The Contribution of Grunge to Social Change

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The Contribution of Grunge to Social Change

Završni rad

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Abstract

This paper explores grunge, a music genre that developed in Seattle, Washington during the 1990s. The aim is to show how grunge contributed to changes primarily in the American society as it moved from underground to mainstream and became a primary pop cultural movement in the 90s. It also became a subculture which has its special characteristics like a certain way of dressing, behaving etc. The paper follows the evolution of grunge from its beginning in the 1980s. Thanks to Sub Pop, an independent record label, and its creators Jonathan Poneman and Bruce Pavitt and their sense for business and self-promotion, grunge moved from underground to mainstream at the beginning of the 1990s with Nirvana's album *Nevermind* as a landmark and their single "Smells like Teen Spirit" as the anthem of the Generation X. Furthermore, the paper explores how musicians engaged in different aspects of society like politics, campaigning and activism and how grunge became an essential part of fashion statements and different forms of art such as movies.

Keywords: Seattle, grunge, subculture, *Nevermind*, Generation X

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Introduction

The focus of this paper is grunge, the cultural phenomenon which started in Seattle, Washington and was at its peak of success in the first half of the 1990s. The aim is to explore the impact of grunge on the overall culture of the United States so as to assess its contribution to American society. In the first part of the paper I discuss its roots and development as it is essential for understanding grunge and its shift from being an underground music genre to becoming a mainstream movement and a subculture. I highlight its early beginnings and the influence of other genres on its creation. Then I present its mainstream success which was incited by an independent record label Sub Pop. Here I also included definitions of some sociological concepts such as subculture, scene etc. in order to put grunge in social context. In the next part I discuss specific examples that show how grunge musicians contributed to society not only with their music but also by conducting a specific way of life which included involvement in politics in some way or campaigning and activism to back the causes they believed in. These examples include their efforts to fight censorship, the Erotic Music Law and the Teen Dance Ordinance. Furthermore, the involvement of the musicians in campaigning and activism is shown on the example of *Pearl Jam* who are most notable for their humanitarian work. In addition, the discussion on the overall impact of grunge on American society concludes with a look at the impact of grunge on the fashion statement of the 90s and its influence on art forms such as movies.

1. The Development of Grunge

Grunge is a music genre which reached its peak of development around 1992. Its evolution started in Seattle, the capital of the state of Washington in the American Northwest. The term "grunge" was first used in a completely different sense from what it later represented. It was mentioned in 1981 by Mark Arm, the front man of the Seattle band *Mudhoney*. He used it inadvertently in order to describe the music of his first band *Mr. Epp and the Calculations*. He said it was "pure grunge" not even thinking that this term would be later used to describe the whole movement thanks to journalists and reviewers who created the whole hype around Seattle.

The explosion of grunge could be compared to other similar events in the history of music which were at the same time momentous events for the society, too, since when there is a change in music consequently a new subculture is born and a variety of subcultures contribute to the culture and cultural change. To put it simply, subculture evolves from the moment when a number of people who do not want to conform to established societal norms connect with the other people who share the same views. The term subculture is in close connection with urbanism and cities since they are the most important constituent for a formation of subculture.

The environment plays an important role in the expansion of grunge music. As Jack Endino, a local record producer puts it: "when the weather's crappy you don't feel like going outside, you go into a basement and make a lot of noise to take out your frustration" (*Hype*). Another key figure in the early Grunge scene, Art Chantry, a graphic designer, pointed out: "the northwest is weird. It's the flying saucer capital of the US, serial killer capital of the US, the Manson family used to vacation here" (*Hype*). Nevertheless, the state of Washington and its capital Seattle became synonyms for a new mass revolt against traditional values in

popular culture. In a very short time things changed drastically – whoever wanted to succeed in the music business did not have to go to New York or Los Angeles. Seattle was a place to be (Novoselic 131). So, Seattle and grunge are the great example of connection between young people, urbanism and the occurrence of subculture.

