to go into this question, because it is not very important for the purposes of this paper. I would like to point out though that Marilyn Manson, who I will talk about later, is not considered Goth by all Goths.

According to statistics suicide is the third leading cause of death for people between the age of 15 and 24 in the US: in 1994 alone 4956 young people killed him- or herself. Among them roughly seventimes more males than females (Vital Statistics 97). Another telling number is the number of suicides per 100,000 people by race and sex. For the aforementioned age group in 1994, it was like this: 24.1 for white males, 3.8 for white females, 20.6 for black males, 2.7 for black females (Vital Statistics 98). Although I do not have numbers to prove, but based on my experience, young, white males are the most represented group among Goths. Coincidentally the suicide rates are the highest among them. Young white males seem to be already in the most risked groups. (I have to emphasize though that Goths come in all shapes and sizes, races, genders, and ages; they are not just white boys.)

In 1999 a team of psychologist conducted an empirical study to investigate „the relationship between preference for heavy metal music and vulnerability to suicide among 121 high school students” (Scheel 253). Although it is not exactly about Goth culture, it might be relevant to note that „analyses comparing RFL [Reasons for Living Inventory] total and subscale scores by type of class, classroom unit, and sequence of surveys revealed no significant effects” (Scheel 260). In layman terms this means that they found no connection between preference for heavy metal music and suicidal tendencies. This finding may be extrapolated to a certain extent to Goth as they both considered youth subcultures. On the other hand, there may be some differences. I had no access to similar studies directed with focus on Goths.

I would like to take a quick look at an underlying assumption of this paper. Is suicide always „bad”? In other words can it be a rational act under some circumstances? The best answer I found comes from a psychologist:

„When we try to answer this question, we too become subjective. If we think that suicide might be a reasonable choice for ourselves under certain conditions, we tend to believe that suicide can be rational. If we would never consider suicide under any conditions, we tend to label suicide as an irrational behavior. [...] Each of us, therefore, must make his own decision on this issue” (Lester 3).

A core value of American and most contemporary societies is the sanctity and importance of life. Furthermore, Western culture is very heavily influenced by the Christian religion that considers suicide a form of sin. As a side note I would like to mention that this dogma entered relatively late Christianity. It was a reaction to the mass suicides of the Middle Ages when clergy depicted heaven with such vivid colors that too many people chose death instead of this mortal coil. In order to have enough living, faithful suicide got „outlawed” I hope next time you hear about somebody’s suicide, condemnation will not be among the emotions you feel.

Teenagers in their most formative years are looking for role models and often find them through pop culture icons. We all remember the fads when young people wanted to look like Madonna, Michael Jackson, The Beatles, Britney Spears, and the list goes on and on. It is a bit similar within the Goth subculture. On one hand, Goths look at Goth artists for inspiration and new ideas. On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, they tend to be also strong individuals. The point I am getting to is that I never heard of a Goth suicide that would have been influenced by the death of a Goth celebrity. Ian Curtis of the British band Joy Division hanged himself in 1980. So did Rozz Williams of the Christian Death on April 1, 1998. Joy Division was not labelled as Goth during their short few years of existence because the label itself was born only in the late eighties. Today however they are probably one of the best known band associated with the Goth label. In contrast, the second band I mentioned was a prototypical US Goth band. Both deaths were shocking for the fans. The two dead individuals may have a cult like following now, but neither had any direct influence

with any other suicide as far as I know. Another connection between media (personalities) and suicide has been proven wrong.

I left for the end the strongest possible argument about the topic. Marilyn Manson was mentioned in the press as a direct influence of the perpetrators of the Columbine killings and several suicide cases. In 1996, a teenager committed suicide while listening to a CD of the band. A year later his father testified before Congress saying that „the lyrics to this song [“The Reflecting God”] contributed directly to my son’s death” (Kuntz 43). In his closing statement of the hearing, Senator Joseph Lieberman said about the group’s CD: „It looked like a CD. Unfortunately, it was a hand grenade” (Kuntz 49). One can certainly understand a father’s grief and search for answers. However, he may have been looking at the wrong place. The standard argument applies here quite well: tens of millions of people listened to that song and did not commit suicide. Furthermore, blaming Manson does not make sense considering that he stated in several interviews that „it is stupid and weak to kill yourself” (Galas-Gray 99). Kevin Dettmar, a university English professor, wrote an essay for the Chronicle of Higher Education, in which he dissects Marilyn Manson’s songs and some other artists’ that were connected to suicides in the history of rock music. His line-by-line analysis of the songs proves that most of them meant to be ironic. His conclusion is: “Songs, like any other text, can always be appropriated for inappropriate ends—by both rock’s insiders and its outsiders, by despondent teens and slipshod media pundits” (Dettmar B11).

There must have been more factors contributing to Mr. Kuntz’s son’s decision than the aforementioned song. Without knowing more about the background of the case I would not even venture to guess them. But there are as many reasons for suicide as many individuals commit it. Just looking at the titles of the chapters in the book titled *Teen Suicide* reveals some of them: Male Minority Teens, Homosexuality; The Availability of Guns in the Home; Depression; Substance Abuse; Abortion (Roleff 5). These and many other factors may contribute to suicide. Being a Goth—whatever definition we would apply to the term—is not among them.

The Detroit Times reported that 12-year-old Tempest Smith committed suicide in 2001. The major reason for her act was that she was constantly teased by her classmates because of her different, Gothic look (Hunter). This is a typical example of a suicide where a Goth killed herself not because of she was Goth, but because how her peers related to her.

I share the opinion of the most extensive sociological study to date on Goth culture: „Some readers [...] may have expected a book on Goth to interpret and structurally or even psychoanalytically account for the apparent fascination of Goths with such themes as horror, death, misery, and gender ambiguity. Quite simply, though the pursuit of such underlying links [...] would have entailed a process far more characterized by construction than by revelation” (Hodkinson 61).

This means that producing links between Goth culture and suicide would be an artificial act. One may create them, but it is not inherent to it. At the same time, I acknowledge that one can find more songs from Goth performers dealing with the questions of death than in some other genres of music. In my view, the only thing this proves is that Goths are more sensitive, open, and exploring than those who limit themselves to traditional pop themes such as love. There is no provable direct causal relationship between the lyrics and suicides.

The title of this essay is paraphrasing the commonplace truth: “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” I believe I showed that it is true for people who turn against themselves and at the same time they may or may not be Goths.

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