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The Inherent Queer and Political Nature of
Gothic Art and Media

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The Inherent Queer and Political Nature of Gothic Art and Media

Fine Art BA (Hons) Dissertation

Standard Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to show that the Gothic as a genre, primarily through art and media is inherently a queer and political genre. It discusses art as a very broad term, covering paintings, literature, music, fashion and film, as well as discussing subculture.

This analysis has been done by looking at books and thesis' by researchers into different aspects of the Gothic such as Catherine Spooner, John Robb, Paul Hodgkinson and Charles Mueller.

This work begins in Chapter 1 by discussing the start of the Gothic, from the ancient Germanic tribes, working its way into a discussion of the start of Gothic art as a genre, covering *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1480-1505). Then, in Chapter 2 it moves into discussing another Gothic revival, that of Gothic literature in the 18th/19th century and its inherent queer underlining. It analyses *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and *Dracula* (1897), discussing queerness and *Nosferatu* (1922) before moving onto German expressionism and queerness in Weimar Germany. In Chapter 3, contemporary Goth subculture is analysed in its relation to queerness before discussing what the contemporary Gothic and contemporary Gothic is, defining it before discussing the installation 'Gone, yet still' (2005) by Terence Koh.

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Appendix

1. Positionality Statement

I am a white, gay, transmasculine person who self-identifies as a Goth and is a participant of the Goth subculture. When queer is used to describe LGBTQ+ people in this dissertation, it isn't being used in the homophobic manner, it is being used in its 21st century definition where the word has been generally reclaimed by the community and is commonly used to describe any LGBTQ+ person generally, as I personally reclaim this word and use it to describe myself. However, I am aware many people still aren't comfortable with that word being used.

A lot of the discussion in this dissertation is done through the lens of masculinity to androgyny when it comes to queerness, so a lot of the focus is on gay male relationships and non-feminine gender expression, due to not feeling as if I could properly add to the discussion on feminine gender expression and lesbian or sapphic relationships, due to my identity.

The topic of the Gothic is a rather large one, so only a few points of history have been chosen to be covered in this dissertation.

Introduction

This dissertation examines the link between the Gothic and queerness. Looking at the Gothic as a whole through art, music, fashion, film, literature and subculture, this dissertation will argue how the Gothic as a genre is inherently a queer and political genre. This will be done through looking at texts by researchers who work in the fields of Goth and Gothic research, such as music researchers and historians, art historians, and Goth journalists. A lot of the analysis has been done through the books, *The Art of Darkness* by John Robb, and *Contemporary Gothic* by Catherine Spooner. As well as *The Music of the Goth Subculture: Postmodernism and Aesthetics* by Charles Mueller. *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* by Paul Hodkinson is another that has been looked at for this dissertation.

Though not referenced in this dissertation, *Gothic: Transmutations of Horror in Late Twentieth Century Art* edited by Christoph Grunenberg was read as initial research going into this dissertation.

This analysis of the Gothic will begin in Chapter 1 with looking at the history of the terms ‘Goth’ and ‘Gothic’, going up until the 18th century before looking at the beginnings of Gothic art. It covers Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and how topics of morality are political and how this piece can be read through the contemporary lens.

The second chapter will then cover the Gothic from the late 18th century up until the 1930s. This chapter will focus on literature and film and queerness. It starts with covering the start of Gothic literature, discussing queer Gothic novels from this time, before moving onto a discussion on vampires and how they are inherently queer beings, before finally ending on German Expressionist film and queerness in Weimar Germany.

Finally, the third chapter will cover the beginnings of the Goth movement/scene in the late 1970s/early 1980s, talking about what makes the Goth movement/scene a subculture and the music and fashion in it and how queer people are drawn to it. It then moves on to discuss what the contemporary Gothic is and what contemporary Gothic art is specifically, mostly discussing artist Terence Koh while doing this.

Chapter 1 – Behind the Gothic

1. What is the Gothic? How it Began and Developed Through the Ages

‘Gothic’ is a word of many meanings which have changed over the course of history. These definitions often have something to do with something barbaric, violent or macabre.

One of the dictionary definitions of ‘Gothic’ in *The Oxford English Dictionary* is ‘Barbarous, rude, uncouth, unpolished, in bad taste. Of temper: Savage’ (Oxford University Press, 2023) with this definition having been used since 1695. An example of the word being used in this context is, ‘All that has nothing of the Ancient gust, is call'd a barbarous or Gothique manner.’ (Dryden, 1695) This use of both ‘barbarous’ and Gothic/’Gothique’ in this shows that ‘Gothic’ is a word deemed to have a similar definition. From this we can see that the Gothic is seen as something negative, as ‘uncouth’ meaning ‘lacking in good manners, refinement, or grace’ according to *Collins English Dictionary* (Collins Dictionary, 2025) which is an inherently bad thing to be described as.

Another one of these definitions in *The Oxford English Dictionary* for ‘Gothic’ is ‘Of or designating a genre of fiction characterised by suspenseful, sensational plots involving supernatural or macabre elements and often (esp. in early use) having medieval theme or setting’ (Oxford University Press, 2008). This definition has been used since 1825. ‘The shapes and conceptions of Gothic fiction—the sheeted ghost gliding from the churchyard...—the groan mingling with the wind that sweeps through the aisles of a ruined chapel’ (Hillard, 1853) is an example of this definition used in context, showcasing what the author classes as being seen as Gothic within Gothic fiction.