Grunge is a fusion of many different styles. One of these styles is punk. In the early 1980s punk music was considered controversial and it was not easy for young people in the American Northwest to get to it due to geographical isolation, but its grounds were established thanks to a few truly independent young minds that not only loved music but had the insight of the ethics of punk-subculture which promoted self-production, independence and an open opposition to any corporate power structure (Novoselic 9). Those who were following punk ethics were connected with fanzines, nonprofessional publications, whose contents did not include only music. They had a significant amount of politics, mostly left-winged, in them. Specifically, fanzines promoted anti-establishment, anti-corporatism and vegetarianism. So, punk subculture lived a certain ideology which rejected old traditions.

Seattle bands that were punk rock in the beginning, like *The U-Men*, *10 Minute Warning*, *The Fastbacks* and *The Melvins*, started making slower and heavier riffs in contrast to the lightning speed of punk. This dirge-like music was grunge. Its characteristics include a dynamic range which means that verses are quiet and choruses are loud, guitars are distorted and low tuned, riffs are simple and vocals are raw. The difference brought about by grunge concerned ideology, too. Those identifying with grunge were not limited by genre or trend. They did not care about the 'clean ethics' of punk subculture.

Punk was made to give to the new generation a hope of changing the status quo through lyrics. Lyrics in grunge are similar to those in punk in that they are angst-filled, comprising themes of alienation, apathy and desire for freedom from established norms. Nevertheless, there are certain differences. Unlike punk, grunge lyrics do not contain explicit political

content. Social concerns, primarily those concerning youth, are rather covertly expressed e.g. the *Pearl Jam* song "Jeremy" covers the theme of youth suicide and *Nirvana's* "Polly" talks about rape although at first hearing it may sound like a nice ballad about a bird. Another important thing expressed in lyrics is ideology which opposes mainstream. One good example is *Soundgarden's* "Sub Pop Rock City":

> At the XTC, party, everybody's invited
> Cool! give it dude, we're plastic like you
> Going to a show, rock's all night
> And everyone I hate is at the party tonight
> I said Sub Pop Rock City

Musicians also advocated equality with the audience since they thought that anyone could start a band. It was very important to be original and remain underground. Artists refused everything that was generic, common and easily accessible, while they were at the same time extremely popular and easily accessible (Thompson 8).

The grunge movement was also a reaction to Glam Metal, another genre popular at that time. Glam used too many costumes and theatrics while grunge musicians tried to keep a low profile in order to prove their credibility. Also, grunge bands do not write lyrics about 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll nor about the devil, demons and apocalypse like metal bands. They write about negative feelings in general like failure, boredom, loneliness etc.

1.1. Sub Pop and the Explosion of Subculture - Creating a Seattle Sound

Young people in Seattle gathered and formed bands to play for fun and to respond to what was happening in American society. The scene where everyone was friends was created. Sociologist Barry Shanks defines 'a scene' as a cultural space in which a range of musical

practices coexist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation. Scene can also be understood as a community because it "engenders a sense of belonging or a group identity" (Lyons 121). This feeling of belonging, friendship and a certain excitement is what launched the Seattle music to the mainstream. As the local photographer Charles Petersen put it: "we were all so hellip; bored out of our heads it was get drunk, fall down and throw your body around. And all the bands that came through Seattle at that time said Seattle had the most exciting live scene, and they loved to play here, because the audience would get drunk and go nuts" (*Hype*).

Along with the excitement another major factor which helped grunge to reach the national level of success is Sub Pop, an independent record label which was founded by Jonathan Poneman and Bruce Pavitt, who were interested in creating a Seattle sound, a unique sound that would be the identity of the whole label, not the identity of any particular band, all in order to, "imbue their records with subcultural capital" as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu puts it. They were inspired by regional music scenes in music history so they established a Sub-pop Singles Club and released the Sub Pop 100 compilation. Only 1000 copies were made at the beginning; releases were limited partly because of the lack of money, partly on purpose so as to make music desirable and to create a certain demand for it. In order to self-promote themselves in 1989 Poneman and Pavitt invited a journalist from British magazine Melody Maker to write an article about the local scene. This helped grunge to become known outside its own area and consequently grunge helped Seattle to develop in cultural and economic terms which is one of its major contributions. It is an interesting example of how "notions of homogenous and local are mobilized for national and international publics." This process was started from 'below'– from Sub Pop – while the usual practice is that new, tourist visions of the city are imposed from 'above' by urban civic elites (Lyons 119).

