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**How does Cultural Capital operate in  
Grunge music, and does this have any  
bearing/effect on which bands are classified  
under this genre?**

In this essay I will be looking at the genre now referred to as Grunge. I will be taking specific examples of bands that have been described as 'Grunge', examining whether this is in fact, the most accurate way of describing them, and examining how the issues of authenticity and cultural capital affect genre classification.

I will be attempting to figure out the elements necessary to include when defining a genre. I will be considering Fabbri's structuralist approach to genre, which is to offer a graph-like model of genre.

"Each single element indicates the value of the rule for the genre" (Fabbri, 1980, p.55)

It also has a 'hyper-rule' or Ideology at the apex because without the ideology, the graph leaves us with little to no idea of the relative importance of rules within a class. In other words, what things do the works have in common, and how consistent are they with the ideology.

The main problem with this according to Toynbee is that when the ideology is added to the graph it begins to employ the use of language, like other methods of determining genre, and instigates a

'Predominating or essential genre characteristic in the guise of the hyper-rule' (Toynbee, 2000, p.107)

and therefore cannot be a completely mathematical approach.

Toynbee's Take on genre is that it ensures alignment between Bourdieu's theory of Habitus and Field, meaning that the existence of genre provides the artist with a set of rules; if they wish to fit into a certain field, they must use certain practices. If they use these practices or elements associated with this field they more often than not may be categorized into it. In the case of some genres the habitus may dictate the field or the other way around depending on the level of authenticity and Avante Garde culture perceived to be important to the culture operating around the genre. (Toynbee, 2000)

Ryan Hibbett is a contemporary theorist who deals with cultural capital and authenticity in popular music.

“Authenticity pervades nearly all avenues of discussion when it comes to art and culture” (Hibbett, 2010, p.1)

This theory can be applied to the genre in question. In Grunge the ideologies associating certain aspects of the culture with authenticity can become an opportunity for Cultural Capital.

I will also be briefly touching on Simon Frith and Theodor Adorno’s theories of popular music, authenticity and the media and comparing them with Steve Jones’s theories on the effect of Journalists and the media on genre classification.

## THE SOUND OF GENRE AND THE SOUND OF GRUNGE

Toynbee states that:

“ As the number of required traits increases, so do the number of texts which conform to the resulting composite of genre attributes will decline.” (Toynbee, 2000, p.105)

He continues to write:

“ In hardcore, and later in grunge, repetition is most clearly audible in the thick-buzzy timbre of the overdriven electric guitar.” (Toynbee, 2000, p.106)

A quick sketch of the elements of Grunge might include these characteristics: High dynamic range (particularly quiet verse/loud chorus), low tuned, fuzzy distorted guitars, simple riffs and song structures, raw sounding vocals.

Many of these characteristics could be applied to other genres, and in turn many works of other genres use some or all of these characteristics.

Toynbee’s sketch of the elements of hardcore isn’t remarkably dissimilar:

“ Noisy guitar chords with many overtones, bass guitar played in a higher register, declamatory vocal style” (Toynbee, 2000, p.105)

So how do these and many other genres of music which seem to share many of the same similar basic characteristics in theory, come to be analyzed as different? Fabbri's hyper-rule of genre analysis offers a combination of structuralist analysis with a mathematical graph approach.

"With rows and columns of genres, in which each single element would indicate the value of the rule I for the genre j"(Fabbri, 1980,p.54)

As discussed above, Toynbee's argues that the use of an Ideology at the Apex of the graph would somehow limit or pre-judge the work in question in some way, however without this model would be un-successful in the case of Grunge, a genre which seems to rely largely on ideology as a defining feature.

"Rock Music fetishizes community while refusing to acknowledge the thoroughly commercial nature of popular music." Simon Frith (Frith, 1998, p.31)

Grunge was certainly not the first or only genre to promote the ideology of underground versus mainstream however it was certainly one of the bigger genres to do so, thus making this and other ideologies associated with it an important characteristic of the genre itself. These ideologies were also reflected in lyrics within the music, many of which became a staple of the genre.

"Mind if we listen to Nirvana?" was almost like fessing up to being a die-hard Bon-Jovi fan" (Ferguson, 1994, *UTNE Reader*, 3)

Examples of similar ideologies expressed in lyrics can be found in some bands songs, Like Nirvana's 'Radio Friendly Unit Shifter' (In Utero, 1993,DGC Records) or Soundgarden's 'Sub Pop Rock City', many make a convincing dig at the mainstream grunge scene.

