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Introducion

This essay reflects on my personal and creative journey as a developing pattern designer working within alternative fashion and dark aesthetic, through lived experience, observation and exploration. My interest in this field developed through engaging with everyday dress, online visual culture, and the ways people use fashion to express identity. These experiences shaped my curiosity and motivated me to explore this aesthetic more deeply through research and creative practice.

My work examines the subcultural foundations of alternative fashion and considers how symbolism patterns and material are used withing dark aesthetics. It also examines designers and brands that have influenced my thinking, not as fixed models to follow, but as points of reference that helped me understand how visual language can be developed within contemporary fashion. By analysing these fields, I explore the methods and values that resonate most strongly with my own design practice.

Finally, this essay considers my future intentions as a designer, including the direction of my Major Project and my ambitions within the alternative fashion industry. Through this reflection, I have gained a clearer understanding of the possible directions available to me moving forward as a pattern designer.

Alternative styles in fashion

During my studies at UWTSD, Swansea, I have explored a wide range of patterns and themes, including architectural motifs, geometric designs, folk style, floral compositions, to insects. From this exploration, I finally arrived at enjoying creating designs with a dark aesthetic nature seen in many alternative styles.

According to David Muggleton in his book *Inside Subculture* (2000), alternative style belongs to the wider field of subculture as visual practices that function outside mainstream norms and challenge dominant expectations.

Subcultural styles are constructed by the taking and recontextualizing of items from the dominant culture. If unconventionality of appearance is constructed in such a way, the wearing of specific elements that are of conventional origin is therefore unavoidable and cannot be taken as evidence of being only part committed. (Muggleton, 2000, p.86).

Muggleton further notes that subcultures are “[...] *manifestations of self-expression, individual autonomy and cultural diversity* [...]” (Muggleton, 2000, p.167). Highlighting that style is not merely about appearance but about building a visual language that reflects identity.

As Muggleton writes, subcultural participants “[...] *possess 'inner states' by which they understand, interpret and evaluate the courses of action open to them.*” (Muggleton, 2000, p.10), which means that their choices are deliberate, guided by their worldview rather than by mainstream trends. These internal motivations, he adds, “[...] *provide the motivation for their conduct*” (Muggleton, 2000, p.10), shaping not only how they dress, but how they position themselves socially and culturally.

This theoretical perspective helps explain why alternative styles often develop around music scenes, lifestyle choices, and a sense of personal freedom. Groups connected to goth, punk or witchcore form communities defined by shared symbolism and creative reinterpretation of cultural elements. Their visual language becomes a way of being who they want to be a form of identity, expressed through clothing, accessories and symbolic patterns.

For me, dark aesthetic works in the same way as the subcultures Muggleton describes. It brings together elements from different styles and reshapes them into a style that feels consistent and expressive. Instead of rejecting mainstream imagery, it reinterprets familiar motifs and gives them new meaning, creating a visual language that is symbolic and personal. Within alternative styles, several aesthetics are distinguished by their characteristic style. In *Goth: Undead Subculture* (2007), Goodlad and Bibby, explain that **Gothic fashion**, emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s alongside the post-punk music scene. They describe gothic style as drawing strongly on imagery associated with horror and the supernatural, particularly figures such as ghosts, vampires and other dark, cinematic references. The style is strongly defined by the dominance of black, which is closely associated with themes of melancholy, mourning and death, as well as with nocturnal and supernatural imagery. Within gothic culture,

it also carries transgressive meanings, often positioned in opposition to conventional or religious norms.

The style is further shaped with the use of antique mystical and religious ornamentation, including pentagrams, ornate crosses, rosaries, etcetera (Goodlad, Bibby, 2007). They further present that:

“Gothic [...] has always been an implicit revival of something else, whether late nineteenth-century decadence, late eighteenth-century Romanticism, medieval architecture, or uncivilized pagans. Gothic as signifier is primarily a symbol of pastness, and pastness that is in the process of returning.” (Goodlad, Bibby, 2007, p.147), and that:

“Both female and male goths wear [...] silver jewelry, much of which recycles religious symbolism. Long-lived goth favorites for jewelry and T-shirts are the cross, the pentagram, and ancient Egyptian symbols such as the ankh and the eye of Horus. Crosses predate Christianity and goths avail themselves of diverse styles with varying symbolic at tributes. Goths also like pagan symbols [...]” (Goodlad, Bibby, 2007, p.362)

Taken together, these descriptions show that gothic fashion is defined not only by darkness or black clothing, but by a complex system of symbols drawn from architecture, religion, horror imagery, and historical revival (see image 1).