What followed was an "explosion of subculture" but many felt that it was only a fad created by the media. In September 1991 Nirvana released their second record *Nevermind*. It was hoped to be a minor success but its first single "Smells like Teen Spirit" "marked the instigation of the grunge music phenomenon" (Lyons 120). "Smells like Teen Spirit" became an anti-anthem for all those discontented with their lives. The lyrics of this song are observation of the society stuck in boredom. Kurt Cobain, the spokesman of the generation, being one of the discontented he said: "Everyone has focused on that song so much. The reason it gets a big reaction is people have seen it on MTV a million times. It's been pounded into their brains" (Fricke n.pag.). High rotation of "Smells like Teen Spirit" made *Nevermind* a global success. It replaced Michael Jackson's album *Dangerous* at number one on the Billboard 200. This was a symbolic event of great significance since it marked the beginning of a new era in music history – it launched grunge to mainstream and gave way to other bands. Also, it announced the start of the new regime – old, long-haired bands were not representing revolt anymore and their symbols like bandanas, whiskey and motorcycles were considered clichés which were only an illusion and not real nonconformity (Novoselic 21). In addition, within weeks of the release of *Nevermind*, major-label scouts started searching for the 'next Nirvana' in alternative venues in Seattle. This implied that Nirvana was not understood as a "musical anomaly," but that Seattle became a city with "a unique and lucrative sound" (Lyons 120).

1.2. Decline of the Mainstream Success

There are several reasons why the mainstream success of grunge started to decline. One of them is the appearance of new genres which were completely different, like Britpop, which had a more positive point of view on life and because of that it started replacing grunge in

Great Britain around 1993. British bands, like *Blur* were characterized as ant-grunge. Damon Albarn, one of the members of *Blur* stated in an interview that if punk was about getting rid of hippies, he was getting rid of grunge.

Another thing that caused the decline of popularity is that bands either stopped existing or performing. Specifically Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994 is perceived by many as the end of the grunge era. He was named by the media as the "spokesman of the generation." At the age of 27 he joined the infamous 27 Club of musicians who died at the peak of their success like Jim Morrison, Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin etc. *Pearl Jam* stopped performing in the USA for three years since they were boycotting the company Ticketmaster because in their opinion they overcharged the tickets for concerts. *Alice in Chains* stopped performing in 1996 since their singer, Layne Staley suffered from drug addiction and in 2002 died of an overdose.

1.3. Grunge Today

To discuss grunge and its part in the society today it is essential to go back to the notion of subculture. What are the reasons why grunge today is not viable as it was in the 1990s? The main reason is the natural "motion" of subcultures. The young people who identify with any of subcultures inevitably grow up and leave the certain group which means that the notion of subculture at the same time signifies a certain value system – norms, beliefs, styles, way of life and a specific subject i.e. group which lives according to that value system. When a group stops living that value system subculture would continue to exist only if it serves the purpose and interests of the generation which is next to come. So, grunge probably does not fit the interest of younger generations anymore. They maybe do not find the answers to their problems in that particular music and are waiting for a new "spokesman" who would reflect and understand their problems. We now live in a society of rapid technological development.

Young people are even more alienated than ever and while in 1990s you still had to meet your friend for a cup of coffee to communicate, today we do not even have to leave the house. That is a big problem and young people need somebody who would shake them and get them out of their rooms, away from their computers, Facebook, Tweeter etc. They need somebody who would inspire them to take action, to make changes, to participate in the society they are part of and not just sit while life is passing them by. Grunge offered answers to the young people of the 1990s but now is time for something or someone new since the society has been in status quo for a long time.

