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**GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN:  
ATMOSHERES, DEATH, AND  
AESTHETICS OF GOTH**

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# GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN: ATMOSHERES, DEATH, AND AESTHETICS OF GOTH

Ashley Watkins

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Recently made available in English, Gernot Böhme's work on atmospheres provides a strong foundation upon which to reframe classic questions in aesthetics and gain insight into the aesthetics of the everyday that is fighting its way to the forefront of aesthetic research. By reconceptualizing familiar ideas and rendering explicit what previously existed in the background of aesthetic thought, Böhme's work puts aside the art/non-art distinction in favour of a unifying picture of aesthetic production and reception in all areas of life, revealing the vast extent and importance of aesthetic work and aesthetic consumption. The concept of atmosphere in aesthetics lends itself to wide and varied application, and its success in providing insight into such fields as architecture, scenography, advertising, and product design serves as much as a test of its merits as does more traditional philosophical analysis. With that in mind I would like to offer here not a traditional defence of the view or a response to its critics, but rather an exploration of an area ripe for illumination via atmospheres: the Goth subculture.

Gernot Böhme's concept of atmospheres in aesthetics sheds considerable light on the subculture and its emergence in late 1970s England. The subculture and its members create atmospheres frequently characterized as macabre, despairing, or simply dark. They do so using music, fashion, jewellery, cosmetics, and scent, as well as the decoration of their homes and personal spaces. The atmosphere they create is intended both to be experienced by others who encounter them but also, perhaps primarily, to be experienced by the creators themselves.

Böhme says that atmospheres are known by their character, as felt by those who experience them.<sup>2</sup> With regard to the atmosphere created by Goth, we may ask whether or not the typical descriptors are truly accurate portrayals of the character of the atmosphere which is so central to the subculture, and we may ask *why* such a subculture would emerge around the

creation of that atmosphere. I shall argue that some of the answers typically given are misguided – Goths are not sad, lonely, or natural-born outcasts. Rather I shall argue that the aesthetics of Goth is a recreation of the atmospheres of past death rituals, rituals that have been lost in an age that sterilizes and erases death in mainstream culture. Goth is a re-introduction and an amplification of something essential that has gone missing from everyday life.

The aim of this paper is not to provide arguments in support of Böhme's aesthetics of atmospheres but rather to show how the aesthetics of the Goth subculture is illuminated by and situated within this paradigm. I draw on sources from art history to establish that the aesthetics of Western death culture have been sanitized, from deathbed to funeral to memorial. I will argue that this aesthetic sanitization explains the controversy over the modern death taboo found in the sociological literature. That is, the observation that there is a death taboo is the observation that a set of aesthetic practices that were once everyday have disappeared from mainstream culture. I then argue for the claim that the Goth subculture is *essentially aesthetic*, by which I mean the norms that define it are, as Paul Hodkinson says, *stylistic* rather than ideological or behavioural. I examine the similarities between contemporary Goth aesthetics and the aesthetics of past death cultures within the paradigm of Böhme's atmospheres and their characters and, together with considerations of timing and location, conclude that the Goth subculture is a reaction to the loss of an important element of the everyday aesthetics of the past – it is a consequence of the death taboo. I wrap up by contrasting this view with other analyses of Goth aesthetics and providing responses to a couple possible objections.

## **2. Notes on Scope**

There are some important limitations and definitions to keep in mind as we proceed. First, the shortened term 'Goth' will be used only to refer to the subculture that arose in late 1970s England. I do not intend to refer to styles of literature, architecture, or any Germanic peoples typically denoted by the full 'Gothic.' This is not a denial that these other Gothic things have had considerable influence on the subculture, nor that they do not create atmospheres similar to those created by the subculture. I simply lack the space to discuss their relevance to Goth here.

I will often use the phrase 'aesthetic culture of death' to refer to the aesthetic qualities and practices associated with the commemoration of the dead and the contemplation of death, broadly conceived. The look and fabric of caskets, the font and iconography on tombstones, mourning fashion, the coverings on a deathbed, invitations to funerals, inscriptions on memorials – all and anything aesthetic to do with dying and the observance of death. I prefer this phrase over the one used by Nigel Llewellyn – the 'visual culture of death' – because I want to explicitly include the auditory, olfactory, and tactile as well as the visual.

In terms of scope, there is a loose geographical limitation to this paper. Because the Goth subculture arose in Britain, I limit discussions of the aesthetics of death to British practices and traditions. The Goth subculture exists all over the world, in many places that no doubt will not share the death culture discussed here. However, it is reasonable to believe that the circumstances giving rise to a subculture can be different from those facilitating its spread. Essentially, this geographical limitation is based on no hard principle – it is, for the most part, a matter of convenience and a clearer way of tracing the history of the aesthetic atmosphere I wish to discuss.

Relatedly, I do not intend for this paper to be or replace any sociological or anthropological theory of the Goth subculture, or of subcultures more generally. It need not conflict with any theory or account of how or why subcultures arise. The question I mean to answer is this: **Given that subcultures are bound to arise *in opposition to some feature or features of mainstream culture*, why is the Goth subculture essentially aesthetic, and why does it create this macabre atmosphere as opposed to any other?**

### 3. Atmospheres and Everyday Aesthetics

Before we go on, it's necessary to get a grasp of what exactly an atmosphere is. For those primarily familiar with Anglo-American aesthetics, it's helpful to recall ongoing debates about aesthetic properties. For those who take them to exist, aesthetic properties would include such things as macabre, despairing, and gloomy (when applied to objects and spaces rather than to people). They are often thought to supervene on non-aesthetic perceptible properties, or to be grounded by them, or perhaps bear some other important relation to them. Many philosophers also suspect that there are aesthetic principles that guide which aesthetic properties supervene on (or are grounded by) which non-aesthetic properties, though these principles have proved difficult to enumerate.<sup>3</sup>

Atmospheres are an alternative way of conceiving of the phenomena. Böhme says atmospheres are *tinctured spaces*: spaces that are given a certain *character* through the presence of things.<sup>4</sup> I like to think of atmospheres as clouds of feeling, spreading out from objects and infecting those who walk into them. Like both Benjamin's auras and Schmitz's atmospheres, Böhme's atmospheres are spatially extended. We can walk into them or be assailed by them. We feel and discuss them as being in the air, filling up rooms, and spreading through crowds. For Böhme, these are not mere figures of speech.

