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# **The Strange and Spooky Battle over Bats and Black Dresses: The Commodification of Whitby Goth Weekend and the Loss of a Subculture**

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## **Abstract**

From counter culture to subculture to the ubiquity of every black-clad wannabe vampire hanging around the centre of Western cities, Goth has transcended a musical style to become a part of everyday leisure and popular culture. The music's cultural terrain has been extensively mapped in the first decade of this century. In this paper we examine the phenomenon of the Whitby Goth Weekend, a modern Goth music festival, which has contributed to (and has been altered by) the heritage tourism marketing of Whitby as the holiday resort of Dracula (the place where Bram Stoker imagined the Vampire Count arriving one dark and stormy night). We examine marketing literature and websites that sell Whitby as a spooky town, and suggest that this strategy has driven the success of the Goth festival. We explore the development of the festival and the politics of its ownership, and its increasing visibility as a mainstream tourist destination for those who want to dress up for the weekend. By interviewing Goths from the north of England, we suggest that the mainstreaming of the festival has led to it becoming less attractive to those more established, older Goths who see the subculture's authenticity as being rooted in the post-punk era, and who believe Goth subculture should be something one lives full-time.

## **Key Words**

Goths, Habermas, Music Festivals, Performance, Whitby

## **Word Count**

8740 words

# **The Strange and Spooky Battle over Bats and Black Dresses: The Commodification of Whitby Goth Weekend and the Loss of a Subculture**

## **Introduction**

Tourism as performance is as old as the work of MacCannell (1973, 1976), who in turn took the notion of performance from Goffmann (1971): the idea that our social identity is bound up with the networks and stages in which we (inter)act with others. For tourist studies, the notion of performance and performativity elides into debates about authenticity, existentialism and experience (Wang, 1999). For Crouch, Aronsson and Wahlström (2001), the performance of tourism only makes sense through understanding and articulating the cultural and spatial relationships through which the tourist make sense in turn of their own self. Performance of self and social identity is restricted by the social structures of the world through which the tourist travels, while being something associated with the free choices made along the way. Edensor (2001: 78) articulates this tension in understanding by arguing:

But performance can be conceived in more ambivalent and contradictory terms, can be understood as intentional and unintentional, concerned with both being and becoming, strategically and unreflexively embodied. As Michael Jackson says, performance ‘encompasses both the rage for order and the impulses that drive us to confound the fixed order of things’ (cited in Carlson, 1996: 192). Thus tourism as performance can both renew existing conventions and provide opportunities to challenge them.

Popular music as subculture in late modernity is one obvious space where social identity is negotiated and performed, and there is a wealth of literature on the topic (Bennett, 2000; Cohen, 1991; Frith, 1983; Whiteley, 2000). However, research on music tourism is less developed (although see Connell and Gibson, 2002). In this paper we will examine the

phenomenon of the Whitby Goth Weekend, a modern Goth music festival (Hodkinson, 2002; Goulding and Saren, 2009), to explore the construction of authentic 'Gothness', the performance of Goth and the role of music tourism as part of a wider neo-liberal tourism policy. We will examine marketing literature and websites that sell Whitby as a spooky town, and suggest that this strategy has driven the success of the Goth festival. We will explore the development of the festival and the politics of its ownership, and its increasing visibility as a mainstream tourist destination for those who want to dress up for the weekend.

Methodologically, we are following the approach of LeGreco and Tracy (2009) called 'discourse tracing': reading around the subject, becoming familiar with the subject, living the subject and figuring out what the issues are in that subject. Our starting points are our previous work on Goths and dark leisure (Spracklen and Spracklen, 2012) and our own engagement and involvement in the Goth scene: we are both to a greater or lesser extent still involved in attending Goth events and we have both identified with the label of Goth at periods in our social lives (though one of us is probably more comfortable being called a metallor). We have both attended Goth nightclubs and gigs over a period of many years, and we have both attended the Whitby Goth Weekend. We are familiar with the scene and people in the scene are familiar to us, and we have an ethnographic insider position based on our lived experiences, reflections and formal research. All these tracings are joined by our lurking on-line on various Goth sites, including the Whitby Goth Weekend site; and our surfing of local tourist web-sites and news websites such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Finally, to the discourse tracing we have added semi-structured interviews with eight Goths in the north of England scene, people who identify as Goths, who attend gigs and Goth nights.

By interviewing established Goths in the north of England, we will suggest that the mainstreaming of the festival has led to it becoming less attractive to those more established,

older Goths who see the subculture's authenticity as being rooted in the post-punk era, and who believe Goth subculture should be something one lives full-time. We will use the work of Habermas (1984, 1987) on communicative and instrumental rationality, as developed by Spracklen (2009, 2011) on leisure and tourism, to help explain the ambivalence of performance when applied to tourism by Edensor (2001). We will argue that the modern Whitby Goth Weekend is something that has become commodified, commodifying in turn the Goth-as-weekender; communicative rationality still operates to give Goths ownership of the myths and symbols that make up the imagined [symbolic?], imaginary community of 'proper' Goth, but the spaces where such rationality can perform freely are restricted. Before we sketch out the history of Goths, of tourism in Whitby, and the rise of the Goth Weekend, we will discuss in more detail the work of Spracklen (2011) and Habermas (1984, 1987), and how this relates to debates in tourism and leisure studies about authenticity and belonging.