Image 1: (left) Gothic Cathedral Bodysuit, (middle) Idol Worship Suit, (right) Alexander McQueen Sweater

The above authors also refer to another style in modern times called **Witchcore**, which draws on pagan and neopagan beliefs system and their visual symbolism. Neopaganism can be understood as a modern reconstruction of ancient religions, using historical deities, symbols, seasonal rituals and spiritual practices (see image 2), often rooted in Celtic traditions in the United Kingdom. The development of Wicca and witchcraft in Britain emerged in the late 1940s under the influence of figures such as Gerald Gardner who systematized Wicca as a modern pagan religion, Dion Fortune, whose occult and psychological writings shaped esoteric thought, and Doreen Valiente, who refined Wiccan ritual language and theology, shaping contemporary witchcraft as a structured spiritual practice. (Goodlad, Bibby, 2007)



Image 2: (left) Celestial Dress, (middle) Faefire Trousers, (right) Tarot Jacket.

Another fashion within alternative style is **Punk**, emerged in the 1970s as a subculture closely connected to music, particularly through bands such as the Sex Pistols. The movement was shaped by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, who helped pioneer punk while simultaneously exposing and challenging the systems it stood against. Punk style rejected conventional fashion through ripped garments, Do It Yourself (DIY) modifications, provocative graphics, distressing and bondage-inspired elements, using clothing as a direct form of rebellion and self-expression (see image 3). (Wrong Trousers, 2024)

David Muggleton emphasizes that punk should not be understood as a fixed style, but as an individual practice shaped by personal meaning. As he suggests, “*Punk is what you make it*” (Muggleton, 2000, p.2), highlighting that authenticity lies in personal interpretation rather than imitation.

O’Hara (1999, p.36) cites Andersen (1985) that punk:

“ [...] isn’t a fashion, a certain style of dress, a passing ‘phase’ of knee-jerk rebellion against your parents, the latest ‘cool’ trend or even a particular form of style or music, really—it is an idea that guides and motivates your life. The Punk community that exists, exists to support and realize that idea through music, art, fanzines and other expressions of personal creativity. And what is this idea? Think for yourself, be yourself, don’t just take what society gives you, create your own rules, live your own life.” (Andersen, 1985, p. 36)



Image 3: (left) Pins Jacket, (middle) Punk Jacket, (right) Graphic Vest

Together, these styles create a dark aesthetic characterised by a mysterious atmosphere and a strong visual identity. In the book *Fashion, Culture, And Identity* (1994), Fred Davis observes that whatever the style:

“ [...] clothing features as fabric, color, texture, cut, weight, weave, stitching, transparency, and whatever else makes a difference in how the garment or its surrounding ensemble of apparel is responded to in a community of clothes-wearers” (Davis, 1992, p. 13).

This highlights that every element contributes to its interpretation and the way identity is expressed within a groups that follow specific styles. Dark aesthetics resonate as a visual language of mystery, introspection, and individuality. Although others may recognize and interpret these motifs differently.

From Inspiration to Practice: Explorin Dark Aeshetic in Design

My interest in alternative fashion began during my childhood, growing up in Poland, where the style functioned very differently than it does today. At that time, alternative fashion was still niche and largely unsupported by dedicated brands, which meant that self-expression often relied on DIY practices. Clothing associated with alternative culture was limited, and black became the dominant choice not as a fully developed aesthetic, but as the most accessible visual language available.

As my interest in fashion gradually developed, I began to look beyond color and pay closer attention to details. Prints on T-shirts, lace details, and small symbolic motifs gradually caught my attention, even if I was not yet consciously analyzing them. I spent time browsing alternative fashion websites and watching online content related to dark aesthetic fashion and interiors, which made me increasingly aware that many garments relied almost entirely on black surfaces. Over time, this repetition made me realize that black functioned more as a base than a complete aesthetic, leaving room for further visual expression.