The character of atmospheres include such things as those that Anglo-American philosophers call aesthetic properties: things such as the macabre, elegance, and even beauty. Characters must be *felt* to be known, and thus have a partially subjective nature. A Francis Bacon painting, for example, gives us the *feeling* of the macabre via its presence in space rather than

having the property of being macabre. However, they also have an objective side. As with conceptions of aesthetic properties, the characters of atmospheres are determined by the qualities of the objects in the spaces they tincture, or what Böhme calls ‘ekstases,’ or sometimes ‘ecstasies.’<sup>5</sup> Unlike properties that belong to a thing, ekstases radiate out from a thing: they are an object’s way of being in space. Aesthetic work, then, is not the creation of aesthetic objects but rather the creation of atmospheres with a certain character, accomplished by choosing and manipulating the ekstases of things. Ekstases and character, like non-aesthetic and aesthetic properties, are connected by principles implicitly known and used by aesthetic workers.<sup>6</sup>

As the first thing we perceive and the goal of aesthetic work, the atmosphere gains a unique primacy, and with it the purely aesthetic enjoys a renewed importance. It is no longer reduced to a sign for a meaning that gives it real value. The aesthetic need not be secondary to the meaningful, the moral, or the communicable. The aesthetic is not shallow, it is not a symptom nor a vehicle for something else. Atmospheres are powerful through their emotivity and the intensity of their presence. This primacy is important to understanding the rise and persistence of the Goth subculture.

I have only been able to offer a hasty treatment of the concept, so let’s sum up with Böhme’s own words: “Atmospheres are totalities: atmospheres imbue everything, they tinge the whole of the world or a view, they bathe everything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state.”<sup>7</sup> Atmospheres are emotive, spatial, the first objects of perception, and the goal of all aesthetic work. They are at the center of what he calls the ‘new aesthetics.’

Böhme characterizes his approach as a *new* aesthetics because it differs from much of recent analytic aesthetics in at least four ways: 1) it is not object-oriented; 2) it is not judgement-oriented; 3) it is not artwork-oriented; and 4) it is not semiotic. That is, this aesthetics is not a study of physical objects but of their atmospheres, their ways of being in the world. It does not focus on determining the correctness of judgements about such objects, as to their beauty, value, or aesthetic qualities. It brings all aesthetic work under the same umbrella, eliminating the need for an art/non-art distinction or an art/craft distinction. All things have atmospheres, and these atmospheres and their perception are *the aesthetic*. Finally, it does not seek to decode any meaning behind aesthetic work. For Böhme, aesthetic works, including works of art, are not by their nature signs. This is not to say that art works do not bear meaning, for surely many do. But this is not what makes them *aesthetic* or *aesthetically valuable*, and most aesthetic work does not ever function as such a sign.

Of these notable features, it is the shift of focus away from art works that undoubtedly situates Böhme’s approach within the broader project of everyday aesthetics. What has become

a subdiscipline in its own right began as an observation of a curious tension in the Anglo-American aesthetic canon: that despite broad agreement that any object is potentially an object of aesthetic attention or experience, the literature focuses almost exclusively on the objects of Western fine art.<sup>8</sup> This does not just result in a paucity of illustrative examples of theoretical concepts, but sizeable gaps in theory itself. For example, Thomas Leddy argued as early as 1995 that the exclusive focus on fine art objects caused the neglect of an entire class of properties on a par with expressive properties.<sup>9</sup>

Fresh, ongoing debate continues to develop the aims and methods of everyday aesthetics, and attempts have been made to clearly define the proper targets of everyday aesthetic inquiry. There seems to be general agreement that art works are not among the proper objects of everyday aesthetic inquiry, even if the proper objects have some special relationship to art.<sup>10</sup> Art works, however, are within the purview of Böhme's aesthetics, and he even takes the art of the stage set as a paradigmatic case for his aesthetics of atmospheres.<sup>11</sup> This need not trouble us too much, however. If the aim is to avoid the pitfalls of excluding certain instances of the genuinely aesthetic, then the aesthetics of atmospheres certainly achieves that. The art of the stage set functions as a paradigmatic case by guiding us from art to the everyday – we understand how everyday atmospheres are created in ordinary spaces and by routine activities by appealing to the more overt setting of the theatrical stage.

Granted, according to some restrictive definitions of everyday aesthetics, applying the aesthetics of atmospheres to the Goth subculture and to commemoration of the dead will not qualify. For instance, Kevin Melchionne's suggested definition of everyday aesthetics includes the conditions that the aesthetic activity in question be *ongoing* and that it be *common*.<sup>12</sup> The Goth subculture fails to be common in the sense that is important to Melchionne, while death culture fails to be ongoing. However, Ossi Naukkarinen offers a less literal definition of everydayness, one that is relative to the subject – what is everyday for me will not be the same as what is everyday to someone who lives in Japan, for example – and that “is characterized by features such as normalcy, routine, repetition, habituality and ordinariness.”<sup>13</sup> For Goths, these descriptors certainly apply to their Goth aesthetic practices. In centuries past, elaborate funerals and commemorations of the dead were certainly familiar matters of routine and repetition, even if they did not occur literally every day for every person. Certainly, we can attend to and examine the aesthetic nature of both Goth practices and death practices without ascribing to them art status; this is the kind of everyday aesthetics that I aim to do.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. Atmospheres of Death

Having given a crash course in Böhme's atmospheres, let's assume for the moment that the account is correct and keep it in mind as we change course. We have seen that atmospheres are the primary object of aesthetic production and reception, that they are known by feeling their character, and that they can be produced through the manipulation of ekstases, or the properties of things. In what follows, I examine the character of the atmospheres produced by the British death cultures of the past and how that character was created. I also review the literature on the so-called death taboo of contemporary mainstream culture, and suggest that the perception of the taboo owes to an *aesthetic* loss, rather than a change in discursive practices.