‘Of, pertaining to, or concerned with the Goths or their language’ (Oxford University Press, 2023) is another of the definitions of ‘Gothic’ in *The Oxford English Dictionary* being used since 1611. ‘Cassiodorus gratified the inclination of the conquerors in a Gothic history’ (Gibbon, 1776-1788) is an example of it being used in context.

The Goths are an ancient Germanic tribe who were known for being barbaric and overturning the Roman Empire through brute force in the 5th century (Spooner, 2006). Led by Alaric, the Visigoth army invaded Rome and unleashed ‘unbridled horror’ upon the city on August 24th

410AD (Robb, 2023). By the end of the 5th century, the Roman Empire in the West was abolished.

Using these few, of many, definitions of the Gothic, we can see for definite that Gothic is deemed to be something that is dark and associated with violence, whether this be in relation to history or as a part of the genre that has developed over the years.

Now, since the time of the original Goths, the term ‘Gothic’ has been associated with the barbaric. Although, due to many Gothic revivals, people don’t tend to think of the ancient Germanic tribe when Gothic is mentioned (Spooner, 2006). According to Fischer (2019), the term ‘Gothic’ first being coined to describe ‘a barbaric aesthetic’ was in the 16th century by Giorgio Vasari. ‘Painter, architect, and historian Giorgio Vasari popularised the term Gothic as a pejorative term to describe a grotesque or barbaric aesthetic, reminiscent of the destruction of Roman buildings during the Gothic sacking of Rome.’ However, according to Robb (2023), the first use of ‘Gothic’ being used in this manner, to describe architecture, was by Raphael to Pope Leo X. It is also used in the 16th century, where he claimed the pointed arches of churches were reminiscent of ‘primitive huts’ of the Goths. (Robb, 2023)

2. The Start of Gothic Art

The Gothic art revival started in the 1100s, emerging from the Romanesque period in France (Kaegi, 2025). Although, as stated before, the term ‘Gothic’ wasn’t coined for this period of art history until the 16th century. The Gothic art era can be split into different styles and categories, these being: Early Gothic style (1144-1200), Late or High Gothic style (1200-1375), Rayonnant style (1240-1350), and Flamboyant style (1350-1550). Although these are typically the main ones, there are other style and categories within this Gothic revival such as the International Gothic style and The Sienese School of Painting (Meyer, 2021). The overall artistic movement was mostly made up of architecture, sculpture and paintings. Within this art it was characterised by large and pointed structures and intricate stained-glass pieces, detailed ornamentation displaying biblical and historical scenes, expressiveness and symbolism and motifs, which display items of both spiritual and cultural nature (Clairmonte, 2025).

The Early Gothic style featured work such as the Basilica of Saint-Denis. This church was led for rebuilding by Abbot Sugar, who felt rebuilding in a Gothic style would ‘lift up the soul to God’. Sugar also added large stained-glass windows to let in light, as he believed in the work

of Pseudo-Dionysius the 5th-6th century philosopher who believed that any light on Earth was God's divine light. This church soon became a basis for Gothic architecture in Europe (The Art Story, 2018).

Moving into the Late or High Gothic style, the intricate stained-glass windows continued. During this period and International Gothic style period, was when Gothic painting primarily kicked off, moving on from architecture and sculpture. Artists such as Stefan Lochner (1410-1451) who was a German painter worked in this Gothic period (Britannica, 2024). He is known mostly for his 'highly mystical religious paintings'. As an artist he was very inspired by Netherlandish art, taking the naturalism found in that art and mixing it with the mysticism found in art in Cologne where he studied (Wallraf Richartz Museum, 2025). His work was seen as soft in style and to the style of International Gothic and High Gothic art.

Many artists in that early Netherlandish art period which Lochner was heavily inspired by worked within styles which could be classed as 'Gothic', such as Jan van Steffeswert, Hieronymus Bosch, and Rogier van der Weyden. However, in this dissertation, I will only expand further into the work of Hieronymus Bosch.

2.1 Hieronymus Bosch

Hieronymus Bosch (1460-1518) is a Dutch painter who gave himself that name after the town of 's-Hertogenbosch. Bosch was a painter who was renowned for his works in the 'Dark Ages', during the transition from the Gothic era to the Renaissance era. (Lipchenko, 2025) His paintings likely influenced by trauma in his youth, he tended to use the theme of 'Hell' within several of his artworks. Being a member of a religious group, 'The Brotherhood of Our Lady' (Labeledzki, 2025), and being one who is said to 'revel' in the darkness of life (Gurney, 2020), it's no surprise that he took the idea of Hell into his works. Bosch, while normally sticking to traditional biblical and conventional themes and imagery in his work, was bolder in his approach. Taking inspiration from 'alchemy, magic, witchcraft, astrology, and mysticism', exploring the darker side of the human psyche to visualise possible torments which would await in the next life (Welford, 2023). Bosch through our contemporary lens would now be classed as a moralist, as his paintings frequently question human morality and moral frailty, drawing inspiration from 14th century moralistic writings. While adhering to the common themes of art

at this time, his work was still classed as outside of the ‘norm’ due to his adventurous takes on these biblical themes and stories. This was very apparent in his triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*.

