

"EVERYBODY IS THEIR ENEMY":  
GOTHS, SPOOKY KIDS, AND THE AMERICAN  
SCHOOL SHOOTING PANIC  
ALLEN BERRES

One of the earliest details to leak out about Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold following their horrifying shooting spree at Columbine High School was that they were supposedly members of a clique that called itself "The Trench Coat Mafia." This name was readily snapped up by the journalists covering the story, and by the evening following the shootings, numerous news organizations were running pieces about this group in an attempt to shed greater light on the reasons why Harris and Klebold killed thirteen people and themselves. Although the Trench Coat Mafia clique was confined to Columbine High School, journalists quickly pointed out many supposed links between this clique and two larger music fan cultures whose members occasionally wear black trench coats that are found in almost every American high school: goths and Marilyn Manson fans. A wave of anti-goth, anti-Marilyn Manson sentiment immediately followed this over-hasty association, motivated by the overwhelming fear that any member of these black-clad legions could turn out to be the next school shooter.

The label "goth" (an abbreviation of "gothic") was adopted by a culture of music fans that started in the late 70s and early 80s as an offshoot of punk. Goths are fans of a variety of generally gloomy bands, including the Sisters of Mercy, Bauhaus, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and the Cure. They are also known for favoring black clothing, ranging from lacy gowns to biker jackets to band t-shirts. One of the bands that is occasionally included in the list of goth musical acts is a band named Marilyn Manson. Marilyn Manson is led by a front man of the same name, an Ohio native originally named Brian Warner. Manson has received more radio and MTV exposure in the 90s than any other goth-associated act, and as such he has spawned a horde of young devotees who are not yet aware of the wider range of gothic music. Manson fans, sometimes called Spooky Kids after the original name of the band, Marilyn Manson and the Spooky Kids, also often wear black. Some goths are Marilyn Manson fans (this researcher included), but many goths despise Manson for his popularity, and many young Manson fans will stop listening to Manson and follow some other musical fad in a year or so without ever expanding their tastes to other goth musicians. In fact, as of the publication of this paper Marilyn Manson's status as the bad boy of MTV seems to have been usurped by the rapper Eminem; Manson's third album, released in 2000, produced only two MTV-

broadcast videos; the first video was only in rotation for a few weeks, and the second has been nearly invisible.

Although the Trench Coat Mafia apparently included some students who were Marilyn Manson fans, Klebold and Harris were fringe members of the group at best. According to Dave Cullen of Salon.com, they did not like Manson's music or image, and there has been absolutely no credible evidence to the contrary (Cullen 4). There is also no evidence that they were members of the goth scene; the closest connection is that the two were fans of industrial music, a genre that has a lot of fan crossover with goths, especially the German bands KMFDM and Rammstein. It has been cynically noted by many commentators (including Marilyn Manson himself) that Mr. Manson (and, by extension, the goth scene that he is often wrongly equated with) became the center of the post-Littleton controversy only because of his previously established controversial reputation (he was a favorite target of former vice-presidential candidate Joe Lieberman and his conservative cohort William Bennett) and the extensive conservative Christian protests against his concerts. These later revelations, however, were no help in preventing the anti-goth media panic over the days immediately following the shootings.

Two news articles which were published on April 21, 1999, initiated the association of the Trench Coat Mafia with goth culture. One, "Trench Coat Mafia Spun Dark Fantasy," appeared the *Washington Post* and was written by Marc Fisher. It maintained that

The shooters who turned Columbine High School into an unspeakable landscape of carnage yesterday were members of a small clique of outcasts who always wore black trench coats and spent their entire adolescence deep inside the morose subculture of Gothic fantasy. (Fisher 1)

Fisher goes on to explain that

Black trench coats are a consistent theme in the Gothic subculture that has attracted many teenagers to the poetry, music, and costumes of a scene that ranges from benign fantasy to violent reality. Inspired by fantasy games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, Gothic has become a fascination of many American high schoolers, some of whom simply dress and paint their fingernails black while others immerse themselves in a pseudo-medieval world of dark images. (Fisher 1)