### **Authenticity, Belonging and Communicative Rationality**

Performance of the tourist role or the performativity of subcultural identities such as Goth, presuppose an understanding by agents of the roles and scripts that are permissible on the public stage and the work involved to pass (Goffmann, 1971). Performativity, then, relates to questions of the authentic: how do agents demonstrate their authenticity? How do they pass – as 'real' tourists or Goths? And what is the authentic culture that exists behind the curtain? These questions raise the problem of how authenticity can ever be understood when everything is a construction of some kind (Spracklen, 2009; Wang, 1999). In discussing the impact of the work of MacCannell (1973, 1976) on tourist studies, Spracklen (2011: 102) writes:

As first sketched out in the work of MacCannell (1973, 1976), authenticity, something real or essential in a place or experience, was the ultimate goal of every tourist... The

morality of authenticity elides smoothly into a Western, middle-class sensibility of culture: the authentic is good because it runs counter to the homogenising tendencies of globalisation, because it encourages diversity and respect and cultural heterogeneity. MacCannell sees authentic cultures as existing, in a Goffmanesque sense, backstage. Although authenticity and the quest for it has played an important part in the research agenda for leisure (eg, Urry; Rojek and Urry, 1997; Wang, 1999; Aitchison, 2006; Belhassen, Caton and Stewart, 2008; Reisinger and Steiner, 2006; Steiner and Reisinger, 2006; Matheson, 2008; Andriotis, 2009), the concept has been the subject of much academic criticism and development.

In Spracklen (2011) it is argued that authenticity is something pursued by those seeking belonging and meaning in their leisure lives – attending something, travelling somewhere, being a fan of something, is made more meaningful for the individual if it is perceived by them to be more authentic (less instrumental). In other words, we are all trying to demonstrate our good choices in a commodified world – as Victor Turner (1969) puts it, we are all searching for a sense of *communitas*, a sense of belonging and existential satisfaction in the cold light of modernity. This search for meaning and community is a search for authenticity. This account of the authentic relates to and can be explained by the ideas of Jurgen Habermas, who identifies two types of rationality at work in modernity. Habermas identifies the Enlightenment as a critical turning point in human culture, a moment when the restrictions of religion and feudalism are challenged by the creation of a free public sphere – a space exemplified by the coffee shop and the newspaper, where people exchange ideas and discuss matters freely (Habermas, 1962). This public sphere is of course contested by nations who want to control and limit freedoms, and the public sphere is free only for the bourgeois elites who have free time and money to engage in it. But it nonetheless establishes a space in which people meet as intellectual equals, exercising their agency and free will, and

applying reasoning to what they believe and how they behave. This public sphere encourages the development of science, democracy, republicanism, secularism, liberalism and radicalism, and creates what Habermas calls our 'life-world': it sees its culmination in philosophers and writers such as Thomas Paine. However, the story of modernity is the rise of another way of thinking and acting that, ironically, owes its origins to the same public sphere. By the end of the nineteenth-century the rise of the modern nation-state and the rise of global capitalism introduce rationalisation, industrialisation and monetisation into the life-world. All these ways of thinking limit the ability of individual agents to think communicatively, and all are used by hegemonic powers to control and constrain action. For Habermas (1984, 1987), the critical work of Adorno and Gramsci can be reconciled with liberal ideas about freedom by recognising the tension between the two irreconcilable rationalities, which underpin our actions: communicative rationality; and instrumental rationality, which is a product of capitalism and the emergence of the modern nation-state.

At the end of Spracklen's (2011: 114) paper on whisky tourism, it is argued that:

One can see, then, that discourses around Scottishness in whisky and whisky tourism both define something felt as real in communicative experience and something consumed through the apparatus of Habermasian instrumentality. The discourses traced in this paper demonstrate the way in which authenticity is marketised, how whisky tourists are still caught in a dialectic of control. It is at once the commodification of leisure expressed in the brochure and the dream of liberty and the choice of the open road in a hundred Hollywood movies: as Cohen (1988) argues, the tension between desires, expectations of something tangibly authentic and the reality of the tourist's commodified experience. Tourism then returns us to the paradox of leisure: the way in which it is both freedom and choice and constraint and commodification.

Edensor's (2001) point about the ambivalence of performance can be re-phrased using this Habermasian framework. The agency of performance in tourism is something that can be valued if it is something communicative: communicative rationality is at work when individuals get to decide for themselves how they are going to act and what roles they intend to play. Authentic performances are guaranteed by communicative rationality: what is the right way to be a tourist, to be a Goth, is the product of public dialogue and critical debate between agents. Fears about the authenticity of a tourist experience, or a subcultural identity formation, is connected to the negative nature of Edensor's (2001) ambivalence: the fear of commodification and control. This dark side to performativity is associated with instrumentality: the control of the tourist industry, the bottom-line economics that put profit before anything else, and the ways in which individual agency has been limited to making meaningless choices in a (post)modern market. This fear of instrumentality is expressed by many researchers in tourist studies (Rojek and Urry, 1997; Rossetto, 2012; Urry, 1990), and has led some to argue that all tourism by definition is instrumental and hegemonically Western (Smith, 2012). The very notion of being a tourist is problematic, despite the arguments of Crouch *et al.* (2001) that travel and tourism can be meaningful encounters for both sides of the encounter: tourists and travellers might think they are exploring themselves and others and contributing to the betterment of human relations, but they visit the places they travel to with money and power.