The Garden of Earthly Delights is one of Bosch’s more famous pieces. It is a triptych featuring the *Garden of Eden* on the left, the *Garden of Earthly Delights* in the centre and *Hell* on the right (Mittman, 2019).



Fig 1.1 *Garden of Earthly Delights* Triptych – Hieronymus Bosch 1480-1505



Fig 1.2 *Hell* – Hieronymus Bosch 1480-1505

For the sake of this dissertation, I will be mostly focusing on the piece *Hell* and only touching on *Garden of Eden* and *Garden of Earthly Delights*. This triptych shares a story, from the globe on the outside of the left and right panels, showing the third day of creation, onto Adam and Eve meeting in the *Garden of Eden* panel on the left, onto the *Garden of Earthly Delights* in the centre, showcasing a world where God is no longer present and where humans take part in sin. Finally, it moves onto the right panel *Hell*, displaying the aftermath and consequences of the centre panel, of partaking in sin (The Culturist, 2025).

The scene laid out in *Hell* is a quite industrial and man-made scene, almost devoid of organic materials compared to the other two panels. The majority of objects featured were those made by man, such as buildings, boats, mechanical devices and instruments (The Culturist, 2025). These things being made by man can show that all this suffering and horror is man's own fault, that we humans created this hell for ourselves.

The large instruments featured being deviant and unnatural in this place could be to show that these man-made inventions and creations are turning their backs on us, that creating them added to our own sin and suffering in the end.

Reading this piece through a contemporary lens, this painting could now act as a commentary as to how we humans are ruining everything for ourselves through these manmade contraptions, especially through capitalism and overconsumption and how we are destroying our own planet and creating a hellscape slowly, depriving our world of resources. Overconsumption and production of cheap items ready to buy means more people are made to work in labour, in sweatshops, facing their own kind of torture on a daily basis, as if they are in Hell, all while the scraps get thrown into landfills and are polluting the world. The cheap labour and long hours are a major issue in themselves, not just the waste from fast fashion. Workers working for up to sixteen hours a day, employers physically abusing their workers, and suppressing employee's rights are a major political issue (Sustainability Institute, 2021).

In recent years with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) especially, the Earth's water sources have been especially polluted due to how much water is needed to cool down these super computers necessary for running this software. As of December 2025, it is said that one ChatGPT question uses about 0.000085 gallons of water, but it's theorised by Morgan Stanley that by 2028, AI data centres will use around one trillion litres of water per year (Tabibi, 2025).

This shows that these manmade inventions and creations are creating our own Hell, where it will be in our afterlives or in our current life right now.

This painting could also be said to be slightly reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*, the painting appearing and the novel both featuring a sort of 'Danse Macabre' (Ferro, 2015).

'The Danse Macabre' is believed to have emerged at the earliest in 1312, being featured in many types of art in broad terms since then. 'The Danse Macabre' is commonly represented by a ring of skeletons dancing in a circle, representing how all will eventually die, regardless of who you were in life, and how it is inevitable (Renauld, 2021).

Both Bosch and Dante's work reflect on human life and sin and what would come after. Although both use elements of 'The Danse Macabre', neither feature imagery of skeletons dancing, instead discussing those who are already dead, in Hell being kept in a torturous dance eternally (Ferro, 2015).

Both also showcase a Hell where each sinner faces a punishment fit for their sin. (Ferro, 2015) Dante used his nine rings of Hell in *Inferno* (1321) his *Divine Comedy* series, each ring for specific sins. Bosch featured people in Hell being tortured based on the sins they committed, such as someone who committed the sin of gluttony being forced to vomit, or someone who had the sin of vanity being forced to look at themselves while their body is abused and touched by demonic hands (The Culturist, 2025).

The painting *Hell* itself looks to have layers. The top layer features silhouettes of man-made buildings, some of which appear to be burning. Under that there is a scene of battle, an army charging into a gate on horse-back and with flags raised, showcasing manmade violence and destruction. Then under that layer, there are layers of vaguely organic creatures, but they're warped, such as birdlike and rabbit-like creatures who are torturing humans. Coming back to the contemporary perspective of this piece, this can be seen as even the natural world and creatures turning their back on humanity due to the harm we have caused, taking their revenge. Further down in the lower layers, we finally come to the man-made objects such as lutes and harps being used to torture the humans, turning their backs on their creators.

Overall, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych by Bosch is an example of how early Gothic art was political, in both the older lens, due to its commentary on sin and human morality, controlling what is seen as morally right and wrong, and in the contemporary lens.

Chapter 2 – Queerness in the Gothic

1. Queer 18th/19th Century Literature

In the late 18th century, another Gothic revival was formed, mostly in the form of literature. It took the darker meanings and aesthetics attributed to the word Gothic in the 16th century and used them to fuel literature about romance and horror. This would become a genre of its own and go on to be a main inspiration for film down the line (Robb, 2023).