My examination of past death aesthetics relies heavily on Nigel Llewellyn's excellent book *The Art of Death*. Llewellyn makes a thorough art historical investigation of the aesthetics of death in pre-Reformation England, including both works of art such as literature and paintings with death as their subject, as well as memorial tapestries, funeral invitations, tombstones and their inscriptions, mourning dress, memento mori motifs, and all the other everyday aesthetic items associated with death. From his research, it becomes clear that there was a particular way of aesthetically acknowledging, ritualizing, and commemorating death and the dead that has been lost. I suggest that the *macabre atmosphere* has disappeared from our contemporary everyday aesthetic practices regarding death and the dead.

I am co-opting the term 'macabre' to refer to the atmosphere created by the everyday death aesthetics of the past. 'Macabre' works best for our purposes because of its specificity. Some may (correctly) call death aesthetics 'dark,' but this is too broad: the night sky is dark as well but does not create the right mood. 'Sombre,' too, is an option, but this is not quite right either, as it precludes the humour that is undeniably present in some nevertheless macabre death culture. These are not weighty arguments about the true meaning of 'macabre' or about what is in fact 'macabre,' however. I simply intend to stipulate that 'macabre' is the character of atmosphere created by past death aesthetics because its everyday meaning is closest to our stipulated meaning. The macabre character is distinctive of past death culture, but not unique to it. Other things, such as paintings, poems, or even facial expressions can also create a macabre atmosphere.

Llewellyn provides a wealth of detail about the qualities of material objects that served to create the macabre. The following is but a sample: black cloth draped in houses, churches, and carriages that transported the dead; death masks and effigies of the dead; motifs of the memento mori tradition (skulls and crossbones, Death as a skeleton wielding a scythe, hour-glasses, coffins, etc.) found on tombstones as well as personal and household items; the wording of tombstone inscriptions and funeral invitations ("Here lyes the corps of..." and "You are

desired to accompany the corps of..."); the tolling of bells and the playing of unsettling and solemn music. Even these brief descriptions and our associated imaginings are enough to create a subtle sense of the macabre.

However, the macabre has undeniably been lost from everyday death aesthetics. Llewellyn counts this as a symptom of a wider denial of death, a psychological and sociological phenomenon of which the aesthetics is merely a side effect. He notes that once, "[i]mages reminding people about their own mortality were to be found in all kinds of public and private situations: as furnishings, on the walls of buildings and carried about the person."<sup>15</sup> However, "[a]mong us, death happens in institutions and the bodies of the dead are hidden from view. To accompany its negative connotations the ritual of death has become ever more muted, its signals ever more bland."<sup>16</sup>



Figure 1

In the first the date is clearly visible as 1656, or possibly 1666. We can see the memento mori imagery of both the skull and crossbones and the hourglass. Besides these more obviously macabre elements, the shape of the tombstone and its edges with scrolling are suggestive of draped fabric, making for a visually interesting silhouette and radiating the macabre from its long association with death culture.

All we need to do to see the differences to contemporary death culture is to look around. However, in the event that not everyone pays as much attention to our everyday aesthetics of death as I do, I'd like to provide a simple but paradigmatic example of the change. It's a hobby of mine to walk around cemeteries and take photos of the headstones I find interesting. The following are all photographs I've taken at various cemeteries in Scotland, so let it be noted that these are British rather than specifically English headstones. However, we can all observe the disappearance of the aesthetic qualities previously mentioned. I will remark on the date of each headstone if legible. Figures 1-3, 6 and 7 are photos of headstones found in the Leith Cemetery in Edinburgh. Figures 4 and 5 were taken in the Howff Cemetery in Dundee.





Figure 1

In Figure 2, the weathered black of the stone adds to the atmosphere. Along with the skull and crossbones, it features a banner reading “memento mori,” crossed shovels on each side, and other smaller carvings that have weathered away. The large, imposing shape of the stone is topped with a serious-faced, winged cherub. The top center of the stone suggests the shape of an urn. On each side at the top, there is another winged cherub facing outward.



Figure 3

Figure 3, about one hundred years younger than the first example at 1774, includes the skull and crossbones as well as the “memento mori” banner. It, too, has an imposing shape suggestive of columns. Though difficult to see from weathering, the inscription begins “Here lyes” and most probably continues as “the corps of” or “the body of” the person memorialized.



Figure 4

Figure 4 shows two large, horizontal style stones with memento mori imagery. In the foreground, we see a realistic skull and crossbones, with a shovel and spade also crossed beneath the skull, and an hourglass resting horizontally on top. In the background, the skull is less realistic, features the bones and shovel and spade crossed on either side rather than below, and an hourglass resting vertically on top.

Figure 5 features a stone I photographed particularly for its style of inscription, which I’ve observed on many stones from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Again, the description begins with “Here Lyes,” conjuring the image of the deceased beneath our feet. Notice also that the stone says clearly that she “departed this life,” not shying away from explicit acknowledgement that the memorial is for one who has died.



Figure 5

Figures 6 and 7 are intermediary cases, drifting toward the side of blandness described by Llewellyn, dating from 1772 and 1880. Notice that the sombreness remains, owing to their size and shape – simpler but still suggestive of an imposing building – and to their heavy font. Figure 6, a contemporary of Figure 3 and likely of Figure 5, features the macabre inscription on a plainer stone without imagery or decoration. In the later 1880 example, there is still an explicit acknowledgment that the memorialized died, but no such acknowledgement that their remains lie below. Rather than the stone marking a body, the stone is “Sacred to the memory of” the person. There is no imagery on the stone, the lines are simple, the inscription business-like.