“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” (1988,*Sub Pop 200*, Sub Pop Records)

The producers and their ideologies also often help to define the genre. Toynbee's example of Hardcore producer John Crosslin and his “Trying to persuade the musicians of the need for ‘artificial’ restraint in the studio,” (Toynbee, 2000, p.104) suggests that to achieve similar genre specific sounds, certain compromises are often made. Bands will often go to producers asking for sound similar to another bands they have produced.

Producer Steve Albini has encountered this problem, famous for producing Nirvana's ‘In Utero’ (1993,DGC Records) he has become known for the Grunge sound, however he argues that it is not his own ideologies which earned him this title, but working on the right records at the right time.

"I've recorded 1500-2000 records, and I know they are all quite different," protests Albini. "I've recorded acoustic albums hundreds of times, with acoustic guitars or strings, and so on. I can name hundreds of bands that I've recorded that have a completely different aesthetic than grunge. And I don't impose my taste on the bands I record. To me it's ridiculous to say that my records have a sound. I can understand why someone who has only heard three or four records I have worked on that are stylistically similar can make such a statement, but I think it is wrong."(Albini, 1993,*Maximum Rock n Roll Magazine*, 22)

So if ideologies help to define the genre, it would be impossible to analyze works within the genre using any graph model which does not include an Ideology, because (As discussed above) you may end up with Hardcore, or another genre which expresses similar musical and aesthetic traits.

So what other non-musical elements need to be considered in order to explain genre classification? There is of course, the aspect of practice, and different practices used within and associated with the given genre. In this case we could possibly apply Bourdieu's theory of Habitus and Field.

## THE CHICKEN OR THE EGG – HABITUS AND FIELD

Toynbee refers to Genre as Ensuring “Alignment between Habitus and Field.” (Toynbee, 2000, p.104), making it possible to theorize that the need for genre classification in popular music is necessary; however this brings about the question of whether this alignment is more beneficial to the artist wishing to work in a chosen field and adopting the associated habitus, or simply for classification of works already produced in a similar means and location to those associated with the genre.

Based on Bourdieu's philosophy of Habitus and Field, (Sometimes referred to as the ‘Subjective ‘ and ‘Objective’), it is possible to see the reason for classification of the (already created) work into a genre.

”In Short, Being the product of a particular class of objective regularities, the habitus tends to generate all the ‘reasonable’, ‘common sense’, behaviors (and only these) which are possible within the limits of these regularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field, whose objective future they anticipate.” (Bourdieu, 1984, p.56-57).

In many examples of popular music , the field dictates the habitus used to work within it. Take for example a genre like Jazz or Be-Bop, where repetition of whole songs (standards), certain instruments and stylistic features are associated with the music, although improvisation is a relatively frequent addition to the original melodies and chord changes of the songs each time they are repeated.

“(Be-Bop is) a reliable repertoire of standard tunes, as well as newer ‘classics’ written within the same genre, provide a set of melodies and chord changes which are then subjected to variative testing by improvising soloists.” (Toynbee, 2000, p.107)

In applying this to the case of grunge, it seems safe to assume that the field is more often than not dictated by the habitus.

There are common traits associated with the bands we now refer to as Grunge that helped to unite them into the genre and define the field. There are many examples, from ideologies as discussed above, to image, to the actual similarities in the sonic elements of their music.

One example of a non-musical trait which the bands associated with this genre have in common is their lack of theatrics, costuming and enthusiasm. As Kurt Cobain of Nirvana and others have said in interviews, much of this was a purposeful reaction to the genre that was popular at the time (Now known as Glam Metal/Hair Metal), which was exceedingly theatrical, and over the top in its aesthetic.

”Some of the working class appeal of these artists and their anti-popular culture stance could be said to reminiscent of the then fading punk scene which was popular in Seattle during the late 1970s” (Anderson, 2007, p73)

So by practicing these same methods and adopting the ideologies does that mean that by default the artist in question would be operating within the field of Grunge? The other aspect to Bourdieu’s theory that becomes relevant in this case is the idea of ‘Likelihood of possibles occurring’ within the radius of the chosen field. This is particularly a problem in relation to geographical and historical components to a movement such as this, because as we are working with Toynbee’s approach also, that genre is what is aligning the Habitus and Field (and that they are already associated with each other) then it would be assumed that location and time period are a part of the Habitus and therefore the ‘Likelihood’ would not be as high for a work to be created in

the field would not be as high outside of these constraints, in which case Field and genre would become one and the same. The real question then lies not within the ability to operate within a genre, but what is required to be authentically operating within that genre and the culture surrounding it.

## THE AUTHENTICITY OF CULTURE

In the words of Pierre Bourdieu:

“Avante Garde culture is (achieved by) rejecting the generic, common, easy and immediately accessible” (Bourdieu, 1984 p.32)

In many ways this statement is applicable to most genres of music where the ideology of anti-mainstream is promoted, however it is a particularly ironic statement when applied to the genre of Grunge.