The first novel that would fall under the ‘Gothic’ genre in the English language was *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole. Published in 1764, it is a novel rooted in romance and emotion (Florida Centre for Instructional Technology, 2025). This novel takes supernatural and occult components from tales of 12th and 13th century romances and twists them with elements from 18th century fiction. This novel set the basis for elements in a lot of Gothic fiction from then on, with mysterious and moody characters, and supernatural elements (Mambrol, 2025).

Following this novel, narratives of sexuality in the Gothic became prevalent, especially homosexuality (Raynor Memorial Libraries, 2009). At the time of Gothic literature becoming more prevalent, more anti-homosexual legislations was being produced.

Author Oscar Wilde was convicted and imprisoned due to his homosexuality after his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) was published. The first edition of Wilde’s novel was met with extreme controversy due to its homoerotic theming, eventually having to be censored for publication due to this (White, 2023). Despite this, following its publication, Wilde stated there was nothing sexual about the novel.

‘Homoerotic’ is defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as, ‘Of a person: having sexual or romantic attraction to, or engaging in sexual activity with, people of one’s own sex; homosexual. Also (...) relating to, involving or characterised by same-sex attraction or sexual activity’ (Oxford University Press, 2023).

Although the novel doesn’t explicitly showcase any acts of homosexuality, it has underlying homosexual and homoerotic theming (Symposium Journal, 2020).

The relationship between Dorian Gray and Basil with Basil’s infatuation with Dorian is prevalent from the beginning.

We were quite close, almost touching. Our eyes met again. (...) Dorian, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. (...) I was only happy when I was with you (...) Weeks and weeks went on, and I grew more and more absorbed in you. (Wilde, 1891)

This shows that Basil has feelings towards Dorian, yearning for him but that yearning not being reciprocated. It also shows elements of dominant and submissive roles. (Symposium Journal, 2020) “As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me.” (Wilde, 1891) BDSM, who’s acronym can be broken down as ‘bondage and discipline’, ‘dominance and submission’, and ‘sadism and masochism’, is highly connected to the LGBTQ+ community due to its non-mainstream sexual practices (StudyCorgi, 2024).

The novel portrays Dorian as a dominating presence, someone who is hedonistic and handsome and knows it. Being manipulated by Lord Henry Wotton, he becomes obsessed with his beauty and obsessed with staying young. Due to the supernatural elements of the painting Basil paints for Dorian, he manages to stay young. However, the painting then displays his vanity and age, growing twisted as his morals degrade, eventually leading Dorian to murder Basil, then destroy the painting of himself, which results in his own death (Zakes, 2017).

Other Gothic fiction of this period featuring a homosexual subtext, includes *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson (1886). This novella deals with themes of repression in Victorian society due to the changes happening in this era and can specifically be read as repression of homosexual urges and feelings (Laubender, 2009). It explores fears surrounding sexuality and seduction, progress in medicine and psychology, and traditional class roles. In this novella, Hyde as a character can be seen to represent this homosexuality which is repressed. He’s portrayed as being violent and animalistic, as a side of Jekyll he doesn’t want to show to the world. Although being portrayed as unnatural, this animalism he’s described with makes him more natural, showing this homosexuality is in fact natural (Laubender, 2009). Stevenson may have not intentionally written this novella to be ‘queer-coded’ due to the fact one couldn’t really reference homosexuality in literature at this time due to laws, but from a contemporary lens, this novella is easily read with underlying homosexuality (Essay Sauce, 2021) .

2. Vampires and Queerness

Vampires are a common device used in Gothic Horror literature. The vampire in mythology and folklore is a fanged creature which preys upon the blood of humans. Beings such as the vampire are present in folklore in various cultures, mostly in Europe. They're undead humanoid creatures, who are either beautiful or disgusting in appearance depending on folklore. In older tales, they're said to bring plague where they go (Eldridge, 2019).

The most popular, but not the first, Gothic vampire novel, is *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker. This novel and the Sapphic novel *Carmilla* (1872) by Sheridan Le Fanu were both inspired by the first vampire novel, *The Vampyre* (1819) by John William Polidori. These established vampires were charismatic and started to blur the lines between a victim and a possible partner. *Dracula* however popularised the concept of vampires draining their victims by their neck. This act can be seen as quite a sexual act for one to do (Nhung Le, 2023).

Vampires as a creature can be argued to be an inherently 'queer' creature. Due to the popularised concept of vampires biting one's neck regardless of gender, this can be seen as queer. Another manner in which they can be seen as queer is through a vampire's relationship to society. Vampires don't have a regular relationship with society, commonly depicted as unable to go out in sunlight or eat human food, they are automatically othered for who they are. This sense of otherness is also commonly felt by LGBTQ+ people in society (Nhung Le, 2023).

In *Dracula*, themes of sexuality and lust are present throughout, whether queer or heterosexual. Dracula himself as an unmarried man with few relationships and a secretive life, only being his true self in the darkness, can easily be read as queer (Marshal, 2023).

In the novel, Jonathan Harker clearly works as a sort of love interest for Dracula, with Dracula claiming Harker as his after Harker enters the castle and is approached by the three vampire sisters/brides of Dracula (Marshal, 2023). "How dare you touch him, any of you? (...) This man belongs to me!" (Stoker, 1897).