Our eyes do not travel around either of these stones, they merely follow the inscription – names and dates as if in a ledger. The 1880 stone especially is serious and professional, but not macabre. The later stone was made well into the professionalization and corporatization of the death trade, a phenomenon that Llewellyn attributes to the gradual and ongoing separation of death from everyday life which ultimately resulted in the muting of death aesthetics.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 6

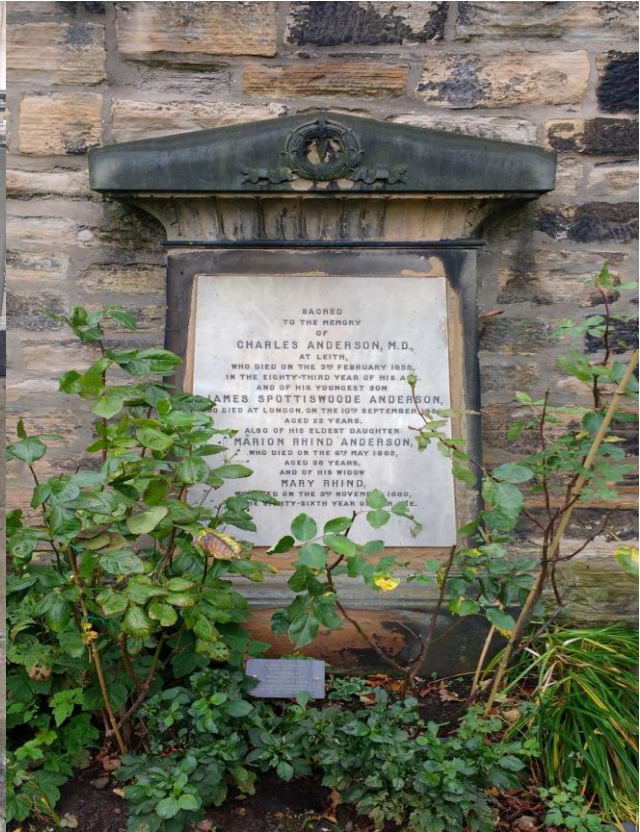


Figure 7

Finally, these last two stones are contemporary samples.<sup>18</sup> They have lost even the sombreness of the late 19<sup>th</sup> - early 20<sup>th</sup> century examples. They are the simplest examples yet, one of a shape somewhat similar to the previous examples but devoid of the imposing atmosphere and any hint of architectural influence. The other, in the shape of hearts, is almost cutesy. We see flowers rather than skulls and crossbones, a range of dates without explicit acknowledgement of the death, and suggested inscriptions full of positive buzzwords: ‘happy,’ ‘smiling,’ ‘content,’ ‘beautiful memory.’ This is only a specific example of a wider trend – the aesthetics of death has gone from macabre to bland, or even cutesy. It is not just a matter of the ekstases of funerary objects and spaces changing; there are many ways to create a macabre atmosphere. However, cartoonish hearts and memories of sunshine and happiness is not one of them. If we try to find a character for the atmosphere created by contemporary death aesthetics, we struggle to pinpoint one.



Figure 8

Llewellyn did quite well with ‘muted’ and ‘bland,’ especially in comparison to what it once was. Perhaps it’s easier to pinpoint the kind of atmosphere it seems to be aiming for, something like ‘uplifting’ or ‘serene.’ But ultimately it fails in this, and we can make any number of conjectures as to why. The little hearts are not uplifting but saccharine, the simple headstone not serene but boring. These and other contemporary aesthetic objects in death culture fail to create the serious atmosphere we expect of death – the sombre mood of a life ended and a hole created in the social fabric. A funeral without mention of death and grief seems almost offensive in its lack of darkness, the little hearts almost in poor taste. Perhaps not enough time has passed for us to shake the macabre from our notions of death; we can only mask it in full awareness of our aesthetic contortions.

## 5. Is Death Taboo?

But is the aesthetic a symptom of the social and psychological, merely the lesser-recognized cousin of the mental and verbal denial of death at the heart of the ‘death taboo’? The death taboo was first influentially argued for by Gorer, first in his paper “Pornography of Death.” An excellent discussion of the taboo and its development as an idea can be found in Tony Walter’s “Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?” Walter remarks on the apparent absurdity of one esteemed scholar after another proclaiming that they’ve discovered the taboo and offers some possible explanations both for the appearance of a taboo and for this continual rediscovery of it.<sup>19</sup>

Following Walter, something is taboo if it is disallowed by custom rather than by law. The meaning of ‘disallowed’ varies. A weak taboo is one in which the taboo subject is merely not mentioned in conversation: it is a discursive practice. A strong taboo is one of complete denial of

the taboo subject, even in one's thoughts. In the interest of charity, let's assume that those who support the taboo thesis conceive it as a weak taboo: we simply do not talk about death.

Of course, this is an empirical claim open to refutation from data showing that we do, as a matter of fact, discuss death. However, it is not the mere claim that there is a taboo that is of the most interest; the literature on the death taboo typically takes the taboo as a premise from which important conclusions can be drawn. Some theorists focus on the taboo as an effect and theorize about what has caused it. Others focus on it as a cause, suggesting that we have the death taboo to blame for seemingly unrelated societal ills. Most do a bit of both, and all have their critics. I shall focus here on Gorer's argument and suggest that he is right that there is a connection between the death taboo and what he once called "the pornography of death," but suggest that the problem is not (merely) psychological but *aesthetic*.

Gorer characterizes the death taboo as a loss of ritual, claiming that no longer ritualizing our grief over death results in a pornography of death: aesthetic works such as comics and films that garishly and unrealistically depict extremely violent, unnatural deaths. As he says, "[i]f we dislike the modern pornography of death, then we must give back to death – natural death – its parade and publicity, re-admit grief and mourning."<sup>20</sup> However, notice that the taboo as he characterizes it does not suit either the weak or strong definitions of taboo given by Walter. The taboo is not discursive, nor is it outright denial of the reality of death. It is the dismantling of ritual, the cessation of the ritualization of death and bereavement. What do past death rituals involve? Artifacts, music, recitations, processions. In this case specifically and perhaps more generally, ritualization is aestheticization. This taboo is one of *aesthetics*, not one of language or thoughts.

he absurdity present in the literature on the death taboo – the insistence that it exists coupled with simple observations that show us we do in fact think about and discuss death – can be explained by our collective failure to appreciate the huge importance of atmosphere. Atmosphere is affective, visceral, and omnipresent, yet as Böhme notes it's rarely discussed seriously. We insist on putting the primacy on language and meaning, and reasonably enough assume that if there is a taboo it must be that we cannot *talk about* the taboo subject. No doubt everyone has noticed that the everyday aesthetics has changed, but the assumption that the aesthetics is secondary to something else is so ingrained that we fail to see what the death taboo really amounts to.