Although grunge is not anymore a genre which is in the center of media attention it did not disappear. There is no grunge as a subculture, but there are a great number of individuals who still find inspiration in old heroes. Many of the bands continued with their careers with more or less success. Most notable are *Pearl Jam* which have their loyal fan base around the world. They released their tenth studio album *Lightning Bolt* in 2013 and have been on tour since its release. Also, they continue to inspire with their activism, pacifism and an open and honest concern for society.

Nirvana also continues with their success posthumously. In 2002 Kurt Cobain's *Journals* and the band's best of compilation was released and the song from that compilation "You Know You're Right" reached number one on the Hot Mainstream Rock Tracks. *Alice in Chains* and *Soundgarden* re-formed and both bands have released records again and have been touring recently. It is true that the sound of these bands is not grunge anymore. They developed musically in different directions, but they will always be recognized as bands which put Seattle on the cultural map and made grunge widely recognized.

Also, there are a great number of bands which name grunge as their influence such as *Korn*, *Blink 182*, Staind, *Jimmy Eat World* etc. Furthermore, even nowadays we can see people wearing T-shirts with famous Seattle bands on them and pursuing the grunge style (flannels,

boots, torn jeans etc.) and teenagers are more interested in exploring the history of music than listening to what is served to them today.

2. Influence of Grunge on the Society

Grunge did not only change music. Its influence was felt in fashion, movies, literature and even politics. Being founded on ideals and values from punk-rock, grunge was sort of an alternative revolution of 1990s, a call to raise awareness of equality and human rights. Many musicians really advocated these values through their music and emotional, introspective lyrics wrapped up in aggression. Revolution was inclusive which means that the female musicians were a vital part of the scene and feministic ideals became a part of the new sensibility. The movement within grunge called Riot Grrrl was a step forward in promoting women in rock. Until then rock music was primarily a white male dominated genre. Booths with political information could be seen at the concerts. Bands were playing for charity and they were not afraid to speak out about burning topics (Novoselic 22-23).

2.1. Soundgarden v. Eikenberry

One of the burning topics at the beginning of 90's was a bill under the name the Erotic Music Law. It was passed in 1992 and it allowed courts to declare certain albums as "erotic" and therefore inappropriate for those under the age of 18. Anything could be declared "erotic" and therefore illegal to sell to minors. Since grunge lyrics often dealt with emotive issues such as murder, rape, violence etc. this law could have had very negative affect on the availability of their albums. The album that was declared inappropriate had a sticker "adults only" which meant that it could rot in a record store at the department for adults and it could have been

stigmatized material for adults which meant it could have been rejected in retail sales. A way to avoid this was for the artists to change their lyrics, but that was censorship. Also, they had to go to court to prove that their art was not obscene. It seems that these types of laws are concerned with the problems among youth. Since it would require plenty of time and money to put an end to these problems, it was easier to point blame for violence and other issues on the musicians by claiming their lyrics were suggestive (Novoselic 37). As a response to the bill, the Washington Music Industry Coalition was formed. Along with the American Civil Liberties Union and Recording Industry Association of America they legally challenged the law. The complaint, which was named Soundgarden v. Eikenberry, includes members of *Nirvana*, *Pearl Jam*, *Heart* etc. All of them thought that this law was contrary to the basic concepts of the US legal system. They succeeded in their attempt and on 20th November 1992 the law was proclaimed unconstitutional by judge Mary Wicks Brucker. She determined that the law was void on its face for vagueness because "it constituted a prior restraint upon speech in violation of the federal and state constitutions because it did not provide adequate notice to persons who might be prosecuted under its provisions and because it allowed a judge to decide what is fundamentally a jury question" (*Leagle*).

In 1995 the same bill occurred again only under a different name and it was accepted in the Senate and the House of Representatives of the state of Washington. Musicians started to co-operate with the director of WMIC Richard White and with Stuart Halsan, the lobbyist of RIAA to persuade more than one third of all senators to accept veto on the bill by governor of Washington, Mike Lowry. It was not an easy task but once again the musicians succeeded. They stood for freedom of speech and made it clear that the music industry brought cultural and economic prosperity to the Northwest.

