
Carol Siegel. *Goth's Dark Empire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005. 211p.

MICHAEL KRAMP
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Carol Siegel's *Goth's Dark Empire* investigates "the Deleuzoguattarian becomings that are produced through the discourses of sexuality that converge within Goth" (1). She makes a significant contribution to the intellectual discourse on this subculture by addressing a prominent void left by the sole full-length academic study of the movement, Paul Hodgkinson's impressive *Goth: Identity, Style, and Subculture* (2002). Siegel's work consistently shows us how "the Goths' perversely eroticized embrace of death" embodies "a new take on the old sexual revolution" (7). While she works through tremendously varied texts and phenomena, ranging from teenage websites to Japanese animated films to popular fiction, Siegel continually returns to Goth's sexuality—a sexuality that is elastic, rhizomatic, and "dissolving shape into a continual becoming" (167). The panoramic quality of *Goth's Dark Empire* certainly poses a challenge, and the book makes no apology for its wide coverage of material from various disciplines. Instead, Siegel presents this diversity and complexity as a fundamental feature of the Goth community, its openness, and its fluidity. Unlike other subcultures that consciously build up barriers to bar intruders, the Goth subculture has remained welcoming, free, and perhaps most importantly, non-fascist. Michel Foucault famously spoke of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* as "an *Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life*" (Preface, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, xiii). Siegel's study, likewise, offers an introduction to the deterritorialized sexuality and sexual desires of the Goth; and while she makes no attempt to show us how to live as Goths, she repeatedly demonstrates how Goths are already influencing our culture and creating new sexual possibilities.

Siegel's first chapter builds upon her earlier *New Millennial Sexstyles* (2000), in which she considered various forms of sexual redefinition occurring within youth cultures at the turn of the millennium. But here, Siegel offers a horrifyingly fresh perspective on the Religious Right's use of abstinence programs, especially those directed at youth. Through close analysis of primary cultural texts and firsthand accounts, she demonstrates the terrifying message produced by such abstinence programs: i.e., sex is equivalent with death. Goth offers a powerful alternative to this cultural conditioning because of its relationships with death, life, and desire. According to Siegel, Goth succeeds in "opening up to resignification the constricting gender identities sexual conservatism imposes" (38). It is this "opening up

to resignification” that drives the theoretical work of the subsequent chapters in which Siegel shows how the Goth community continually reshapes and reorients sexual relations, sexual bodies, and sexual experiences to explore new possibilities of pleasure and desire.

In her second and third chapters, Siegel turns to literary texts, and conducts extensive analyses of the early works of Angela Carter (chapter two) and the novels of Poppy Z. Brite (chapter three). Her study of Carter is designed to disrupt the persistent nostalgia of the 1960s as a time of peaceful revolution and liberal reform; Siegel’s goal is to “penetrate the haze of nostalgia and remember the sixties as a time in which such dark nightmares occupied an important signifiatory place” (51). According to Siegel, Carter’s early novels, such as *Shadow Dance* (1966), *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Several Perceptions* (1968), and *Heroes and Villains* (1969), show us this haze, and she contends that the very meanings and power of this haze “can be better understood through a knowledge of Goth” (50). In her treatment of Brite’s work, Siegel focuses on the popularity of the novelist’s fiction amongst young women and emphasizes “how the masochistic male body is displayed as an erotic object for women” (73). Siegel’s range as a cultural critic is showcased in both chapters as she seamlessly integrates an important discussion of the differences between the recurring Punk subcultures and the Goth community into her discussion of Carter, and then provides an engaging treatment of Goth music into her reading of Brite. Her readings of musical texts and performances by Nine Inch Nails, Joy Division, and Marilyn Manson, moreover, provide vital interdisciplinary depth to her powerful conclusions concerning the eroticized masochistic male body of Brite’s fiction. It is also important to note that Don Anderson provides an exhaustive Discography of Goth Rock Artists as an Appendix that will be of much interest to Goth music fans and of scholarly use to musicologists.

Siegel focuses on film for the remainder of her book, but as with her previous chapters, it is not quite accurate to announce that her chapters take up a subject and stick to it; rather, as I suggested earlier, she continues to reveal the fluidity of Goth within her very argumentative structure. Her discussion of the Brandon Teena stories in chapter four may be her most expansive treatment. She conducts a comparative analysis of Susan Muska and Gréta Olafsdóttir’s 1998 documentary, *The Brandon Teena Story* and Kimberly Pierce’s *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), whose title, Siegel points out, is strangely taken from a song of the Cure, a well-known Goth band. While much of this chapter is unconcerned with the Goth community, Siegel’s acute analyses of the films help us to understand Goth’s dynamic relationship with sexuality in contemporary culture. Unlike the masochism that Siegel finds eroticized in her

reading of Brite, Siegel finds that the rape and hatred that is levied against Teena “is naturalized, as if it came out of the poisoned and exhausted earth itself” (108). But Goth refuses to naturalize such violence or hatred; they do not root identities in anger or discrimination. As Siegel promptly concludes, “whenever hierarchies are created and institutionally enforced we, as a society, are most fortunate if all we see are fantasies of violence, such as those most characteristic of Goth culture” (109). And Siegel shows how this fantastic quality remains crucial to the regenerative power of Goth.

Siegel continues to highlight the creativity of Goth in her final two chapters through her discussions of the femme boy and emergent Asian-American masculinities. She reads Rob Schmidt’s *Crime and Punishment in Suburbia* (2000) within the context of Goth’s ability to “[open] up a welcoming space for those outlawed by majorist sex and gender mores” (121). Siegel suggests that Schmidt’s film ultimately promotes a mode of Deleuzian “becoming itself,” in which traditional and static identities are left behind in favor of “a state of constant psychic motion, never-ending response to perception” (132). Siegel’s final chapter may be her most eclectic, as she moves between a variety of textual representations of new Asian-American masculinities. Discussing a range of texts from Guy Maddin’s *Dracula: Pages from a Virgin’s Diary* (2002), Yoshiaki Kawajiri and Tai Kit Mak’s *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust* (2000), and *The Matrix* trilogy (1999-2003), Siegel traces the appearance of new Asian-American masculinities rooted in a Goth identity that “break free” from the constraints and constraining forces of the mechanized desires of conformity-driven society (156). Her ability to re-read such tremendously popular texts such as *The Matrix* films and later M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense* (1999) deserve special note, as she is consistently able to demonstrate not only how such texts have been misread, but how such texts *are* indeed culturally efficacious and informative, even for our understanding of such presumably invisible subcultural groupings as Goth.

Siegel’s conclusion iterates the malleable identity of the Goth; she prefers to discuss Goth as “a grouping of styles of resistance, a series of dark archways through which one can be always entering resistance, always departing the officially known” (158). She places this devolving identity and lifestyle in opposition to the American millennial existence marked by the SUV-ridden public spaces that simultaneously prevent human interaction and promote violence. Her reading of *The Sixth Sense* is extremely poignant as it allows her to investigate how ongoing psychiatric readings of the occult deny the irrational power of children—and others deemed incapable of ascertaining truth—to communicate with those/that

beyond the realm of the known-to-be-living. Goths, according to Siegel, “escape the willed stupidity of the American Dream to find in the nightmare of fallen knowledge a becoming that is also a coming to knowledge with no goal beyond intimacy with life’s dark side” (166). And *Goth’s Dark Empire* consistently shows us how this beautiful paradox of a lack of telos, and the proximity with the inevitable end of death in life, continues to energize the “dissolving shape” and “continual becoming” of Goth (167). ✱