Harker's subverted gender role of him being kept captive, almost in place of the 'damsel in distress' helps to add to this queer narrative, as normally it is a female who is in this kidnapped role, at the mercy of her kidnapper. This comes back to the dominant and submissive roles discussed earlier in this dissertation with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, clearly a common element of a 'queer-coded' relationship in literature (Gogo, 2023).

Nosferatu (1922) was a film directly inspired by *Dracula*, directed by F.W. Murnau. This film was an unauthorised retelling of 'Dracula' but became one of the most well-known and enjoyed works of the German Expressionist film era (Colangelo, 2022). The film covers themes of queer and female desire, as well as fears of intrusion from other countries. Murnau decided to use this film as a vehicle to explore sexual and social anxieties in Germany at the time, due to the Weimar Republic. The film follows married couple Hutter and Ellen. Hutter leaves to go to Transylvania to sell a house to Count Orlok, the Nosferatu. From Hutter and Orlok's first interaction, there is immediately tension between the two, clear coding for homosexual desire, through Orlok's growing hunger for Hutter. After seeing a photo of Ellen however, Orlok now desires Ellen.

Throughout Hutter's time with Orlok, there are moments that can be seen as homoerotic, such as Orlok sucking on Hutter's finger after he cuts it. Once again, Hutter, who is meant to represent Harker, is almost a damsel in distress in Orlok's castle, getting weaker when around Orlok (due to Orlok drinking from him in his sleep) (Colangelo, 2022).

Count Orlok himself can represent 'the queer Jew', someone during this time of history who looked down upon in the Weimar Republic due to Germany's political sphere getting more fascist with Hitler's rise to power.

3. 1920-30s German Expressionist Film and Queerness in Weimer Germany

There was increased knowledge about homosexuality and queerness within German society at this time due to the expansion of German Expressionist film in Weimar Germany, specifically queerness portrayed in these films, deliberately or through coding, which was later picked up upon (Zimmer, 2014). Director of Nosferatu, Murnau, was rumoured himself to be homosexual, while in a country where homosexuality was still controversial and criminalised. In his film, he likely used common expressionist techniques regarding chiaroscuro lighting and shadows to help express this shadowed sexuality and sexual repression, especially when Count Orlok was on screen (Zimmer, 2014).

The film *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), or *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in English, is easily the most well-known and most inspirational film that came from the German Expressionist film period. Directed by Robert Wiene, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* is what

could be classed as the first true horror film. This film was a major inspiration in terms of lighting and style. The film follows a student, Francis, whose friend, Alan, is murdered by somnambulist Cesare who is hypnotised by Dr. Caligari (Barrett, 2020).

The film in terms of its overall look is very gothic and dark. Its chiaroscuro world made up of odd sharp angles helps to give it the feeling of an expressionist painting almost, the sharp angles, geometric designs and dark set sparking unease, helping to class the film as a horror film. The set design can also help to represent the psychological madness in the characters in the film's mind, especially as at the end of the film it is revealed that they are all in a mental asylum that Dr. Caligari is actually the director of (Zimmer, 2014).



Fig 2.1 *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* – Robert Wiene 1920

The film has strong political, anti-authoritarian messages. It also has queer coding, due to queerness automatically being anti-authoritarian and against the 'norm'. Cesare's appearance is dark and overall androgynous, with his fluid and almost feminine movements helping to portray a sense of queerness in this film. He embodies a sort of allure by being this androgynous figure who sneaks around in the night, representing anxieties in Weimar Germany. (McKinnon, 2024) He represents social deviance, killing the heterosexual unit which is Alan and kidnapping the woman, Jane, who Francis and Alan both loved. He splits up heterosexual 'traditional' relationships, being almost seen as this queer threat upon them, due to being this androgynous

gothic figure. Cesare as a character also wears more dramatic and what would now be seen as ‘Goth’ makeup, than the other male characters, adding to this androgyny which would be come very relevant within the Goth subculture in the 1980s.



Fig 2.2 *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* – Robert Wiene 1920

In Germany, before Hitler fully rose to power, queerness and the understanding of LGBTQ+ individuals was starting to rise. The Institute of Sex Research, founded by Magnus Hirschfeld, was opened in 1919, although Hirschfeld had campaigned for the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals since 1897. It offered counselling, sex education, sex reassignment surgeries, with transgender people on staff in the institute and offering free contraception and help to those who didn't have as much money (Hope, 2022).

Although still met with a lot of opposition, Berlin's Institute of Sex Research and Berlin's nightlife was still flourishing. Berlin had many nightclubs marketed towards LGBTQ+ individuals such as Ther Eldorado. This club was a safe haven for queer people, especially transgender people (Hope, 2022). Another club during this time was Damenclub Violetta, founded by Lotte Hahm in 1926, was one of the largest lesbian clubs in Berlin (Friedrich Kreuzberg Museum, 2023).

Although there were strong networks and decent resources for LGBTQ+ people at this time, sexual contact between two men was still illegal in Germany. LGBTQ+ people at the time of the Weimar Republic didn't tend to use the words 'queer' or 'homosexual', instead using 'Urning' for males, and 'Urninde' for females (Friedrich Kreuzberg Museum, 2023).