One may think that Gorer is making too much of horror films and other images of violence as a modern-day obsession. People of previous centuries, including the Victorians with their dramatic ritualization of death and mourning, revelled in horror stories and images of the

ghastly and grotesque. It seems to me that two things could be motivating Gorer's view: 1) that interest in death-focused fiction and media has intensified with the removal of the macabre from the everyday aesthetics of mainstream culture; or 2) that the revulsion with which modern-day commentators view macabre media is an extension of the very same revulsion of the macabre that caused its disappearance from everyday death culture. I suggest that it's a mixture of both. Our need for the full spectrum of aesthetic experience, including of the macabre, has been relegated to the fringes, and those left in the bland center of the mainstream feel such revulsion for this interest in the macabre that they must diagnose and pathologize it. The prudish critics of horror that Gorer talks about in his paper are participating as fully in the taboo as those who suppress ritualized expressions of grief. As he says, "[i]f we make death unmentionable in polite society – 'not before the children' – we almost ensure the continuation of the 'horror comic.'"<sup>21</sup>

Even if one does not agree that the previously observed death taboo is one of aesthetics rather than language, we need not track people's attitudes, beliefs, or discursive practices regarding death to know that there is *some* aesthetic taboo in force. The atmospheres once associated with the everyday aesthetics of death have undeniably disappeared from mainstream society and are even considered in poor taste. Böhme's concept of atmospheres, their ontological indeterminacy, their affective power, and their primacy give us a way to understand how this aesthetic change can be powerfully felt by a culture while at the same time being so little acknowledged.

## 6. The Aesthetics of Goth

I've argued that Böhme's atmospheres can help us reconceptualize the everyday aesthetics of death and the apparent death taboo in contemporary Western culture (particularly British and American). I have suggested that the loss of the macabre atmosphere in death aesthetics has resulted in what appears to be a death taboo that doesn't involve the customary disallowance of acknowledging, thinking about, or talking about death. I shall argue that, much like the horror films in Gorer's view, the Goth subculture has arisen in response to this mainstream loss of the macabre.

This view can be summarized in four claims: 1) that the Goth subculture is an essentially aesthetic subculture; 2) that the Goth subculture creates a macabre atmosphere; 3) that this atmosphere is a recreation and amplification of the atmospheres of past death aesthetics; and 4) that Goth aesthetics is a response to the loss of those everyday aesthetic practices in mainstream culture.

There have been limited academic studies of the Goth subculture; however, Hodkinson's *Goth: Style, Identity and Subculture* stands out, and is my primary source. It is an insider's ethnography of British Goths in the 1990s and places Goths at the center of an account of the substance of subcultures, particularly those reliant on technology to overcome geographical distance between participants.<sup>22</sup> Of greatest interest to me, however, is the focus on style, or what I would call the aesthetic. Subcultures are individuated by their norms and, according to Hodkinson, "shared tastes and norms manifested themselves primarily in the arena of style" in the Goth subculture, and members "were sceptical as to whether the aesthetic details of the goth scene were intrinsically connected with particular attitudes or goals."<sup>23</sup> This is what I mean when I say that Goth is an essentially aesthetic subculture. We can see this even if we compare the Goth subculture to the Punk subculture from which it developed. Punk, though dynamic, includes norms governing behaviour and attitudes that are non-aesthetic. One norm arguably shared by all iterations and offshoots of Punk is a distaste for authority. However, illicit drug use may be an important norm for one strand of authority-hating Punks, while an extreme hatred of drug use and users is an important norm for equally authority-hating 'straight edge' punks.

Goths, on the other hand, are not essentially anti-authority. Nor are they anti-religious, anti-capitalist, or anti-anything else that mainstream culture values. All Goth norms are related to the aesthetic; behaviour governed by Goth norms is limited to music-listening, concert-going, dancing, dress, and so forth. Subcultures arise in opposition to some feature of mainstream society. Most, if not all, will eventually develop norms related to fashion and style – most subcultures' members are visually recognizable in this way. However, their point of opposition often lies elsewhere. For example, butch lesbians may have developed some stylistic norms in terms of fashion and hairstyles, but their main point of opposition to mainstream culture is in their sexual orientation. For Goths, the main point of opposition is aesthetic. It is a recreation and amplification of an atmosphere that has been eliminated from the mainstream and that is treated by the mainstream with distrust, hostility, and disgust.

Goths create the macabre in two ways: through direct re-use and novel staging. Rather than two exclusive methods, I conceive of these as two ends of a spectrum. Most of the aesthetic work Goths do lies somewhere in the middle. Goths engage in direct re-use most notably of memento mori imagery, the use of black fabrics, the style of furniture, and in many styles of mourning dress and jewellery. Some Goths greatly value historical accuracy in their recreation of Victorian funereal looks, or dark Medieval looks. Goth musicians make direct use of tolling bells in their songs and frequently borrow the minor third bass pattern of Chopin's Death March.<sup>24</sup>



However, novel staging has been a feature of Goth aesthetic production since its inception. They make their faces pale and ring their eyes in black, not because it was once a mourning custom, but because it creates the macabre through resemblance to a corpse. Likewise with ripped and fishnet clothing, as though one has arisen from the grave. Musically, Goth singers in the early 1970s made use of solemn *basso-profundo* vocals singing sad or eerie lyrics, achieving the macabre via sound in a way never done before.<sup>25</sup> Goths continually update according to current trends, making macabre versions of popular Instagram posts that showcase lipsticks by adding fangs and a drip of blood, or manipulating popular logos into something more sinister. They even appropriate (and, arguably, misappropriate) elements from non-Western cultures, creating a dark version of Japanese Lolita fashion, incorporating dreadlocks into the Cybergoth style, or using Romani elements to add a touch of the supernatural. A day spent at a Goth festival or even a quick internet search of images of Goths reveals the undeniable presence of the macabre in our stipulated sense. It's no coincidence that Goths hang out in cemeteries; their atmosphere is intimately connected with the past ritualization of death.