We can see a number of propositions here that remained prominent throughout the post-Columbine goth panic: 1) All goths are teenagers, 2) All goths are prone to confusing fantasy and reality, and 3) Their immersion in dark images has a strong potential to lead goths to participation in murder

sprees. Fisher, apparently inspired by reports of the killers' fascination with German fascism, also associates goths with neo-Nazis, noting that "Yesterday [the 20th] was Hitler's birthday, an occasion for demonstrations, mock funerals, and other macabre celebrations among both neo-Nazis and parts of the Gothic scene" (Fisher 1). In my six years of involvement in goth culture, I have never heard anything about Hitler's birthday celebrations; where Mr. Fisher got his information is anybody's guess, as he does not cite a source,

The second article, "Opinions Run Gamut on Suspects Among Neighbors, Friends," by Jim Hughes, is from the *Denver Post*. Hughes states that a classmate of the boys

said Klebold adopted the "goth" –short for Gothic—appearance in the past year, wearing black clothing and growing out his once-short hair. The "goth" scene draws from satanic worship and medieval Europe [*sic*] barbarism. (Hughes 17)

In Hughes' article we see the first post-Columbine association of goths (and Klebold and Harris) with satanism. This accusation had an extremely long life prior to Columbine; it is primarily due to the fact that goths wear black clothing, which is also supposedly the favored color of witches and satanists. While there are satanist goths and gothic satanists, the two identities are by no means synonymous. Hughes also seems to confuse our modern goths with Goths, such as the Ostrogoths or Visigoths, the tribes of barbarians active at the time of the fall of Rome (for a full discussion of the evolution of the modern use of "gothic," ask any scholar familiar with the development of the gothic novel). In any event, Hughes' picture of the latest barbarians at our gates associates goths with violence, ignorance, and, in a vein followed by many other commentators, the fall of civilization.

A third news article completed the foundation of the anti-goth narrative; it was a segment on the television news show *20/20*, broadcast on the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup>. This segment, rich in Marilyn Manson concert footage, featured a police officer from the Denver Police Department named Steve Rickard. The segment introduces Rickard as follows:

. . . for the last seven years, Steve Rickard of the Denver Police Department gang unit has been trying to spread the word of how the so-called Gothic Movement has helped fuel a new kind of teenage gang - white suburban gangs built around a fascination with the grotesque and with death. (Ross)

Brian Ross, the segment's reporter, claims that "There have been a series

of violent episodes around the country linked to teenagers who call themselves Goths" (Ross). Rickard portrays goths as a new, even scarier form of gang:

With traditional gangs, their enemies are pretty well-defined. With suburban groups, their enemies are not defined. I think everybody is their enemy. . . . anybody who would get in their way, I think they would potentially kill. (Ross)

In this scheme, the goth is even scarier than the usual (ethnic) gang member in that they could attack and kill anyone, presumably even white kids who are apparently minding their own business.

In an apparent attempt to be fair, Ross states that "For most Goths, it's just an act, but apparently not for all" (Ross), and Rickard notes that "All Gothic young people are not the same. There's the Gothic scene where kids are just dressing the part, listening to the music" (Ross). "Just an act" and "just dressing the part" imply that the goth identity is essentially a violent one or that the goth is intentionally dressing to intimidate or threaten outsiders. According to this logic, dressing like a goth or listening to gothic music and then not engaging in violent or hateful behavior is thus a shallow act, devoid of its original meaning: a goth is either a murderer or a poseur.

On the April 22, the *Denver Post* ran an article documenting various threats made against goths in the Denver area. The article features a doctoral student at the University of Denver, Derek Sweet, who is quoted as stating that his research on goths indicates

They're not violent. They're not racist. They're not into this whole hate mentality. . . . These are not people who are out looking for trouble. They're just looking for a place to hang out and have fun. . . . But now this group is really scared. And they are angry that they're being alienated and attacked once more just for being different. (Briggs and Greene 11)

Although most of the article defends goths from the threats being made against them, the article ends, however, on a much more sinister note, quoting Yvonne Peterson, a San Antonio nurse: "I don't think the gothic movement created this situation at the school. But. I do think that the gothic movement can give teachers in the future some tips. These kids are in trouble. . . . They're looking for attention" (Briggs and Greene 11). In other words, even if goths aren't murderous, they are mentally ill and a threat to themselves.