2.2. Teen Dance Ordinance

The Teen Dance Ordinance was a controversial Seattle law which existed from 1985 to 2002. It had a negative effect on grunge and the music community since it tried to exclude young people from their participation in the development of Seattle's scene. It was created as a reaction to a club for all ages which became a place for outcasts, drug abuse and sexual exploitation, all due to the bad management of the club. The law stated that underage dances may only admit patrons age 15-20 unsupervised. The law stated that anyone younger needed a parent or guardian chaperone and anyone older an accompanying youth under 18. Furthermore, two off-duty police officers were required on premises, with one off-duty officer outside to patrol the area. On top of everything $1,000,000 in liability insurance was required (Licata n.pag). None of the concert or club promoters wanted to pay these costs. The Teen Dance Ordinance was full of loopholes and ambiguities so that enthusiasm for the organization of any such events petered out. This was not good for the music scene of Seattle and the Northwest, because it needed people of all ages if it wanted to be vivacious. Artists realized that they had to do something to change the situation. They wanted to facilitate access to music, but not to alcohol consumption because they knew that they could not have a music community without safety. To preserve safety and to meet the need of the supervision of events such as concerts they suggested to contribute to the local economy by organizing these events in small clubs to which goods and services were necessary. Also, taxes were collected from each ticket sold for these events. For eighteen months David Meinert, the music promoter, political activist Angel Combs and many other worked with Seattle City Council, police, fire department and parents to find the solution. In the end, the Teen Dance Ordinance was repealed (Novoselic 53).

2.3. Campaigning and Activism

It can be seen from the previous chapters that grunge bands were actively involved in raising awareness of social and political issues. As Krist Novoselic, the bass player of *Nirvana* and today political activist says: popular music and politics are the same. People search for the meaning in both of these social phenomena. Both politics and music develop cyclically. When music becomes boring its consumers become cynical and the same happens with politics and democracy – people stop voting and they do not believe that anything can be changed for the better. At that moment it is a time for change. Some of the ways to achieve change are campaigning and activism. Bands used their reputation to support and promote their beliefs, hoping that the influence of music can direct the people towards independence.

One of the Seattle grunge bands most notable for their activism concerning social and political issues is Pearl Jam. From the very beginning of their career they refused to stick to the practices of traditional music industry in such a way that they refuse to make music videos and give interviews in order to avoid unnecessary publicity. Later they did make a video for the song "Jeremy," but after that decided to appear less on television.

Among other things, *Pearl Jam* has promoted pro-choice sentiments. They are members of the pro-choice organizations Choice USA and Voters for Choice. During their MTV Unplugged concert in 1992, singer Eddie Vedder wrote on his arm "PRO-CHOICE" in protest. They are also members of Rock the Vote and Vote for Change. Through these organizations they have encouraged voter registration and participation in United States elections. The elections in November 1992 resulted with the greatest turnout of young voters since 1971. That year the USA got its first Democratic president, Bill Clinton. Being the band's spokesman on political issues Eddie Vedder often comments on politics during their

shows. They are openly critical towards U.S. foreign policy. Some of their songs like "Bushleaguer" and "World Wide Suicide" are critiques of the Bush administration.

Also, they engaged in a boycott of Ticketmaster, a ticket sales and distribution company, because in their opinion Ticketmaster surcharged the concert tickets. These are all reasons why many people thought they have been deliberately ruining their own fame. This proved to be completely wrong since they outlasted and outsold most of their contemporaries from the 1990s and are amongst the most influential bands (Erlwine n.pag.).

In 1994 the band's manager described them as fighting on all fronts. When they discovered that Ticketmaster added a service charge to the tickets they committed to keep their concert ticket prices down. Because of this they needed to create their own outdoor stadiums to perform since Ticketmaster controlled most venues. They did not succeed in organizing concerts without Ticketmaster which was evidence of their monopoly. The United States Department of Justice was investigating the company's practices and band members Stone Gossard and Jeff Ament testified against them on June 30, 1994 in Washington, D.C. After some time the Justice Department dropped the case and the band canceled its 1994 summer tour in protest which they continued during 1995. That prevented them from playing in the United States for the next three years. Eric Weisbard of Spin magazine said in 2001: "The group that was once accused of being synthetic grunge now seem as organic and principled a rock band as exists" (Weisbard, n.pag).