Music tourism, while clearly exhibiting instrumental rationality and the ambivalence of performance (especially where globalized pop and classical music is at stake, such as the Glastonbury and V Music Festivals – see Gelder and Robinson, 2009), might be better understood as a communicative drive for belonging and identity among music fans (see Bennett, 2000). Music fans create self-referencing, subcultural communities that are symbolic and imaginary (Cohen, 1985): there are levels of belonging inside the communities that are

accessible to those who can demonstrate knowledge and awareness of the symbolic boundaries that exist. There is an enormous literature on music, music fandom and subcultural theory – from Hebdige (1979) on punk and reggae fans resisting the system to Kahn-Harris (2007) on extreme metal. Although there are differences in theoretical and methodological approaches, sub-cultural theorists all recognise the importance of popular culture as a place for enacting agency in a (post)modern world. Fans control access to music communities, and define what (if any) spaces might be considered worthy of the tourist pilgrimage. Lucas, Deeks and Spracklen's (2011) research on black metal serves as a good case study of this communicative play in constructing belonging, identity and community. The black metal scene might be a particularly conservative, traditional leisure form, but on the other hand it thrives on the construction of subcultural identity, the establishment of neo-tribes and the globalisation and commodification of leisure. It is in many ways a scene that seems to fit with the idea of the intentional and the liquid. But even though individuals are using agency to create community and identity and belonging from this obscure leisure form, there is a limit to this activity. Black metal fans insist that individuals define their individuality by conforming to the idea of the elitist, misanthropic outsider (ibid.). Playfulness and pastiche are not allowed, and fans and musicians alike police the boundaries of what is considered to conform to true black metal identity and ideology. Beyond the boundaries of the scene, the instrumentality of the music industry and its relationship with hegemonic masculinity impose other structures on the individuals who choose to like the music. There is some intentionality and some liquid transitions at work in the scene (fans take on the role of iconoclasts in their bedrooms, safe from the boring jobs they have) but this is bounded by wider social structures of late modern mainstream society (ibid.). Using Habermas allows us to see beyond the existential, psychological mindscapes of Turner (1969)

into the material spaces and places of contemporary society. Habermas allows us to situate the subcultural and the symbolic in the real processes of instrumentality.

## **Goths**

What is Goth? The sound is Motorhead with a dash of Duran Duran, spliced with drum machines. The Goth wears black eye-liner, white foundation, dark lipstick, a black dress – perhaps (or at least the men do). Some Goths might argue it should better be called Gothic, but for the purposes of this paper we will use the term Goth. Goths are everywhere: initially, Goth was a counter cultural formation reacting against the commercialized pop and rock of the 1980s mainstream. Goth was a music movement that owed its origins to punk scenes in the West, and mainly the United Kingdom. There is some debate about the first sighting of Goth as a descriptor, or the first Goth band (Spracklen and Spracklen, 2012) – like all music scenes, the genre's origins stories are reconstructed *ex post facto* (see the debates about extreme metal in Kahn-Harris, 2007), and depending on your own musical tastes you might mention bands such as Bauhaus, the Banshees or The Sisters of Mercy. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of post-punk bands and scenes emerged, and the Goth scene in turn emerged from the post-punk scene. A number of musicians started to create a new sound, combining the amphetamine-driven intensity of post-punk with more reflective chords and riffs. Singers wrote lyrics laced with romance and poetry, and sang in deep, morose voices. These bands proved popular on the live circuit and in the independent charts, and fans copied their black-clad fashions. Other bands copied the style and journalists picked up on the new genre, inventing the term Goth to describe the different-but-similar bands and sounds.

Leeds and the north of England can make a convincing claim to be one of the sources of Goth music and Goth counter culture – a link that makes the choice of Whitby for a Goth music festival more understandable. The Headingley area of Leeds was the spiritual home of

many Goths and Goth bands throughout the 1980s and beyond – the most famous of them was The Sisters of Mercy, co-founded by Leeds University student Andrew Taylor, who changed his name to Andrew Eldritch and wrote some of the biggest-selling Goth songs of the 1980s. Leeds had a Goth nightclub, the Phonographique (known to all its regulars as the Phono), which thrived in the 1980s and 1990s, and had a number of alternative clothes and record shops. Although the Phono and the shops have disappeared, Leeds, like other cities such as York and Sheffield, still has regular Goth nights and Goth gigs, and as we discovered when we spoke to some of the local Yorkshire promoters for this paper, Goths from across the world think Headingley is full of Goths.