Gradually, I became more actively engaged in pattern design. I began exploring how motifs could be developed and applied through specific processes, such as creating lace effects using Devoré techniques or Laser Cutting, drawing and digitally manipulating imagery in Photoshop, and producing decorative surfaces using UV printing. I also experimented with creating elements from wire and cutting shapes into aluminium sheets, learning how structural and handcrafted components could extend patterns beyond print. These methods allowed me to experiment with texture, transparency, and surface detail. This shift marked my transition from simply wearing alternative fashion to understanding how patterns and techniques can shape and expand the visual language of styles and subcultures.

Looking at the work of other designers, I explore new techniques and ways of creating drama in pattern design. For instance, Guo Pei's Fall/Winter 2018 "The Architecture" (see image 4) collection explored Gothic architecture into fashion through sculptural pannier structures,

pointed arches and layered silhouettes. The extensive use of black emphasized form and depth, demonstrating how architectural principles can be reinterpreted as surface design and garment construction (Runway Magazine, 2018). Designers such as Alexander McQueen and Chung Thanh Phong inspire me through their use of animal-based patterns, including reptile skin textures and layered butterfly wing motifs. Techniques such as mirrored symmetry, and repetition transform natural forms into striking, almost fantasy-like compositions (see image 5). The work of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren has been influential in shaping my understanding of fashion as a medium for visual experimentation. They developed a distinctive fashion language based on distressed garments, fetish-inspired elements, and provocative surface design. Using confrontational graphics, their work challenged conventional fashion aesthetics. (V&A, 2017) (see image 6) I am also equally drawn to individual creative practices seen in the work of young artists, who customize garments with decorative stitching, embroidery or even bleach-based motifs (see image 7). These approaches show how a simple intervention can completely change the character of a piece.



Image 4: Guo Pei's Fall/Winter 2018 "The Architecture"



Image 5: (left) Alexander McQueen, (right) Chung Thanh Phong.



Image 6: (left) Queen with a safety pin, (middle) Naked Breasts top, (right) Cutted Outfit



Image 7: DIY Denim from Etsy

Building on these inspirations, my early design in this aesthetic was of wallpaper with a repeating motif of bats and grapes on a cream background. It was a simple, Gothic pattern created for a Surface Pattern Design Competition I-dott. Another project was a decorative lampshade for Anglepoise, where the design was precisely cut on a laser cutter machine into delicate firefly shapes, their faint glow casting delicate, shifting shadows across the room at night. I also designed a butterfly wing pattern in deep blue and black color, with overlapping wings digitally created using Photoshop. This pattern could be perfect for bedding or a rug. Building on these digital explorations, I designed a spiderweb lace pattern in Illustrator, which was then precisely cut using a laser cutter machine. These beginnings are simple, but they taught me how dark patterns create an atmosphere in that they can be a delicate decoration or a stronger accent.

This experience naturally led me to examine how contemporary brands develop and commercialize similar dark motifs within alternative fashion. In recent years, alternative brands have emerged, enriching the style by adding motifs to plain black garments, yet still in maintaining a specific style.

Disturbia is a UK-based alternative brand originating from Manchester, aimed primarily at young adults who identify with dark, gothic and alternative aesthetics. The brand addresses consumers who treat clothing and interior objects as tools of self-expression rather than short-lived fashion trends. Disturbia offers a wide range of lifestyle products, including jewellery,

home décor and accessories. This expanded offer positions the brand not only as a fashion label, but as a lifestyle brand that allows its audience to extend alternative aesthetics into their everyday environments. Visually, Disturbia is characterized by recurring symbolic motifs such as insects, dark florals, celestial imagery, anatomical references, and occult symbolism. These motifs are often applied through graphic prints and surface design, transforming simple garments and objects into expressive pieces with a strong narrative and atmospheric quality (see image 8).