## 7. Why Atmospheres?

One may ask what work the concept of atmospheres is doing here. It's nice to have the more robust continuity between the everyday death aesthetics of the past and the Goth subculture. After all, atmospheres are individuated by their character, so despite differences in the qualities of death artifacts and Goth artifacts, the atmospheres created by them are identical. However, we get nearly the same result if we think of the macabre merely as an aesthetic property that supervenes on or otherwise emerges from non-aesthetic properties. Böhme admits that there are principles connecting ekstases and the characters of atmospheres – how is this superior to the usual conception of aesthetic principles connecting non-aesthetic properties to aesthetic ones?

It is not just the connection between ekstases and characters that Böhme's aesthetics illuminates in the case of Goths and death. Earlier, I surmised that the affective aspect so central to atmospheres, together with their status as the primary object of perception, went a long way toward explaining why an aesthetic change can have the profound effects on society that Gorer, Phillipe Ariès, and others describe. The affectivity and primacy of atmospheres contributes to two puzzling phenomena: 1) the extreme attachment of Goths to a subculture without norms governing things typically considered important to identity, such as world views and non-aesthetic values; and 2) the extreme hostility with which mainstream people react to a subculture that differs from the mainstream only in this aesthetic dimension.

Both of these phenomena are puzzling due to the aesthetic nature of the Goth subculture. It is commonplace to consider the aesthetic, understood here as the atmospheric, to be shallow – lacking importance on its own and only given significance as a symptom of or instrument for something ‘deeper’ or ‘truly meaningful.’ This can be seen in everyday talk about the shallowness of being attracted to a person’s looks, for example. In both everyday and critical discussions of arts such as music, it is considered not sufficient that music *sounds* appealing, but that the appealing sound is secondary to something else – the complexity and sophistication of the structure of the composition, the meaning of the lyrics in the case of popular music, the innovative use of instrumentation, and so on. So strong is the desire to attach the aesthetic to that which is already widely considered important, that these intellectual properties are subsumed into the category of the aesthetic in much of contemporary analytic philosophy of art.<sup>26</sup>

In the study of subcultures, too, theory assumes the shallowness of the aesthetic and strives to give it importance by allocating it instrumental status to something truly important. In Hebdige’s classic *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, the aesthetic norms of subcultures are analysed symbolically; the variant styles merely stand for a resistance to beliefs or ideologies of the mainstream.<sup>27</sup> While Hebdige did not himself use Goths as one of his case studies, others have used similarly symbolic and semiotic methods to explain why Goth creates the atmosphere that it does in the particular ways that it does. Take, for example, this passage by David Lenson from “The Aesthetic Apostasy”:

The signature black clothing is, at first glance, a generic gesture of negation. It goes back to Hamlet, and even earlier medieval figurations of melancholia, acedia, tristitia. All of these are personifications of despair, the one unforgivable sin (since it cannot seek forgiveness), and forerunner of gothic angst. ... It smacks of monasticism, vampires, and funeral directors. But to consider the symbolism of black in a vacuum is to miss something. Goths do not go out in direct sun, so that their skin remains an alabaster white. This stands out against the dark gear in a most striking way. It asseverates the purity of the person, dressed as if in mourning for a still-visible innocence. The goth motif of the fallen angel expresses this condition. It is not that the angel has fallen from a condition of intrinsic grace, but that he or she has fallen anxiously into a graceless world.<sup>28</sup>

While this is a beautiful passage, it is not a good analysis of Goth. It reads like an analysis of imagery present in a novel or a painting, treating Goth as a work of art akin to something with a single author or creator with a specific intention to communicate a particular message. This

fits with Lenson's view of Goths as a 'decontextualized artwork.' However, we do not need to classify everything that is essentially aesthetic as an artwork to make sense of it. In fact, this view will be hard not only for most mainstream people to believe, but for Goths themselves. Consider what Hodkinson has to say about these kind of analyses:

Years of ethnographic research as an insider have confirmed for me that there was no underlying shared structural, psychological or political meaning to be discerned from the style. Many participants themselves were sceptical as to whether the aesthetic details of the goth scene were intrinsically connected with particular attitudes or goals. Indeed, there was a particular tendency for hostility toward the suggestion that their dark hair or clothes said anything about their character, outlook, or behaviour. The most noticeable general point that came across, from both interviews and general ethnographic experience, was that style was held to be significant in and of itself as a set of enthusiastic preferences located within, and not beyond, the sphere of the aesthetic.<sup>29</sup>

Lenson's attribution of such things as negation, angst, despair, sin, and the mourning of lost innocence to the Goth subculture is puzzling. When such things are attributed to art works, it's thought that there's some intention behind it: an artist chooses to symbolize such things. Who chooses to symbolize them in the Goth subculture if not the Goths?

This is not a knock-down argument against Lenson's analysis. There are plenty of anti-intentional views according to which aesthetic objects can symbolize without necessitating an intention on the part of a creator. It is not within the scope of this paper to argue with such views. Rather, I aim to show that my view has the benefit of simplicity and believability over one like Lenson's.