Some Goth bands resisted being labelled as Goths (The Sisters of Mercy) or changed their sound to become pop or rock bands (The Cult). Very quickly, Goth became a trend in alternative music, and Goth bands became established full-time professionals on the live gig circuit across Europe (especially Germany) and to a lesser extent in North America. Goths in the United Kingdom were stereotyped as middle-class students, compared to the more politically-minded punks or the working-class moshers, but Goth bands could be very left-wing and the scenes merged into an alternative counter culture. In the 1980s, Goths, punks, rockers and metal-heads went to the same gigs and nightclubs, and borrowed fashions from each other – and musicians crossed genres in the same way (Hodkinson, 2002). Goth bands signed to major labels and Goths appeared on the front covers of music magazines, but the ambivalence of the alternative scene towards the mainstream, and the suspicion of mainstream trend-setters (music journalists) of the authenticity of Goth, meant that front-page headlines were soon replaced by mockery (*ibid.*).

By the 1990s, Goth had become unfashionable even in the alternative scene, as the big bands moved on or broke up, but the stereotype of the Goth as a sad person listening to disturbing music, wearing black fetish clothes and white corpse-paint, remained in popular

culture (Brill, 2008). Goth music split into a number of regional scenes, being particularly strong in northern Europe and northern England. Goth music itself split into a number of sub-genres: some musicians adopted practices from dance music to create nightclub-friendly EBM and others took elements from heavy metal. Goths became Christians and Pagans and Satanists (Spracklen and Spracklen, 2012). Then bands in the United States such as Marilyn Manson became labelled as Goth or Goth Metal, and Goth was revived as a dark, subcultural scene (Brill, 2008), with the public sphere filled with stories about Goths killing themselves or killing others. The music's cultural terrain has been extensively mapped in the first decade of this century (see Brill, 2008; Hodkinson, 2002; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2012). Goth emerged into this century as a small niche in alternative music, but one in which many young people were unjustly positioned by the mainstream press: Goth has been used as a catch-all label for young people who like heavy metal, or emo, or punk, a way of defining anyone who dresses in black as an unwanted Other. So in one sense, Goth has become part of the mainstream through its use to define that mass of black-clad people with piercings and tattoos. From subculture to the ubiquity of every black-clad wannabe vampire hanging around the centre of Western cities, Goth has transcended a musical style to become a part of everyday leisure and popular culture (Siegel, 2005).

### **Whitby, Tourism and Goths**

Whitby is a small town (with a population of approximately 14,000) situated on the north-eastern coast of Yorkshire, England. The old part of the town is built around the small estuary (and harbour) of the River Exe, which comes down from the North York Moors that rise above and behind the town. Above the old town on the East Cliff are the remains of a medieval abbey, which tower up alongside a church and a graveyard. The East Cliff is black and filled with fossils. On the other side of the river the West Cliff is orange and less

oppressive, and under it a sandy beach stretches along to the village of Sandsend under the high cliffs of Kettlewell. The hills mean Whitby is isolated from many other parts of Yorkshire – there are three main roads into the town, and a railway line, but these can often be blocked by snow and flooding. Its local residents look to Yorkshire for their allegiance, but also to the North East – and their accents are a mixture of both, especially with the arrival of retirees and other incomers from these post-industrial centres. In terms of its psychogeography, the moors and the landscape limit the horizons of Whitby's inhabitants and turn them out to the North Sea. Whitby is part of the county council of North Yorkshire and the district council of Scarborough Borough. This means that the town's education and social services are run by the council offices in Northallerton, on the other side of the North York Moors; and the rest of the local services – including leisure and tourism - are run out of Scarborough, the bigger seaside resort further down the coast. Traders in Whitby and the local town councillors have often clashed with Scarborough council over its supposed failure to promote Whitby properly, or its supposed failure to care for Whitby – recently, Whitby's town council and local traders argued against the construction of a new marina and leisure complex in Whitby, which Scarborough council promoted and backed (Whitby Gazette, 2010). The two towns are rivals for tourist income (even though they are part of the same local council), and Whitby folk are suspicious about anything Scarborough might do to make Whitby less attractive to tourists (or to make Scarborough more attractive). Whitby, they argue, is unique and different, and deserving of its independence from its newer, bigger, poorer neighbour (see Inman, 2012, for a discussion about the intersection between the councils and the locality).

Although it has a long history associated with the Abbey (it was in Whitby in 664 that the English Church decided to follow Rome on the question of when Easter was to be celebrated), the old town of Whitby grew wealthy on the whaling industry and fishing in the

eighteenth century and into the nineteenth (Robinson, 2009). Whaling peaked quite quickly as an industry but fishing, ship building and shipping generally continued to be the mainstays of the economy into the twentieth century. In the British mass tourism boom of the nineteenth century, when holidays at resorts by the sea became the fashion among the bourgeoisie, then the working classes, Whitby became a place for respectable tourists. New parts of the town were constructed to house hotels and guest houses for visitors, and a railway company planned a huge expansion of the town – but these developments were restricted by local opposition, the difficulty of the train journey to Whitby and by the growth of Scarborough as the resort of choice for industrial workers from the West Riding of Yorkshire and their families (Walton, 2000). Whitby did attract bourgeois visitors in significant numbers who came to breathe the air and look at the places of geological or natural interest, as well as to buy the black jet jewellery – made in the town’s workshops - that had become a Victorian fashion after the Queen wore it when mourning her Prince Albert (Winter, 2009). Into the twentieth century the fashion for jet declined and the fishing and shipping industry collapsed, leaving the town with tourism as its major source of income. In the first half of the century, the shift from fishing to tourism was gradual, but by the 1950s the town was seeing a boom in working-class tourism, as holiday resorts across England prospered (Walton, 2000, 2009). More rough and ready establishments appeared on the streets of the West Cliff area, replacing sedate Victorian hotels, and holiday camps with caravan sites were built on the edge of the town. Increasingly, cottages in the old town were being sold by local families to individuals and companies who wanted to turn them into holiday cottages or second homes. The boom, however, was followed by a slump caused by the decline of working-class domestic tourism, and by the 1980s Whitby’s tourist industry looked as beleaguered as its fishing industry. The town became a place of high unemployment, with associated problems of drug use, poor health and anti-social behaviour (Beatty and Fothergill, 2004).