According to Bourdieu's philosophy, it is when Avante Garde culture becomes popular culture that another movement will form as a reaction. The irony occurs when we apply it to a culture that surrounds such a large and popular mainstream music movement, because one of the general features of the 'Avante Garde' is that it rejects the "generic, common and easily accessible" (Bourdieu, 1984)

Grunge seems to do this with examples like Nirvana's 'Radio Friendly Unit Shifter' while still being extremely popular, and easily accessible.

“With lyrical concepts often tackling topics such as Rape, violence, depression and mental illness and contrasting this with often upbeat music, which provided a specific type of irony and desensitization to these subjects.” (2007, Anderson p.47)

Grunge did not invent the ideas of drug use and self-destruction, but it certainly helped disassociate drugs like heroin with the glamorous rock star image and re-

acquainted it with the ordinary working class. (Anderson, 2007).

However, as not everyone who listened to Nirvana, Alice in Chains or Soundgarden in the 1990s suffered from internal torment and took drugs, or for that matter lived in America, it would be possible to debate that according to Bourdieu's theories of Habitus and Field that the idea of these types of psychological issues being associated with cultural identity of this music, would be specifically representative of the people creating the music and therefore the original Avante Garde genre, yet many medical journals suggest that some of these issues are statistically increasing globally in both the generation making the music, and those growing up listening to it (Generation Y). (Brabazon, 2005).

So was the idea of an authentic, Avante Garde culture of grunge musicians and what they stood for merely a marketing tool used to create cultural capital?

As discussed above, many involved in the grunge culture would suggest that what is mainstream grunge is in-authentic and that to authentically operate within the genre of Grunge, you would have to have been living in Seattle between 1985 and 1992, however that leaves no room for the transportation of the culture to a new location and the consistent development of identity occurring as time passes, which in this case certainly has happened. Fans of the music, fashion trends and even bands from other countries still exist and can still identify with Grunge culture. Kurt Cobain killed himself in 1994, having a huge effect not just on Seattle, but also on Nirvana fans throughout the world. Many believe that the post-grunge increase in youth suicides, particularly in Australia is due to this. (Hibbett, 2005, p.3).

Toynbee also argues that  
 “(As against film and television) Pop music may be owned and produced within communities. The institution of the proto-market is crucial here, enabling small-scale production and reception in bounded social-geographical spaces. This material then under-writes a deeply embedded discourse which states that the validity of a musical

style will be measured by the extent to which it is an expression of grass-roots values and identity.” (Toynbee, 2000,p.110)

This meaning the culture surrounding the given genre of music is often firmly bound (as in the case of grunge) to Avante Garde.

Frith argues that this position is developed most completely in rock ideology, and that it is just an ideology (see pg 2 for quote), it ‘Fetishizes’ community, and does not publically acknowledge its commercial nature, because for an artist operating in the genre to do so, it would then void them of certain cultural values associated with the genre, making their work seem less authentic to those involved within the scene.

#### THE INEVITABILITY OF GENRE CLASIFICATION AND THE AUTHENTICITY DILEMMA

So in that case it would seem that the artists operating within the culture are in some aspect, the least aware of the cultural capital they are generating. Of course there are cases as in any genre of ‘Cashing in’ and ‘Selling out’ where the artist is well aware of the situation, but it is difficult to say whether in the case of the grunge movement, the culture itself may have been created or adapted heavily by any outside sources.

None of the theories or means of analysis I have previously discussed take into consideration the performing artist.

The listener has the ability not only to classify the artist into a certain genre but to judge a bands authenticity within that genre.

Auslander states that live performance enables the determination of authenticity. “Only in live performance when the listener can ascertain that a group which looks authentic in photographs, and sound authentic on records, really is authentic in terms of rock ideology.” (Auslander, 2006, p.90)

In the case of grunge, this is particularly relevant, fans would perceive a band's 'level of grunge' not only by their ideologies in their lyrics and the way they sounded, but also by their aesthetic and the way in which they dressed and performed; the obvious example being a lack of theatrics and costuming. (Anderson, 2007)

However journalists and critics seem to have as much sway as the fans involved with the cultural movement themselves, as Kyle Anderson states in his book *Accidental Revolution* – the story of Grunge, the term 'Grunge' was coined by small-time journalists associated with the 'Subpop scene' as a method of describing the sound.

Journalists and reviewers certainly have the power to change the perception of a band's authenticity. A textbook example of this can be observed when researching articles and interviews with Nirvana and Kurt Cobain. Being analyzed as the most in-authentic and mainstream band of the Grunge movement in the 1990s (as discussed above), with many involved in the grunge culture arguing that their music lacked authenticity, post-grunge movement research into articles and reviews about the band seem to reveal evidence that Nirvana, rather than being considered fake and inauthentic as they were at the peak of their success, are now idolized as the face of the grunge movement.