The strongest example of this anti-goth attitude can be found in articles consulting or written by anti-Satanist Carl Raschke immediately fol-

lowing the shooting. With only the sketchy information about Klebold and Harris that was available following the first few days of media coverage, Raschke concludes the Klebold and Harris were part of the youth Satanist movement that he has been writing about since the early nineties. In an editorial piece he wrote, published in the *Rocky Mountain News* on April 25, Raschke maintains that the Columbine attack was "carefully planned and superbly executed terrorist violence" and goes on to explain that

These types of disquieting adolescents have been a routine item in suburban high schools and urban dance clubs since the early 1980s. They have gone by diverse and sundry names - punkers, stoners, metalheads, skinheads, headbangers and, now, "goths." They are the minions of a flourishing youth anti-culture, which from year to year, concert to concert and album to album finds novel and creative ways of celebrating the emblems of apocalyptic violence and trashing minimal standards of human decency. They think of it as fashion, if not "art." "Revolutionary" art. They aim to frighten and to shock. (Raschke 1B)

In Raschke's view, goths and Marilyn Manson fans set out to "frighten and shock" the moral and decent world, and as such they are terrorists just as much as Klebold and Harris were terrorists; he bitterly claims that Columbine administrators ignored the "obvious" threat posed by the Trench Coat Mafia because had they acted, "they would be branded by various educated apologists for teenage excess as too authoritarian and intolerant of those who opt for 'alternative lifestyles'" (Raschke 1B).

It is not too difficult to see Raschke's plan for preventing future school shootings in this complaint: make the "misfits" conform to mainstream conceptions of normalcy. They are not protected by free speech or any other protections because they are supposedly using their freedoms only to oppress, threaten, and harass normal people. Showing sympathy towards goths or excusing them as troubled or mentally ill just perpetuates the problem; Raschke declares that

We are so mesmerized by the saccharine rhetoric of the "human services" professions, which has convinced us there is always an excuse for someone's outrageous criminal behavior, that we can't imagine a set of circumstances when someone is self-conscious about what they are doing and, as Saint Paul once put it, without excuse. (Raschke 1B)

In this scheme, even those whom Ross and his informant Rickard would regard as harmless poseurs or Yvonne Peterson would classify as mentally ill and needing therapy are an "anti-culture," deadly threats to social order and civilization itself.

A plausible explanation for the widespread insistence on goths as a convenient explanation for the school shooting crisis is offered by Robert Snyder in an essay for *Anthropology News*:

The typical narrative for suburban teens might thus go as follows. One should grow up to be a good student, athletic, monetarily care free (in a dual income household), religious and bound [or college. Suburban, middle-class teenage "massacre" does not fit the traditional narrative that has been socialized into North American society. The Littleton massacre is a prime example of media attention to an event that does not follow a "traditional" social narrative. . . . High tech video games, sci-fi movies and Goth subculture are created as the primary social pressures that corrupt middle-class suburban teenagers. (Snyder II)

This "corruption through invasion" metaphor is prominent in Carl Raschke's work, but there are other examples as well. In June 1999, the conservative publication *The New American* ran an article referring to "Manson's anti-hero acolytes Harris and Klebold," describing Marilyn Manson as "an androgynous creature who works at being as repulsive as possible (and succeeds wildly!) [parenthetical aside in original]" whose "'music' revels in nihilistic rebellion, rage, alienation, death, and despair" (Jasper). The article goes on to comment that "the Columbine killers and their fellow teen sociopaths imbibed deeply of the toxic waste that courses through the culture of death now engulfing our whole society"; this "toxic waste" has filled "the God-shaped vacuum" created by "the militant secularists of academe, the decadent culture vultures of Hollywood, and the left-wing activists in the courts and legislatures" (Jasper). Manson, at the head of a phantom army of drooling, psychotic fans, serves here as a powerful symbol of an invading force that is the ultimate cause of everything that is wrong with the United States.