Of course, people still travelled to Whitby for holidays, and many of the town's businesses have continued to survive through the end of the last century into this one, but the days when entire northern towns and cities flocked to the coast for a fortnight's holiday have gone. Whitby's tourism industry has had to adapt itself to find a new class of visitor, as so many other traditional seaside resorts have had to do (Agarwal, 2002). There has been a revival of tourism in recent years linked to two trends: middle-class second/short vacations and a re-casting of Whitby as heritage and festival destination. The first trend has seen the gradual bourgeoisification and gentrification of the town (the replacement of greasy spoon cafes with wine bars and ice-cream vendors with art galleries), the increase in the number of holiday cottages and second homes and the re-invention of Whitby's past: the Magpie fish and chip shop becoming a 'real food' gourmet attraction, and the adoption of Captain Cook and other heritage tourism brands as a signifier of holidays as learning (Winter, 2009). The second trend has seen Whitby's tourism industry and policy-makers in the district council work in conjunction to produce a calendar of festivals and events, so that Whitby becomes an all-year tourist destination. Whitby has had its regatta and its folk festival for many years, but many other things have added to these existing events, including the Whitby Goth Weekends that take place in April and October of each year.

The heritage-tourism marketing of Whitby started with the launch of Captain Cook trails and leaflets on the Victorian geologists who found fossils under the East Cliff (Winter, 2009.), and has continued into this century with a focus on three themes: whaling; the Abbey; and Dracula. Whaling is commemorated by a number of local landmarks (for example, the whale-bone arches at the top of the Khyber Pass steps) and is the focus of local histories and the town museum. The Abbey, owned by English Heritage, is the focus of interactive displays in its own museum at the top of the old town, and is a visible marker of the past (although the ruins are not those of the abbey where English Christians decided on the date of

Easter – what is seen in Whitby is the impressive remains of the later abbey that was built on the site of the seventh-century abbey). The third theme of Whitby's heritage-tourism is the fact that Whitby is literally the holiday resort of Dracula (the place where Bram Stoker imagined the Vampire Count arriving in England one dark and stormy night). The following long extract from a site promoting Whitby makes the link with Dracula – and Dracula's author Bram Stoker – clear:

One of the most popular stories ever told, Dracula has been re-created for the stage and screen hundreds of times in the last century. Yet it is essentially a Victorian saga, an awesome tale of thrillingly bloodthirsty vampire whose nocturnal atrocities reflect the dark underside of a supremely moralistic age. Above all, Dracula is a quintessential story of suspense and horror, boasting one of the most terrifying characters in literature: centuries-old Count Dracula, whose diabolical passions prey upon the innocent, the helpless, the beautiful. Bram Stoker, who was also the manager of the famous actor Sir Henry Irving, wrote seventeen novels. Dracula remains his most celebrated and enduring work -- even today this Gothic masterpiece has lost none of the spine-tingling impact that makes it a classic of the genre. "But, strangest of all, the very instant the shore was touched, an immense dog sprang up on deck from below ... and running forward, jumped from the bow on to the sand. Making straight for the steep cliff, where the churchyard hangs over the laneway to the East Pier ... it disappeared in the darkness." from Dracula by Bram Stoker, 1897... Looking across the harbour toward East Cliff, you can see the view that inspired the fertile imagination of author Bram Stoker, who stayed in the Royal Hotel on the western side of Whitby while writing his famous novel. The above extract is from a critical point in the book's story-line, where the Russian schooner Demeter raced across the harbour before the blast of a massive storm, with its dead captain lashed to

the helm, and crashed into the pier just under Whitby's East Cliff, whereupon the immense dog leapt onto English soil. The dog was known to be one of the many forms into which a vampire could transform itself. Count Dracula had arrived in England. Whitby is an ancient seaport and fishing village on the north-east coast of England and has been a haven for holiday-makers since Victorian times and has played a significant role in English history. Its harbour, once the sixth largest port in Britain, lies where the River Esk reaches the North Sea.

(<http://whitby.co.uk/dracula/>, accessed 22 October 2012)

There is no doubt that Bram Stoker visited Whitby and was inspired by the ruins of the Abbey and its balance of Georgian decay and Victorian holiday retreat (for an example see Moore, 2009). The website does not do justice to the complexity of the action Stoker sets in Whitby. Dracula is a novel constructed through primary sources written by the main characters. The town and Dracula's presence there is reported through the journal of Mina Murray, who is staying the summer in Whitby with her friend Lucy (Mina is betrothed to Jonathan Harker, who has been trapped by Dracula in Transylvania, so Dracula's arrival in Whitby is no coincidence). When Dracula's ship beaches under the Abbey he stays in the town and hypnotises Lucy, feeding on her blood – Mina sees this happening when she looks out across the harbour from the West Cliff to the graveyard by the Abbey (where Lucy is attacked). Mina's journal and the newspaper cutting about the beaching of the ship describe the interaction of both women and the vampire in the real tourist spaces of the town.