My view is that Lenson has it right when he mentions monasticism and funeral directors, and even mourning. However, the 'smacking' of monasticism and funeral directors is not symbolic of anything more, and the mourning is not literal mourning for lost innocence. Rather, to say that the style smacks of monasticism and funeral directors is just to say that it shares with them the macabre atmosphere. The mourning is merely performative, recreating a vision of literal mourning of the dead. Goths are truly dressed for a funeral, but not for any symbolic funeral of their innocence. They pale their skin because it is corpse-like, conjuring up the macabre by looking like the dead themselves. It need not be an alabaster white symbol of innocence, especially because not only white people may perfectly embody the Goth style. It is, very simply, the use of make-up to recreate the pallor mortis of a corpse.

All this to say that the atmosphere is the point, the end-all of Goth norms. We need not subscribe to hard-to-believe semiotic explanations of the style, or embroil ourselves in questions of how a subculture symbolizes such themes as angst, despair, and lost innocence. There is no need for intentionalist or anti-intentionalist questions to be answered at all.

As for our two phenomena, they can be understood as two sides of the same coin. Contemporary society is dealing with the erasure of a once-commonplace atmosphere deeply connected to the ritualization of bereavement, the everyday aesthetic acknowledgement and processing of our own and others' mortality. Those drawn to this missing piece of the spectrum of human experience devote their aesthetic lives to this 'affective power of feeling' that has gone missing from mainstream culture. Given the affective and perceptual importance of atmospheres according to Böhme, there need be no belief or world-view that ties the subculture's members together in opposition to the mainstream or its accepted ideologies. The atmosphere is more than enough to establish the subcultural identity.

On the other side, mainstream culture cultivates a revulsion toward that aesthetic acknowledgement of death. Goth norms are exclusively aesthetic norms, having only to do with fashion, make up, music, and dance. One might then be surprised, if one subscribes to the idea that the aesthetic is shallow or merely symbolic, to discover that reactions to Goths in public are extremely hostile, sometimes fatally so. In 2007, Sophie Lancaster and her boyfriend Robert Maltby were brutally attacked in a park in Lancashire for being Goth.<sup>30</sup> Sophie later died from her injuries. Those who are or have been Goth will have their own stories of being shouted at, followed, berated and harassed by strangers in public for looking the way they do. Lenson says about Goths that "these decontextualized artworks are not even perceived as art, but only as intrusions. This is why mall walkers who could just as well ignore a group of goths may be offended by them. Aesthetics without consent feel like an invasion."<sup>31</sup> Replace 'decontextualized artwork' with 'atmosphere,' and I think he's right on the money. An atmosphere is a mood, a feeling, that assails us with or without our permission any time we come into the sphere of the perceptible presence of the object that radiates it. One cannot simply walk past a group of Goths without *feeling* the macabre. It is a visceral, affective thing. It need not remind us or make us think about or contemplate death or mortality to be so offensive. It is being assailed by the feeling of macabre – an atmosphere considered so inappropriate and distasteful by mainstream society – that creates such violent reactions.

Thus, atmospheres are enough to explain the intense identification of Goths with their subcultural style as well as the mainstream's seemingly disproportionately negative responses without requiring that we subscribe to any unlikely semiotic explanations. Furthermore, iden-

tifying and prioritizing the macabre atmosphere as the center of Goth leaves us with no uncomfortable questions regarding how a subculture comes to symbolize themes or critique society, or indeed what negation and angst have to do with monasticism and funeral directors.

## 8. Objections and Replies

One might object that Gothic style and its associated macabre atmosphere existed not only long before the 1970s, but simultaneously with death rituals the loss of which I'm suggesting is responsible for the rise of Goth. Arguably, the Gothic architecture of the Middle Ages and its revival in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century creates the appropriate kind of macabre atmosphere. The first recognized Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, was published in 1764 and, as much as fifty years earlier, macabre works of literature in the so-called Graveyard School contained much of the imagery that influenced the later Gothic tradition.<sup>32</sup> Styles such as Southern Gothic, popular during the de-aestheticization of death culture but prior to the 1970s, is surely a continuation of this. Why mark out the rise of Gothic music as something special, rather than yet another continuation of the same style that has existed before, during, and after the de-aestheticization of death culture?

This objection necessitates a couple important clarifications. First, there is a distinction between the everyday aesthetics of mainstream culture *in which all members of the given culture inevitably participate*, and works of art that may be enjoyed by some members of the mainstream. Second, there is an asymmetry between being a 'member' of mainstream culture and being a member of a subculture. Even members of subcultures are still meaningfully members of the culture as a whole. A Goth is at once an abnormal person in the wider culture (in the sense of breaking the mainstream aesthetic norms) and a normal Goth. However, a person who follows the mainstream aesthetic norms is not then an abnormal Goth; they are not a Goth of any sort.

Given that, we should recognize that it is the *subculture* that I take to be the point of interest. That the subculture arose with a new Gothic style of music is certainly not a coincidence, but the reason for the association is not that the subculture and the musical style, or even its fans and creators, are identical. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a subculture is "[a] cultural group within a larger culture, often having beliefs or interest at variance with those of the larger culture."<sup>33</sup> However, this basic definition needs tweaking. Merely sharing Gothic interests is not sufficient to be a Goth; certainly listening to Gothic music is neither sufficient nor any longer necessary to be a Goth.<sup>34</sup> As Hodkinson notes, belonging to the subculture involves adherence to a sufficient number of stylistic norms. All fans of Gothic music are not Goths, and not all Goths listen to traditional Gothic music.

Thus, it is not the arrival of Gothic rock music that I am treating as somehow special in the history of Gothic style or the macabre atmosphere it creates. It is the formation of an aesthetic subculture dedicated to creating the macabre atmosphere, the members of which identify so strongly and devote themselves so entirely to the macabre. The subculture is precisely what is new. Thus, there is nothing troubling about the existence of artworks that aimed to create a macabre atmosphere before its expulsion from everyday death aesthetics. These works are not sub-cultural artifacts, nor are they everyday activities as death rituals are. At some point, the macabre ceased to be a normal, routine, and ritualized part of a death culture in which every member of the larger culture participated. This is a significant change in the aesthetic culture, and one that has notable consequences (both in the ‘pornography of death’ and in the rise of the Goth subculture). Its continuation in art works does not replace the everydayness it once enjoyed.