Image 8: Motifs from Disturbia

Killstar is also a UK-based alternative fashion and lifestyle brand founded in 2010, originally operating primarily as an online label. From its early beginnings, the brand built its identity through strong digital presence and social media, which allowed it to reach an international audience within dark alternative communities. The brand is best known for its bold and theatrical visual language rooted in gothic, occult and witch-inspired aesthetics. Killstar consistently uses symbolic motifs such as pentagrams, moons, stars, crosses and ritual imagery, applying them across clothing, jewellery, accessories and homeware products. Offering items such as blankets, cushions, tableware, candles and decorative objects. Through its emphasis on graphic prints, surface decoration and symbolic storytelling, Killstar demonstrates how alternative aesthetics can be commercialised while maintaining a strong sense of identity and subcultural reference (see image 9).



Image 9: Motifs from Killstar

Restyle is a Polish alternative fashion brand founded in the early 2010s, operating primarily online. Focused on gothic and dark romantic aesthetics, drawing strong inspiration from historical silhouettes and decorative traditions. The brand is best known for corsetry and long, flowing garments that incorporate lace, embroidery, and ornamental detailing. Through its consistent visual language, the brand demonstrates how dark aesthetic can be translated into contemporary alternative fashion within the Polish market. (see image 10).

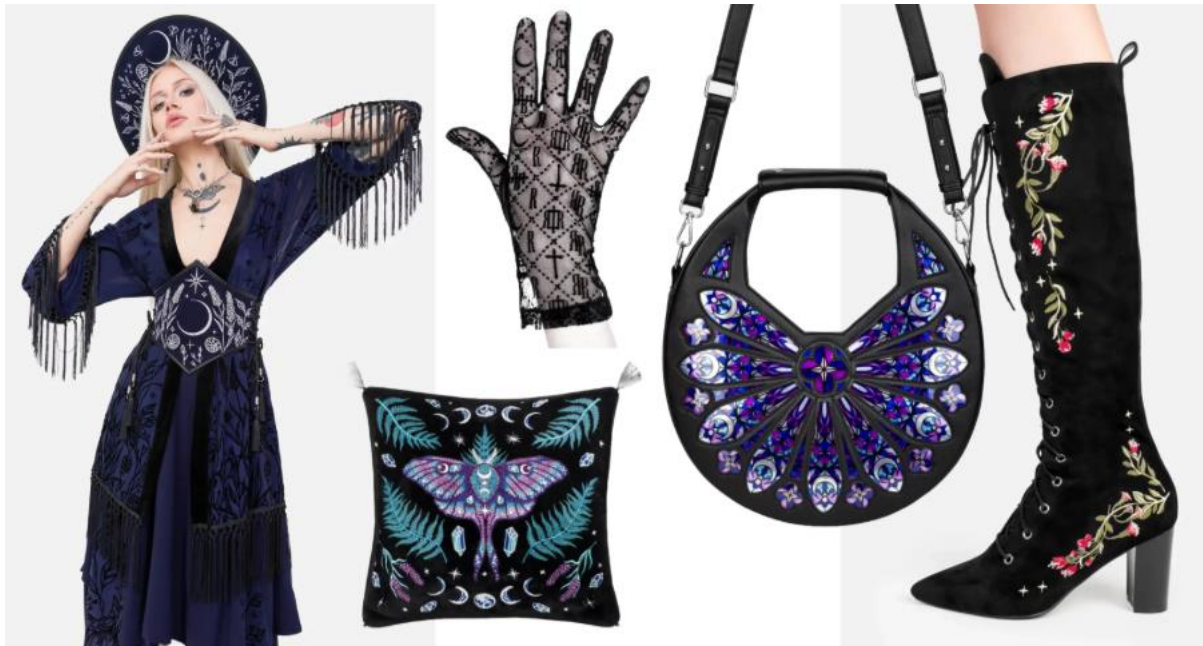


Image 10: Motifs from Restyle

These brands are widely recognised among young people who use alternative fashion to express individuality and personal identity. Their consistent use of dark colour palettes, symbolic motifs and rich surface textures demonstrates how style can be communicated through pattern and material rather than form alone. These approaches inspire me to develop a collection of my own, drawing on similar methods such as embroidery, lace construction, and graphic transfer, while reinterpreting them through my personal visual language.