Dracula has always been a popular novel since its publication, but the place of the vampire in popular culture was established when the creature's story transferred to the movie theatre. The re-appearance of vampires in every generation of Hollywood film production led to the rise of vampire fiction in the 1970s, with Anne Rice's vampire stories becoming best-sellers and inspiring a host of pale imitations. Vampire fans returned to the pure source and

now found in Stoker's story the pleasure of old-fashioned images and themes – what was a story about the modern when it was first published had become a classic of the Gothic literary genre, a piece of Victoriana that allowed modern readers to laugh at Victorian obsessions with sex (Halberstam, 1993). Fans of the Gothic horror novel started to come to Whitby in the 1980s to look at the places in the book – and inevitably the local tourist organizations, businesses and the local councils exploited (and still exploit) this. There are leaflets and walking tours up the steps to the graveyard, there are Dracula-themed souvenirs in the gift shops (including Dracula chocolate) and the Dracula Experience on the harbour side (<http://www.draculaexperience.co.uk/>). The growth in Dracula tourism coincided with the vampire turn in the Goth scene, which was partly inspired by the Anne Rice books (and the Buffy film and TV show – see Spracklen and Spracklen, 2012), but partly a product of the shift in the early 1990s Goth scene from a music-based subculture to a fashion-based subculture. What happened in Whitby was an increase in the number of vampire tourists occurring when it was likely that fans of Dracula would be either alternative-looking people (some Goths, but other alternative people such as heavy metal fans, pagans and Wiccans) or Victorian enthusiasts (some Goths but others who wanted to dress up as Victorians and act as Victorians and perform a stereotypically upper-class Victoriana – see Kaplan, 2007). Over the years these two fashion scenes have become conflated – especially at Whitby - in the rise of steampunk, an alternative subculture growing out of Goths inspired by science-fiction alternative histories to create pseudo-Victorian costumes (the scene has no identifiable style of music, though there are steampunk bands, including spoof ones such as London's The Men Who Will Not Be Blamed For Nothing, who write punk songs about Isambard Kingdom Brunel and other famous Victorians). This has now been embraced by people who have no understanding of its Goth roots, and care only for the fashions, or people who think dressing as a steampunk is the same as dressing as a Goth (Cherry and Mellins, 2011).

Whitby Goth Weekend - the Goth festival - first started in 1994, and its genesis and early years are described in Hodkinson (2002). According to the official WGW website (<http://www.whitbygothweekend.co.uk/>), Whitby was chosen as the site for the festival by Jo Hampshire, the promoter, because of the Dracula connection. At first the festival was popular in the Goth scene but it did not make an impact on the wider national consciousness. It was, however, welcomed by the locals in Whitby, who saw a chance to exploit the Goth link with Dracula. In other words, Whitby had already become known for being a magnet for Goths, particularly those vampire Goths who were becoming attracted to the look of 'Victorian Gothic'. There were already some alternative clothes shops in the town, and of course there were some alternative people who had moved to the town, but the festival caught the attention of local businesses and the local tourist industry, which were looking to create a new market opportunity. As Whitby became a destination for vampire fans, it became a destination for Goths attracted by television features about the Goth festival or about Dracula, and friendly spreads in newspapers and magazines about the rise of Whitby as a Goth 'mecca' (Goulding and Saren, 2009; Hodkinson, 2002). The festival was promoted in Goth magazines and Goth web-sites, as might be expected, but the town of Whitby became a Goth destination outside of the weekend(s) of the actual festival - as it had been becoming with the rise of Dracula tourism. There are Goth shops and a Victorian Gothic bed and breakfast, and the gift shops in the old town are as likely to have postcards with pictures of Goths on them as they are donkeys and sand-castles. In an old chapel on Church Street an emporium selling wool and knitting patterns and toys sells car-stickers for Pagan Goths. The festival has become a key festival for Whitby, which promotes itself as a destination for music tourism and other forms of festival tourism, with the folk music festival in August and the Musicport world music festival in October (<http://www.discoveryorkshirecoast.com/whitby.aspx>). The Goth weekends have become part of the cycle of events in Whitby's calendar, and they are

mentioned in all marketing and policy documents promoting Whitby as a tourist destination published locally (ibid.).