Another call for action against the goth menace is *She Said Yes*, the story of the supposed martyrdom of Cassie Bernall, one of Klebold and Harris' victims, as written by her mother, Misty Bernall. It was widely believed following the shooting that one of the shooters had approached Cassie and asked her if she believed in God; she was said to have said yes, and that is when she was killed. The way Misty tells it, Cassie was a basically good child until she fell in with an ill-behaved, black-wearing, pink-haired friend named Mona (a pseudonym) in her early high school years. One of the key signs that Misty and her husband, Brad, focused on as an indication of trouble was the music that Cassie and Mona were listening to:

I don't know exactly when it was, but at some point Brad began examining some of Cassie's music and realized that it wasn't "just" entertain-

ment. Despite the innocuous covers, the lyrics themselves often carried an unmistakable message. (Bernall 45)

Misty then includes a brief sample of lyrics from one of Marilyn Manson's songs, claiming that the group was "a favorite of the two boys at Columbine who killed [Cassie]." The quoted song is "Get Your Gunn," the two n's on "Gunn" referring to a murdered abortion doctor, David Gunn (Manson). Misty misquotes the song's lyrics, however, transforming the song's refrain from "get your gunn" (as indicated clearly in the album's liner notes and on any internet listing of the song's lyrics) to "get your gun" (Bernall 45). With a slight misrepresentation of its lyrics, the song is transformed from an ironic commentary on a murder committed by pro-life zealots into an apparent endorsement of gun violence.

The possibility that Cassie and Mona posed an immanent danger to Brad and Misty's lives is confirmed for Misty when she discovers a series of letters from Mona that Cassie was hiding in her room:

There was endless talk about the "sexiness" of black clothes and makeup, the "fun" of contraband alcohol, marijuana, and self-mutilation, and the adventures of a classmate whose girlfriend went to "this satanic church, cult thing where you have to drink a kitten's blood to get in." Several of the letters advised Cassie to do away with us and thus solve her innumerable problems. One ended, "Kill your parents! Murder is the answer to all of your problems. Make those scumbags pay for your suffering. Love you, me." (Bernall 38-9)

Misty and Brad see these letters as a sure sign that Cassie is up to no good, and they report the children to the police. At a meeting with a police detective and the Bernalls, Mona's parents don't see what the big problem is. Misty reports that Mona's mother "could not understand why we had the need to bring [the letters] to the attention of the law, or to involve her husband in the matter," but that

Thankfully the detective and the investigator took the situation as seriously as we did, and supported our desire for a restraining order to bar Mona from further contact from Cassie. Among other things, the sheriff told Mona's parents that the letters were the worst he had seen during more than a decade in juvenile crime, and he warned them that if Mona had had any sort of prior record, she would have been called before a judge. Still they showed no surprise or remorse. (Bernall 52-3)

The narrative we see developing here is one insisting on parental authority, specifically that Misty and Brad Bernall were right in splitting up Mona and Cassie's friendship. Mona's parents are presented as gullible, over

indulgent monsters; Misty reports that she was traumatized by their behavior, claiming

I can still feel their cold, level stares. Nor will I forget how Mona's mother walked her back to their car after our meeting, rubbing her shoulder and reassuring her, as if to say "Oh, honey, it's okay, the Bernalls are just mean people." (Bernall 52)

The proof that the Bernalls acted appropriately comes in the actions of other black-clad trouble children. Although Mona is never referred to again after her exorcism from Cassie's life, Misty mentions a case in 1997 when a fourteen-year-old from a nearby suburb "said he was going to kill his parents" and then subsequently stabbed his father the next day. Misty notes that "After the stabbing, satanic carvings and other Goth trappings were discovered in the boy's bedroom" (Bernall 61). She maintains that "In a time when supposedly peaceful middle-class suburbs like ours are breeding children capable of such things, you begin to realize that talk is never just talk" (Bernall 61).

The ultimate proof that the Bernalls acted in Cassie's best interests is that Cassie was a devout, genuine born-again Christian by the time she was killed at Columbine High School by the very type of black-wearing, Marilyn Manson-listening, murderous freaks that she could have ended up being. This is demonstrated when Misty sympathizes with the Klebolds and Harris after she receives an apology letter from the Klebolds:

Even if Cassie were still alive, we would be able to understand their hurt and humiliation. Before she changed directions, we agonized over her in the same way the parents of her killer surely agonize over him now. And even if we could never compare the weight of our separate griefs, we have at least one comfort: the knowledge that our daughter died nobly. What balm do they have? (Bernall131)

Misty Bernall's message to parents is that they must intervene when children rebel; even a minor rebellion or demonstration of a warning sign can have life or death consequences.