Urnig Balls were balls catered towards the queer population, emerging around 1900, they were evenings where queer people could express themselves how they wished, playing with their gender expression and identity. They were banned for a period of time before making their resurrection in the 1920s. However, these balls were watched over by the police force however, to try and keep peace at these events (Friedrich Kreuzberg Museum, 2023).

Overall, Expressionist film at the time played a major role in sharing these queer commentaries to a wider audience, expressing frustration over the anxieties of the time with the rise of fascism.

Chapter 3 – 20th/21st Century Gothic

1. Start of the Goth Scene

The late 1970's saw beginning of a new 'Gothic Revival'. This was the 'Goth' scene/subculture. Derived from the punk scene/movement which began around early 1970's, the Goth scene took the elements of 'sex, style and subversion and twisted them with the sex and death dance to create a new hybrid that would end up dwarfing punk in popularity' (Robb, 2023).

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, subculture is:

An identifiable subgroup within a society or larger group of people, esp. one characterised by beliefs or interests at variance with those of the larger group; the distinctive ideas, practices, or way of life of such a subgroup. (Oxford University press, 2023)

This definition of subculture has been in use since 1914. Knowing this definition, it would be right to classify the Goth scene as a subculture, characterised by beliefs akin to that of punks, being inherently anti-capitalist, leftist and into similar music and fashion.

According to Sarah Thornton, a subculture is classified to be 'underground taste-cultures that have been given a specific label by the media (...) or groups of people that congregate on the basis of a shared taste in music and consumption habits' (Mueller, 2008).

Dr Charles Mueller adds to this opinion based on his own personal experiences in the subculture stating the core of subculture would be a clear philosophy or outlook expressed towards social and societal matters and 'a rejection of mainstream social values' (Mueller, 2008).

Paul Hodkinson however believes he has found a more up-to-date idea of what subculture is and its makeup, these things being: consistent distinctiveness, identity, commitment and autonomy (Hodkinson, 2002).

This all being said, based on these sources, Goth as a subculture is defined by being distinct and different from mainstream society, having identifiable looks, tastes and beliefs, and having a commitment to these strong beliefs in the face of cultural norms. This helps to prove that Goth and the Gothic are inherently political, being built deep into their roots since the beginning.

This has all led to a strong sense of community and understanding within it.

The Goth subculture, in its imagery, style and musical inspirations clearly come from early black and white horror films, many of these being from films of the German Expressionist era, such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Nosferatu*. These films set a base for horror film and the visual aesthetics within (Mueller, 2008).

Horror was seen as ‘degenerate’ media in the UK for a period of history and could mean that if you enjoyed anything associated with horror you were outside of the mainstream already.

Hebdige refers to the styles within the Goth subculture to convey meaning themselves and to subvert the normal, deconstructing the typical and being visible and ‘other’ by wearing these styles. Hebdige calls this ‘aesthetic terrorism’ (Mueller, 2008).

1.1 Goth and Queer Culture

Music that falls under the genre of ‘Goth’ tends to touch on heavier emotions and topics, feeling free to be more in touch with emotions. It has sinister and sombre tones, with lyrics talking about sex and seduction, traumas and mental illness, and social and political troubles (Mueller, 2008). Bands such as Siouxsie and the Banshees sing about domestic abuse and national tragedies like war. Sisters of Mercy as a band creates songs talking about struggles with love and acceptance, and the media.

Goth as a genre typically has a feminine gendering by the media. (Mueller, 2008) Goth lyrics being more in touch with one’s emotions compared to other musical genres is likely the cause for this. Androgyny is also prevalent within the subculture, within bands and artists and the members of the subculture. Artists who ‘gender-bend’ as a part of their performance, such as David Bowie, are a large inspiration for many Goth artists (Mueller, 2008). This is likely one of the reasons why members of the LGBTQ+ community are typically drawn to the Goth subculture, being more likely to be accepted in this subculture due to the androgyny and ‘gender-bending’ aspects. The ambiguous gender expression within the subculture can come back to Judith Butler’s theory of gender being a social construct. One’s sex, gender and gender expression are all different things, as people, regardless of gender, would wear the same

clothes, jewellery and makeup, with what is seen as male and female being vague upon appearances (Hodkinson, 2002).

The fashion within the subculture is often characterised with dyed black hair, backcombed into a 'bats-nest', dramatic dark makeup which accentuates eyes, cheeks and lips, and dark fashion (Hodkinson, 2002). This fashion would be seen from Goths regardless of gender or sex.

Goth going out of its way to be anti-establishment and against the mainstream in terms of music, fashion and politics makes it a subculture that people in the LGBTQ+ community would be drawn to, as being LGBTQ+ is already against what is classed as 'normal' (Mueller, 2008).

2. Contemporary Gothic Art

As stated earlier in this dissertation, there have been many Gothic revivals since the Gothic's beginning. The Gothic in the contemporary era has mostly been seen throughout most types of art such as film, music, fashion and physical art; the type of art you would consider archetypal. Types of contemporary art like performance pieces, paintings, sculpture and more. The Gothic as a genre has infiltrated all types of art one can think of at one time or another throughout history.