Over the last fifteen years, the wider Goth economy in Whitby has ebbed and flowed like the tide in Whitby's harbour, with alternative clothes shops opening and closing (a large shop on the same harbour-side location as the Dracula Experience closed in 2012), but the Whitby Goth Weekend has remained a constant success. From one event a year to two, which now synchronise approximately with the Celtic pagan festivals of Beltane and Samhain (this may be deliberate or an accident of the availability of the venue), the official festival is held in the Spa Pavilion, a council-owned building nestling precariously in the steep slopes of the West Cliff. Here there is a hall for live music and spaces downstairs and in the reception area for a Goth Market to run. The line-up of bands combines new acts emerging out of the international Goth scene with older established bands (often) from the United Kingdom that might be said to transcend the Goth scene such as The Damned, Doctor and the Medics, or Zodiac Mindwarp. Our own attendance at the festival has been dependent on seeing a band that is an absolute 'must-see' on the bill alongside another couple of bands to make it worth our while – it has been rare that the line-ups have been exciting enough to tempt us to Whitby. In the last few years, some official and unofficial fringe events have appeared over the course of the Goth weekends. A number of Whitby pubs and nightclubs run Goth nights and put on Goth gigs over the Goth weekends, mainly with the implicit support of the official festival (some of these fringe events are official events making money for the festival, others are run by local businesses or Goth DJs who hire venues), but sometimes these events run in direct (if unspoken) competition with the official festival. There are also a range of informal Goth gatherings outside of the official venue, where Goths come to meet other Goths they know in pubs and other leisure spaces – gatherings organised on-line and through local networks. The market has grown to be hosted by a number of venues, and there has been a

struggle between the official venues and official market and unofficial markets in unofficial venues. The markets make money for traders selling Goths - and other visitors - expensive clothes, jewellery, accessories, magical items, books, New Rock boots and so on. The markets have effectively commodified the Goth Weekend experience (Goulding and Saren, 2009; Spracklen and Spracklen, 2012). They are also the source of complaints on-line about the cost to the traders of having a stall – and the focus of a dispute between the official festival and someone who tried to take control of the festival away from the original organizers, a split in the Whitby Goth Weekend organization that was also a personal split in the family who run the festival (Whitby Gazette, 2011). At one point this dispute threatened the survival of the original organization as the rival festival looked to book venues at the time the April festival was meant to run, but the dispute has been resolved and the Goth weekends continue to run as normal.

The festival now has a national profile in the United Kingdom, caused in part by the promotional acumen of the organization and the proactive nature of the Whitby tourist industry, and in part by the mainstream's fascination with beautiful young women in fetish-wear, stockings and high-heeled boots. Goth fashions have tended to be provocatively dark and vampish, with a sense of emancipatory playfulness for men and for women (Brill, 2008). At Whitby Goths could dress as playfully as they liked, and feel safe from abuse and lascivious gazes from outsiders (Hodkinson, 2002). However, the public's attention has been drawn to the Goth weekend because there are attractive women in attendance who dress in sufficiently sexy manners, making them perfect targets for the cameras. Without fail, the Goth weekends have become the focus of newspaper reports (from the respectable broadsheet *The Guardian* – see The Guardian, 2012 - to the egregious right-wing, middle English tabloid *Daily Mail* - see Garland, 2012) and 'amusing' short films in television news, all of which focus on the strange fashions and the amusing idea of Goths eating fish and chips – but all of

which feature at least one young woman and her corset-bound chest. On the BBC news website, there were four articles on the Whitby Goth Weekend in the last three years alone, including two almost-identical video reports from 29 April 2012 (Freeman, 2012) and 25 January 2011 (Inwood, 2011), a local BBC report of the October 2010 festival using 12 pictures

([news.bbc.co.uk/local/york/hi/people\\_and\\_places/arts\\_and\\_culture/newsid\\_9144000/9144676.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/york/hi/people_and_places/arts_and_culture/newsid_9144000/9144676.stm)), and a feature on a Lancashire ‘glamour Goth’ attending the festival in 2009 ([news.bbc.co.uk/local/lancashire/hi/people\\_and\\_places/arts\\_and\\_culture/newsid\\_8242000/8242701.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/lancashire/hi/people_and_places/arts_and_culture/newsid_8242000/8242701.stm)). This media coverage encourages non-Goths to turn up at Whitby to see the freaks in fancy dress, the girls in the sexy outfits, and to take their pictures: and it encourages non-Goths to dress up as Goths just for the weekend, an *ersatz* version of Goth that mistakes Victoriana for Goth and concentrates more on the easy-to-buy-a-corset-to-boost *décolletage* than the too-hard-to-get-right hair and make-up. The Whitby Goth Weekend official website explicitly invites a wider audience to attend – the festival and the weekend now are not just for Goths, they are for anyone who wants to dress up as if they are a Goth, especially people who want to come along as Victorians or steampunks, and those who want to come to Whitby to say they have seen the Goths (and the sexy women).

### **Goth Tourism and Goth Identity**

Not surprisingly, all eight of the Goth respondents knew about the Whitby Goth Weekend and all of them had attended it a number of times. As one explained:

It is a great weekend... that time of year when you know you can get away from work... it's just you have to support it, really, to be there... it's about getting away and being there, you know.