The overt anti-goth panic has largely disappeared now, more than two years after the Columbine shootings. A series of pro- (or at least not anti-) goth news articles that followed the anti-goth articles discussed here was partially responsible for the shift, and it didn't hurt matters that the media, for the most part, decided that the gun control issue was going to be their primary target issue. With this in mind, however, the image of the immanent threat posed by the gothic rebel child still retains its power in the discussion of school safety. A particularly vivid example appeared in April



2001 in an AP article by Dan Elliott, "Columbine Killers Icons to Some." Although most of the article discusses Klebold and Harris's appeal to generic "angry, disaffected youth," James Gerbarino, author of *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them* is quoted as saying,

Thirty-five years ago, if a kid walked into your school with body piercing and black makeup, almost certainly somebody would say, "We've got to find out what's troubling this kid. . . . Adolescent culture has taken on this foray into the dark side. For troubled kids, this feeds their trouble. (Elliott)

Here we see the use of the goth as a potent visual metaphor; even though neither Klebold or Harris, or any other school shooter to date, fit the description above, the personal style of the goth is still specifically invoked as a symbol of sociological and psychological dysfunction and, simultaneously, as a sort of supernatural evil, as using the phrase "the dark side" inevitably conjures up both Darth Vader of the *Star Wars* trilogy and legends of satanic worship.

With the latest bout of school shootings following the shooting at Santee High School in California, however, most of the media's focus has shifted to a call for greater surveillance to spot potential troublemakers. A series of researchers have tried to create a typical profile of the school shooter, much in the same way that profiling is used to pursue serial killers. These profilers, especially profilers working for the Secret Service and FBI, appear to be very careful about dismantling certain stereotypes about serial killers, among them the anti-goth concerns discussed here. For example, a paper written jointly by members of the Secret Service and the Department of Education for a 2001 issue of *Psychology in the Schools* states:

Decision makers who rely on characteristics that appear to be more typical or representative of the category, to determine whether an object belongs in that category, may inadvertently render faulty decisions. . . . For example, a school administrator who believes she should be concerned about a particular student because the student wears a black trench coat similar to the ones worn by the shooters at Columbine High School would be relying inappropriately on such information to determine risk. (Reddy et. al. 163)

While this article points out that while a student's making threats should be taken seriously, it also maintains that a student making a threat is not always going to become a school shooter (Reddy, et. al. 168). Since

the Santee shooting, however, threats issued by students are popularly believed to be an accurate indicator of potential trouble. An AP article written by Greg Toppo, for example, ends with the following passage:

John Kotnour, a police officer with the Overland Park, Kan., police department, works in Shawnee Mission South High School. He said his job often makes him feel like "a small-town sheriff." The most effective deterrent to school violence, he said, is a staff that makes students feel comfortable sharing their fears. "Most of the people here at South don't want the liability of letting a rumor go unchecked," he said. Among the most important conversations he has with students and teachers, he said, are those that begin with these five words: "This may be nothing, but. . ." [ellipses in original]. (Toppo)

Among school administrators and local law enforcement, the fear of being held legally responsible for a school shooting because a threat was not taken seriously is very strong, and also very understandable, given the lawsuits filed after the Columbine shooting against Columbine High School and the Jefferson County Sheriff. In such an environment of fear, the caution advised by the federal authorities is likely to be abandoned in the same way that local authorities ignored national, official skepticism regarding satanic crime in the 1980s and 1990s (as documented in Jeffrey Victor's *Satanic Panic*, among other sources). As such, I am reluctant to declare the goth panic dead; as demonstrated by the previous examples, the anti-goth panic immediately following the Littleton shooting is probably best understood as part of a larger move to cement parental control over adolescents and over society in general. It is likely that as long as there are goths, anti-goth sentiment will continue.

OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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