According to Spooner:

the gothic lurks in all sorts of unexpected corners. Like a malevolent virus, Gothic narratives have escaped the confines of literature and spread across disciplinary boundaries to infect all kinds of media, from fashion and advertising to the way contemporary events are constructed in mass culture. (Spooner, 2006)

In this contemporary era, the contemporary art that can be deemed as Gothic tends to take inspiration from previous Gothic revivals, from referencing Gothic architecture, to Gothic horror monsters from 18th/19th century literature.

However, some contemporary Gothic artists tend to take more of their meanings and inspirations from ideas and feelings. As with Gothic music, Gothic art is very in tune with emotions, specifically those emotions which are darker and drearier.

As a genre and type of art, it can play on audience expectations, not just reflecting common social anxieties but deliberately creating fear and discomfort, really tapping into the emotions of its viewers (Spooner, 2006).

As the Gothic has had so many revivals throughout history, it can be said it is dependent on these revivals for its survival. This helps to make sense of how differing the contemporary Gothic is and why it has so many different forms throughout art.

Joss McKinley is a good example of an artist who could be described as a Gothic artist. His photography series *Underneath an Abject Window* (2003-2005) and *6 Rue* (2006) especially can be described as Gothic. Taking a highly ‘Victorian edge’ to his work, he infuses his work with ‘a sense of melancholy and the odour of death’ (Gavin, 2008).

His series *Underneath an Abject Window* features a series of five found dead animals and insects, photographed under natural lighting, but having this light in a way that makes it more dramatic gives a chiaroscuro sense to the images.

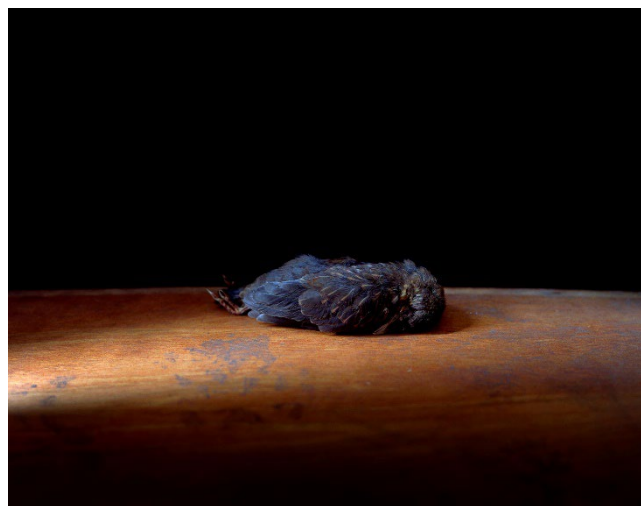


Fig 3.1 *Underneath an Abject Window* – Joss McKinley 2003-2005

McKinley therefore is an example of drawing inspiration more from older Gothic revivals, drawing more from 19th century Gothic sensibilities.

Examples of contemporary artists whose work can be described as Gothic, which I feel take inspirations from other Gothic revivals are Terence Koh, Marnie Weber, and Iris Van Dongen.

For the sake of this dissertation however, I will only go further into artist Terence Koh.

2.1 Terence Koh

Terence Koh, otherwise known as ‘Asianpunkboy’, is a Canadian-Chinese artist born in Beijing in 1977 (Robert Fontaine Gallery, 2015). He currently works and stays in Los Angeles (Koh, 2025). He works in many mediums, including drawing, multi-media sculpture, videos, zines, as well as performance art. As a queer man, Koh’s work involves many queer, punk and pornographic themes (Tate, 2022). His work over the years has evolved into full complex installation and performance pieces, his installations almost being ecosystems in themselves.

As an artist he has been known to use bodily fluids such as blood and semen, whether his own or others. We see this in his piece *These Decades That We Never Sleep, Black Drums*, which is made from a drum kit as well as paint, wax, ‘vegetable matter’, insect parts, those bodily fluids and more. The piece is made to look as if it could move, as if it is a living creature of sorts in a ‘non-organic environment’ according to Gavin (2008).

His pieces are often monochrome and are in more recent years either all white, all gold or all black. He has claimed there is no actual focus on this limited palette, stating, ‘There is no colour in this world. You have to believe that. It is our eyes clouded by inexperience, inexperience in how to understand the fundamentality of the universe that divides colours into colours’ (Koh, 2025)

Koh’s work is often seen to be characterised by its ‘Gothic infused sensitivity’, touching on emotional, morbid topics (Koh, 2025). The limited, monochrome palette that he often uses likely lends itself into this Gothic aesthetic of such.

‘Gone, yet still’ is an exhibition Koh held in the Grafisches Kabinett at the Secession, 07/07/2005-04/09/2005. Many iterations of this installation have been held in galleries, but for the sake of this dissertation, I shall only be covering its time in Secession.

In this installation, Koh apparently had set out to create a space in which he could stay for the rest of his life (Secession, 2025).



Fig 3.2 'Gone, yet still' – Terence Koh 2005, Secession, photos by Matthias Herrmann



Fig 3.3 'Gone, yet still' – Terence Koh 2005, Secession, photos by Matthias Herrmann

The title of this exhibition is from a type of traditional Japanese farewell poem called a 'Jisei' which was often composed by Zen monks and samurai soon before their death (Secession, 2025).