Some of the Goths we interviewed had been attracted to Whitby for other reasons and had visited it outside of the Goth weekends: they recognised the aesthetic charm of the town nestled around the inlet of the river, the beauty of the cliffs and the Abbey, without feeling the need to identify the town as a peculiarly Goth place. Despite the intentions of the tourist industry and the media to portray Whitby as a Goth town or a Dracula town, neither of those explanations was offered when the Goths we interviewed said they liked visiting the town outside of the Goth weekends. The Goths we interviewed are comfortable and proud of being Goths – they all demonstrated long years of hanging out at Goth events, mingling with other Goths in a mixture of spaces, and all of them listened to Goth music and dressed as Goths in their everyday lives, where possible – but their performance as Goths, however communicatively authentic, did not necessarily extend to every decision, every encounter, or every space. So visiting Whitby in the Goth ‘off-season’ was just something they did because they liked the town, they felt safe walking around it because of its familiarity, and it is situated conveniently for these northern English Goths: close enough to home, but sufficiently far away to feel like the grime of the city and the instrumentality of work was left behind. When in Whitby in the Goth ‘off-season’ these Goths did what everybody else does in Whitby: went on walks, travelled on the steam train, strolled on the beach looking for jet and fossils, and ate chips. In our own experience of going on holidays to Whitby, there are Goths who live in the town and Goths who are on vacation, and there are enough people dressed in black for it to be a place where you feel safe from abuse – but we go to Whitby because of the balance between its natural beauty, its built environment and the remnants of its working-class seaside resort past.

The Goths in our research are well-travelled, and attend Goth events around the country and further afield, where Germany’s mega-festivals for the ‘dark wave’ scene are as big as the Leeds or Reading music festivals in the United Kingdom. Most of these Goths are

comfortable with going to Whitby for the Goth Weekend and hanging out at the festival, or alternative fringe events. The line-up on the stage at the Pavilion might sometimes draw our Goths into purchasing tickets for the official festival. Where there is poor line-up the Goths we interviewed have still gone to Whitby for the Goth weekend but have gone to hang out with friends and attend fringe Goth nights (where famous Goth DJs from around the world might be found). Not all the Goths go every year to the festival: some have stopped attending, not because the festival is 'false' in any way but because the festival and accommodation is too expensive. When the Goth Weekend is on it is difficult to find accommodation in the town, as non-Goths turn up to watch the Goths, and more and more people attend the Weekend dressed as Goths. The interest in attending the festival has led to an increase in the price of weekend tickets. Like the Goths in Hodkinson (2002), all our respondents saw going to Whitby on the Goth weekend as an opportunity to connect with old friends, to see the latest fashions from other places, to buy things at the market and to socialise in a Habermasianly authentic way – whether or not they went in the Pavilion.

All of the Goths in our research believe the festival has become something bigger than just a Goth festival. Most noted that the festival attracts a wider audience to gaze at the Goths (our Goth respondents called these people tourists, as opposed to the Goths as proper Goths attending a Goth event, which only accidentally makes them tourists) but also people who 'act' Goth, people who come to the Goth weekend to dress as Goths. Two female Goths highlighted this phenomenon in their reflections on attending the festival in the last few years, when it has become a mediatized event. One of them, Lucretia, told us the exasperation she felt when she could not get in one Goth-friendly pub because it was "full of people in Halloween fancy dress... [I] can tell when people are dressed up in... [they] don't look comfortable". Tourists are coming to Whitby for the Goth Weekend for the postmodern play of performing Goth identities, but the performances are inauthentic and dependent on an

instrumentalised notion of what a real Goth looks like: they come dressed as steam-punks or Victorian vampires or something from a horror film, but they do not have the right hair or the right make-up, or the right combination of jewellery or piercings or tattoos. Authenticity is still important to our respondents. The fake, inauthentic Goth-men look like a character from a Dickens adaption on a trashy TV channel; the fake Goth-women look like they are on a hen night. Despite attending the festival, some of the Goths we interviewed believe that it has over-commercialized and commodified Goth culture, that is has become more about the event than the music. For these respondents, Goth should be defined by its music and its alternative ideology: it is a reaction against the mainstream and should never be a part of that mainstream popular culture; as one suggested “if anybody can be a Goth by buying the uniform it does stop being something else”, that something else being the political, communicative edge the scene developed in the early 1980s. The same respondent questioned the loss of Goth’s alternative spirit as a result of Whitby Goth Weekend normalising Goth style and opening Goth up from a counter culture to a part of the instrumentalised mainstream, where Goth becomes a brand to promote tourism: “Goth” he told us, “has lost its fuck-off punk attitude”.

## **Conclusions**

Edensor’s (2001) ambivalence about the performance of tourism can be seen in the way Whitby has branded itself as a Dracula and Goth town, and the way in which the Goth Weekend has become an established and well-known attraction. On the one hand, Whitby tourist chiefs are trying to stop the town becoming over-commercialised and are open to this (seemingly) strange subculture’s presence in the town’s streets. Goths created the festival as a communicative act among themselves, and use the Goth weekends as opportunities to perform authentic Goth identities in a communicative-shaped space (Habermas, 1984;

Spracklen, 2009, 2011). But Whitby Goth Weekend has become a tourist event: the eventisation of tourism commodifies and instrumentalises the relationship between individuals 'at leisure' and the spaces around them (Smith, 2012). The Goth scene has become a commodity, a space where an industry (tourism) has taken over. People dress up (perform ambivalently) as Victorian Goths by hiring or buying expensive clothes; and the festival tries to promote itself beyond Goth music. The communicative freedom of the Goth scene is still present but it is limited. The struggle over the ownership of Whitby Goth Weekend, the attempts to control the fringes, and the evolution of the event as spectacle and popular carnival (when people become Goths for a weekend of inauthentic, fake performativity through the purchase of throw-away fancy dress) point away from that freedom.

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