## 9. Conclusion

A remarkable feature of the Goth subculture is its longevity and spread across the world. Though you will find fewer Goth clubs today than in the 80s and 90s, there’s a substantial Goth presence on every social media platform, particularly visual platforms such as Instagram and Youtube. Goth remains an important identity, both for so-called elder goths and for younger generations. Its survival through the decades signals the importance of the aesthetic to social life, as the Goth outcry against the de-aestheticization of death culture has continued for 40 years. If we insist on depriving society of death’s ‘parade and publicity,’ as Gorer says, then we will have Goths to bombard us with the atmosphere that we futilely try to abolish. Perhaps this is indicative of the great importance of ritualized aesthetic practices for our social and psychological well-being, and that the denial of our need to aesthetically acknowledge events as jarring and interruptive as death will be met with aesthetic resistance. By explicitly acknowledging the affective power and imposing spatial presence of atmospheres, Böhme’s new aesthetics is uniquely capable of accounting for the intensity of our aesthetic need.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my anonymous referee for very valuable comments on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud, (London: Routledge, 2017), Kindle edition, 25.

<sup>3</sup> For a classic discussion on this see Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *The Philosophical Review* 68, no. 4 (1959): 421-50. doi:10.2307/2182490.

<sup>4</sup> Böhme, *Atmospheres*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

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<sup>8</sup> Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Leddy, "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: 'Neat,' 'Messy,' 'Clean,' 'Dirty,'" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53, no. 3 (1995): 259. doi:10.2307/431351.

<sup>10</sup> See for example Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, (Peterborough, London and Moorebank: Broadview Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Böhme, *Atmospheres*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Melchionne, "The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 11 (2013),

[https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=663#FN3\\_link](https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=663#FN3_link)

<sup>13</sup> Ossi Naukkarinen, "Everyday Aesthetics and Everyday Behavior," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 15 (2017),

<https://contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=802#FN2>

<sup>14</sup> It's worth noting that, in turning to the 'aesthetic' in 'everyday aesthetics,' Naukkarinen draws our attention to four features that differentiate aesthetic approaches (in his case, to another's behavior) from other types of approaches, and each appear to be captured by Böhme's aesthetics of atmospheres. The first is that the aesthetic approach is sense-based: we perceive the aesthetic qualities of something with our senses and we do so immediately without need for inference. Atmospheres are both the primary and the first object of perception according to Böhme; we perceive them first and foremost, in part due to their spatiality. There is no inference involved, because the aesthetic qualities are literally created by and radiated out from the ekstases. Naukkarinen's second observation is that the aesthetic approach tends to be emotionally charged, in the sense that there is something it feels like to perceive aesthetic qualities: awesome, cosy, awkward, and so forth. Atmospheres, as mentioned, are spatial bearers of moods and essentially affective. Third, we make use of a particular terminology when we approach things aesthetically. In Böhme's framework, these aesthetic terms refer to the character of atmospheres, and are thus the words we will use when we're perceiving and attending to the atmosphere. Finally, Naukkarinen observes that explicit rules are often not necessary, and that we employ aesthetic terms after learning from examples. Böhme makes a similar point, more explicitly about aesthetic creation rather than appreciation, that aesthetic workers understand how to manipulate ekstases to create certain atmospheres *implicitly* rather than by following any explicit rules; they learn the principles implicitly through their aesthetic work rather than the other way around. This convergence of thought goes to show, I think, that Böhme's targets of inquiry do overlap with the broader, developing field of everyday aesthetics.

<sup>15</sup> Nigel Llewellyn, *The Art of Death*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 19.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>18</sup> ©Memorials of Distinction.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Walter, "Modern Death: Taboo or Not Taboo?" *Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1991): 294.

<sup>20</sup> Geoffrey Gorer, "The Pornography of Death," *Encounter* 5, (1955): 52.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Hodkinson, *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*, (Oxford, Berg, 2002), 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 62.

<sup>24</sup> Tricia Henry Young Young, "Dancing on Bela Lugosi's Grave: The Politics and Aesthetics of Gothic Club Dancing," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 17, no. 1 (1999): 75.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>26</sup> I'm referring here to views in which historical, intellectual, and other types of properties count as genuinely aesthetic because they contribute to the correct evaluation of art works. However, given that we are working under Böhme's aesthetics, I shall use the term 'aesthetic' to refer to atmospheres and their character. Hence, 'macabre' is genuinely aesthetic under this picture while things like 'novel' or 'complex' are not. Under a Böhmean framework, there is no particular reason to suppose that art works are evaluated only aesthetically and that, therefore, any contributing factor in its evaluation is itself aes-

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thetic. For recent discussions on the distinction between genuinely aesthetic value and artistic value, see Louise Hanson's "The Reality of (Non-aesthetic) Artistic Value," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 63, no. 252 (2013): 492-508 and "Artistic Value is Attributive Goodness," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 75, no. 4 (2017): 415-427.

<sup>27</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, (London: Routledge, 1979).

<sup>28</sup> Lenson, "The Aesthetic Apostasy," in *Goth: Undead Subculture*, ed. Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Michael Bibby, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), Kindle edition, location 7323.

<sup>29</sup> Hodkinson, *Goth*, 62.

<sup>30</sup> Charlotte Bradshaw, "Sophie 'murdered for looking like a goth,'" *The Lancashire Telegraph*, March 12, 2008, [http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/2115019.Sophie\\_\\_murdered\\_for\\_looking\\_like\\_a\\_goth\\_/](http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/2115019.Sophie__murdered_for_looking_like_a_goth_/)

<sup>31</sup> Lenson, "Aesthetic Aspostasy," loc 7347.

<sup>32</sup> Jack G. Voller, *The Graveyard School: An Anthology*, ed. Jack G. Voller, (Richmond: Valancourt Books, 2015), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 'Macabre,' accessed May 24, 2018; <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/subculture>

<sup>34</sup> It seems true, however, that listening to Gothic music was necessary to be considered a Goth in the subculture's infancy.