The use of the colour white throughout this installation, from the pieces to the walls and floor acts as a 'harbinger of transcendence'. What is meant by this is that it helps to create a feeling of calm and tranquillity, a sense of being able to go beyond ordinary limitations and rising

above to another state. As this piece is practically a meditation, based upon waiting for death, it makes sense for it to have a sense of tranquillity about it, a calm acceptance of what will eventually come.

Throughout this installation of creating what he would like a forever resting place for himself to be, Koh decorates it as if it is his own tomb, adding a chair, bed, shelf and a refrigerator. A lot of trinkets and random items one may wish to take to the grave are featured in this exhibition as well, such as ‘animal figurines, little dolls, two kissing marble busts of the last pope, miniature Michael Jackson figures, Chinese reincarnation statues, plastic dinosaurs, insects’, and more (Secession, 2025). Many parts of this installation feature queer and gay iconography, specifically penis’, butts and some faces, featuring images of young adult male bodies as well. This makes this space, not just a tomb, but an openly queer space. This space represents Koh, showcasing things that could be deemed close to him, things that he may want to bring to the afterlife with him. It becomes almost autobiographical because of this, instead of trying to show the ‘fragility’ of a life (Secession, 2025). This queerness being so overt and open in this piece is political in itself, as though this is a resting space, a space that would normally be very private and sealed away, is a public exhibition, showcasing this queerness and this very private and personal space to all.

Seeing this piece through the lens of it being a tomb, it draws the tombs of the Ancient Egyptians to mind. The tombs of mostly the wealthy in Ancient Egypt held items of value to the person whose tomb it was, whether that was of personal or monetary value. They also held items one might need in the afterlife, such as furniture and food, not seeing death as a proper end, seeing it instead as a form of rebirth (ETP Team, 2025).

This itself adds to the Gothic of Koh’s work, due to a lot of Ancient Egyptian beliefs being quite morbid, and the iconography, such as the ankh, being commonly used by contemporary Goths. The ankh, meaning the ‘key of life’ or ‘eternal life’ (National Park Service, 2015), is commonly seen worn by Goths, which could be due to its connections to that eternal life which is a common theme in Gothic media such as in vampire media. However, for many it may not be about fashion or its meaning connecting to Gothic media, it may be due to the overall themes of life and death that are carried with the ankh lending itself into the darker aspects of one’s existence in this world (Goth Clothing, 2024).

Overall, Koh’s work is a great example of contemporary Gothic art, not being afraid to touch on heavy topics of death, and not afraid to get almost scandalous in the materials he chooses to

use to make his work. It showcases those punk ideologies and pushes boundaries. The overt queerness in the work shows growth since the times of the Gothic in the 18th and 19th century, when any queerness was mostly only subtext throughout the work or was only read as being queer years down the line.

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to discuss, how in all mediums of Gothic art and media, that the Gothic is inherently a queer and political genre. Through analysing Gothic from its very roots, fuelled by violence and destruction before becoming a style of art due to cathedrals and churches of an era reminiscent of ‘primitive’ huts of the ancient Germanic tribes (Robb, 2023), we can see how religion and themes of morality have played a big role in Gothic art since its beginning. Looking at *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1480-1505) triptych, specifically the right-hand panel *Hell*, and analysing the piece through the contemporary lens, we see how it could be a commentary on how we are creating our own Hell, ruining our planet with our man-made creations due to capitalism and overconsumption, those being major political issues in current years.

The analysis then of Gothic 18th/19th century literature explored how themes of queerness, repression and gay kink culture have been prevalent in Gothic fiction for years, such as the dominant and submissive roles of Dorian and Basil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by Oscar Wilde (StudyCorgi, 2024). Examining the themes of homosexual repression in Victorian England in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson showed how Hyde represented the repressed homosexual urges in Jekyll, while being portrayed yet as a natural thing due to the comments on being animalistic, as normally things are animalistic are natural to this world (Laubender, 2009).

Further analysing the themes of homosexuality through vampires, specifically the novel *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker and *Nosferatu*, directed by F.W. Murnau, both revealed a repeated trope of dominant and submissive men, while also tapping into the subversion of gender roles with the characters Harker and Hutter. Both men were treated in a feminine role due to being held hostage and used by this older single man (for blood) (Gogo, 2023).

This led into a discussion on German Expressionist film and the queer environment which continued to grow due to the queer and political commentaries pushed forward by these films.

Finally, this dissertation analysed Goth as a subculture being derived from punk, and therefore automatically a political subculture. It analysed how due to the styles, music and politics being away from the mainstream, it was a subculture popular with LBGTQ+ individuals. (Mueller, 2008) Then it discussed the contemporary Gothic and contemporary Gothic art.

Throughout this dissertation, I felt I explored the Gothic in many aspects well and to an extent proved that the Gothic in many ways is political and queer. However, due to how large this topic is due to the many Gothic revivals, I feel some areas lacked research into, especially those of the Gothic outside of Europe and America.

I would like to take research on this further into postgraduate education, exploring this topic on a deeper level, and go into more niches.

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