The band is also engaged in promoting awareness of Crohn's disease since the guitarist Mike McCready suffers from it. They play numerous benefit concerts to support causes they believe in. In 2001 they played in Seattle to support the United Nations in combating World Hunger. In 2005 the concert was held in the Chicago House of Blues to help the victims of Hurricane Katrina and the money was donated to Habitat for Humanity and the American Red Cross. They are also engaged in the work of Rock the Earth. It is a national nonprofit

environmental organization dedicated to protecting and defending natural resources through partnerships with the music industry and the worldwide environmental community to ensure a sustainable and healthy planet for all. For over ten years it has worked on high-profile issues throughout the United States like protecting endangered species, defending US public lands and national parks, fighting water, air and noise polluters etc. In 2011 Rock the Earth named *Pearl Jam* "Planet Defenders" for their efforts to decrease their own carbon emissions.

2.4. Grunge in Fashion

Grunge musicians dressed plainly – torn jeans, flannels, and boots. It was not a style they created out of fun in order to be different than others. They dressed like this out of necessity, because most of them came from working-class backgrounds and did not have enough money. Also, boots and flannels where appropriate for northwestern weather. Furthermore, these clothes were usually slept in, not washed etc.

Surprisingly, this style became a fashion statement in 1992, when grunge music was at the peak of its success. In November that year three young designers, Marc Jacobs, Anna Sui, and Christian Francis Roth presented grunge style to Seventh Avenue. Opinions on this style were divided. English actress Sophie Dahl said that since the word grunge was antisocial and the premise antidotal to what had gone before grunge fashion was perfect for the awkward stage of adolescence. In contrast, Suzy Menkes, a fashion critic, described it as ghastly (*Vogue*).

How absurd it was to introduce grunge to the fashion world is best said by a reader who sent them a letter with a question: "If the whole idea is to dress down, why picture models in $400 dresses? No one who can honestly relate to the music labeled grunge is going to pay $1,400 for a cashmere sweater [,] especially when they can buy a perfectly comfortable flannel shirt for 50 cents at the local thrift store (*Vogue*)." Although Jacobs' collection was

not even produced it did affect the fashion world. A reporter for *Knight Ridder Newspaper* wrote in 1992: “All fashion is loosening up, in an apparent rejection of the hard-edged styles and attitudes of the ’80s. Grunge is the realization of that backlash at its most extreme. And ugliest” (qtd. in *Vogue*). Images, advertisements and editorials began to try to show what is “real” (*Vogue*). Although this is a positive thing I agree with designer Jean Paul Gautier’s opinion that Grunge is nothing more than the way we dress when we have no money (qtd. in *Vogue*).

2.5. Grunge in Movies

Grunge music inspired writers and directors to make movies that were targeted towards the so called Generation X audience. With the help of a buzzing Seattle music scene they tried to achieve bigger commercial success by casting bands from Seattle or by making soundtracks to movies from their music. There are at least fifty movie titles that can be classified as “grunge.” Their plots focus on young people at the beginning of the 90’s who do not have jobs and are trying to find their place in the world. Also, a great number of documentaries have been made, most of them as a history of a certain band or on a popular conspiracy theory created around Kurt Cobain’s death.

In order to illustrate the grunge movie classification I have selected two movies – *Singles* and *Last Days*. *Singles* is the first movie which comes to my mind when I think of the 90s and the grunge movement and a good illustration of the era. The latter example, *Last Days* depicts Kurt Cobain’s last days or at least director Gus Van Sant’s version after reconstructing the story from various sources.