Future and goals

As my professional career is just beginning, my first goal is to gain experience within established companies operating in the alternative fashion market. Working alongside designers who understand current trends, customer expectations, and production processes would allow me to develop practical knowledge of the industry. At this stage, my focus is not on long-term attachment to one company, but on learning how patterns function in a commercial context, how designs are prepared for larger-scale production, and how creative decisions are balanced with market demands.

At the same time, I am aware of the limitations and challenges often associated with larger fashion structures. By observing customer feedback online, everyday consumer behavior and

corporate practices, I have become increasingly conscious of issues such as overproduction, anonymous designer credit, and environmental harm. These observations have shaped my values as a designer. In the long term, I aim to work with smaller, value-driven brands that prioritize conscious consumption, sustainability, and an independent design approach not dictated by short-lived trends. If such an environment is not available, I am open to creating my own practice based on these values. This perspective shapes how I understand success within my future career as a designer.

Success, for me, is closely connected to a sense of belonging and personal fulfilment. For much of my life, I struggled to imagine a future in which I felt genuinely comfortable and confident in my professional identity. Discovering pattern design and alternative fashion has allowed me to recognise my abilities and identify a field in which I feel aligned with my work rather than working without personal engagement or creative satisfaction. Achieving this sense of purpose and fulfilment is a central goal of my career.

I am also realistic about the obstacles I may face. The Polish fashion market offers limited opportunities in pattern design, and initial research into job offers revealed a lack of positions directly aligned with my specialization. While smaller independent brands offer potential pathways for growth, establishing an individual presence within a highly competitive global market remains challenging. Platforms such as Etsy, a global marketplace for handmade and independent creative work, and Spoonflower, which operates as an open print-on-demand platform, offer opportunities for designers to share and sell their work internationally. While these platforms create valuable entry points for emerging designers, they also place individual creators within highly saturated environments where standing out becomes increasingly difficult.

Despite these challenges, the prospect of reaching an audience that connects with my visual language motivates me strongly. The idea of seeing my patterns worn, used or shared by others, particularly through social media, reinforces my desire to continue developing my practice. In the coming months, I plan to focus on building a professional portfolio and refining my technical skills in order to position myself as a distinctive and confident candidate within the alternative fashion and surface pattern design field.

While researching the Polish fashion market in more depth, I identified smaller independent brands whose values align more closely with my own approach to design. One example is

Mystelth.com, founded by Agnieszka Łaszek. The brand places strong emphasis on transparency and authorship, clearly listing the names of pattern designers for each garment. This approach ensures that designers are fully credited, recognised and integrated into the brand's narrative, rather than remaining anonymous within the production process.

Another relevant example within the Polish fashion market is **Medicine**, a brand known for its ongoing collaborations with independent illustrators and graphic designers. Beyond fashion production, Medicine engages in cultural, educational and social initiatives, including public art projects, environmental actions and charitable collaborations. With over ninety independent artists the brand demonstrates how graphic design, illustration and pattern can play a central role in shaping contemporary fashion while supporting creative communities. The brand also runs an online magazine offering styling guidance, curated looks and visual content that supports customers in developing an individual approach to dress.

Looking at these brands has helped me clarify where I see myself within the fashion and pattern design landscape. Brands that allow artists greater creative freedom are particularly important to me, as they create space to develop original projects and explore individual visual ideas. Their emphasis on artistic authorship, collaboration, and conscious engagement with visual culture reflects the kind of environment in which I would like to work.

Conclusion

Through researching alternative fashion, its subcultural foundations and symbolic visual languages, this essay has allowed me to define the direction in which I want to develop as a pattern designer. By analysing key subcultures, studying the work of designers, and examining contemporary brands, I have gained a clearer understanding of how dark aesthetic functions both as a form of self-expression and as a growing design market. Observing the increasing visibility of alternative fashion in both the United Kingdom and Poland has further confirmed my desire to work within this field.

I see strong potential for the continued development of alternative fashion through the creative combination of symbols, techniques, and materials. Drawing on the skills and methods I have developed during my studies in the UK, I aim to apply this knowledge within the Polish fashion context, contributing new perspectives shaped by cross-cultural experience.

Through researching contemporary brands and creative platforms, I have begun to see how my interests and values can align with professional practice and contribute to the continued development of dark aesthetic within alternative fashion.

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