2.5.1 *Singles*

Singles is a romantic comedy from 1992 written and directed by Cameron Crowe. It was made to popularize Seattle and is the only movie to represent Seattle as the birthplace of grunge. Crowe himself stated in an interview that he had originally planned to set the story in Phoenix, Arizona, but he had changed the location to Seattle since he had discovered its "budding music scene."

The movie has three plot lines. One follows Janet, a coffee waitress (Bridget Fonda), who is in love with a rock musician Cliff (Matt Dillon) from a fictional grunge band *Citizen Dick.* Another plot line focuses on Linda and Steve, starring by Kyra Sedgwick and Campbell Scott. The two of them are not sure whether to start a relationship or not. The third plot is about Debbie (Sheila Kelly) who is trying to find the perfect guy.

The plot itself is pretty dull, just another romantic comedy, so Crowe had to do something to make it more appealing to the audience. As he was aware of the hype created around Seattle he did the right thing when he included cameos from quintessential bands from Seattle's scene, such as *Pearl Jam*, *Alice in Chains, Soundgarden, Tad* etc. Stone Gossard, Jeff Ament and Eddie Vedder of *Pearl Jam* got their part as members of Matt Dillon's band. Furthermore, *Soundgarden* play their song "Birth Ritual" and *Alice in Chains* "It Ain't Like That" and "Would" during a gig at a night club. All of this made the soundtrack more successful than the movie. It became a best seller even before the release of *Singles*.

The movie also serves as a sort of Seattle postcard since it features a number of well-known locations such as the Space Needle, Capitol Hill, Jimmy Hendrix's grave, Pike Market Place etc. One of the positive reviews on the movie which captures the zeitgeist of the time was written by Tim Appelo for *Entertainment Weekly*: "With an ambling naturalistic style,

Crowe captures the eccentric appeal of a town where espresso carts sprout on every corner and kids in ratty flannel shirts can cut records that make them millionaires" (Appelo, n.pag.).

2.5.2. *Last Days*

There are many documentaries on Kurt Cobain's life and death. A great number of them focus on a conspiracy theory according to which he was actually murdered. *Last Days* from 2005 by Gus Van Sant is somehow different from most of these. It is somewhere between documentary and fiction. Van Sant's intention was not to clear out the mystery of Cobain's death, but rather to present his last days credibly. Also, the main character of the movie is not Kurt Cobain. It is a young guy named Blake starred by Michael Pitt. He resembles Cobain and that immediately makes it clear that the movie is an allusion to his life. By giving a different name to the main character Van Sant was able to put facts in the movie which correspond to the conspiracy theory. The plot is very slow. All we see is Blake wandering around his house, mumbling to himself, eating, playing guitar etc. There is almost no dialogue and nothing much happens until the end where Blake overdosed and his spirit departs his body.

The movie combines fiction with the elements of a documentary and shows how the "spokesman of a generation" was a real person, with real problems and not some deity. It also shows how lives of rock-stars are not always as glamorous as people imagine them to be. Rather, they are filled with struggles just like everyone else's and perhaps even harder due to the constant presence of the media that first elevate a person to a level of deity and then crucify them just like in the case with Kurt Cobain.

Conclusion

Grunge, the cultural phenomenon which started in Seattle, Washington in the 1990s, definitely contributed to American society and had an impact on the overall culture of the United States. It proved how even the areas that are labeled “periphery” or “province” like the American Northwest can be hot spots of cultural change. The evolution of grunge, from its starting point through its peak of success to its decline is a great example of how a subculture is created and how it dissipates from the plethora of different cultural phenomena that create our society. Subcultures contribute to the dynamics and vivacity of the society. They are created around urban areas like grunge was created in Seattle. Grunge contributed to Seattle’s cultural and economic prosperity and changed the American Northwest from a province to a place buzzing with life, with young people who tried to create something and change their community for the better. Grunge musicians contributed to change through various forms of campaigning, activism and simply through being actively involved in the life of the place they lived in. Through their lyrics and actions they tried to move people to do the same. As it became the dominant popular movement of the 90s, grunge showed its widespread popularity as part of the fashion statement and the movie industry.

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