"The music contains within itself a pre-existing truth, and that it is the task of both performer and audience to rediscover and re-express that truth." Writes an unknown author in reference to Nirvana on a blog site entitled 'Rock and Authenticity'

Journalist Steve Jones Defines authenticity as one of the "Most Prevalent themes in popular music criticisms" (Jones, 1995, p.2) up alongside racism/urban culture and mass culture.

Many journalists seem to romanticize Kurt Cobain's death as the end of the Grunge Movement. Thus seemingly, Nirvana's musical association with the term grunge seems to have become more authentic post 1994 (Cobain's suicide)

Everet True States in his 1996 book 'Nirvana, the true story'

“The death of Kurt Cobain was the end of an era.” (True, 1996, p.62)

Jones argues that this is simply a strategy for meaning making employed amongst journalists trying to explain a ‘greater meaning’ behind Cobain’s suicide. (Jones, 1995, p.103)

Simon Frith also states that journalists are often to blame for the issue of authenticity.

“Fanzines, fanzine writers (and the important critics in the mass music papers share the fanzine stance) are the source of arguments about what rock mean, arguments not only about art and commerce, but also about art and audience”. (Frith, 2007, p.3)

So if the genre classification and authenticity in relation to that genre is in the hands of Journalists and the audience, it seems it would be particularly difficult for a successful Seattle rock band during the early 1990s to avoid being classified as Grunge

Artists like Alice in Chains (originally formed in 1983 as Glam Metal band Alice N’ Chainz) were already realizing this, however for bands who didn’t mind being classified this brought the advantage of mainstream success, their solution was if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em. They significantly managed to market themselves as grunge, played with grunge bands and become multi-millionaires, while still retaining a significant amount of authenticity with the media and audience; and their style that was significantly different from Nirvana, Soundgarden or any of the bands originally labeled ‘Grunge.’

“Alice in Chains will stand as the definition of what grunge is because they embody the clichés so well.” (Anderson, 2007,p.97)

The other approach to the situation was to shun the media and the label ‘Grunge’ and to remain underground. Bands such as Mudhoney (who were on the Deep Six compilation and considered amongst the Avante Garde scene to be a highly authentic grunge band) managed to delay signing to a major label until the mainstream explosion of grunge was almost over , while still continuing to successfully tour and release albums

and have a major influence on the sound of the genre from behind the scenes.

“When Kurt Cobain was still living in Olympia, and still finding graffiti on his bathroom wall informing him that he smelled like Teen Spirit deodorant, Mudhoney was gigging around and laying down the track that would comprise the band's dazy, zoned-out, distortion-pedaled sound which eventually became the Seattle Scene's Trademark”, an article by Elizabeth Wurtzel (1993, Musician Issue 1) proclaimed on the wave of Mudhoney's first major label release (10 years into their career) Piece of Cake (1993, Reprise Records).

## CONCLUSION

It is impossible to say that none of the bands generally classified under the umbrella of grunge couldn't fit into another genre, as it is proven with hardcore or any genre that musical analysis alone is not enough to classify a band into a particular rock genre, however when the non-musical elements such as ideologies, fashion, and the general culture surrounding the genre are taken into consideration, it does prevent these bands from being defined in the mainstream media as a different genre.

The rolls of the musicians and producers involved in making this music which is often viewed as a counter-cultural reaction or display of Avante Garde has now limited them somewhat in how they are perceived within the media and by their audiences, this in turn has set standards for the level of cultural capital or authenticity that is necessary to be perceived by these audiences in order for an artist to associate themselves into the genre, and therefore making it limiting to artists working within the genre because they now have to continue to reject the mainstream in order to be considered authentic.

I believe the Habitus and field Theory is relevant when applied to the genre, and it is safe to say that it is the Habitus that in this case dictates the field, as the ideologies and aesthetics of the bands are often more similar from band to band than the actual musical

elements in their recordings, however as it leaves no room for the influence of the audience or the media and provides only part of the picture. Therefore we must conclude that a combination of Toynbee's theories and Frith's notion of Rock Ideologies fetishizing community with Auslander's approach that a live performance determines authenticity, is the most accurate way to measure authenticity within this particular genre.

Journalists and the audience play a big part in defining the bands within any genre which enjoys mainstream success such as this, and as much as the artists involved and the Avante Garde community may try to ignore it, there is clear evidence to support otherwise. While there may be musical similarities between these bands, there are the same level of musical similarities between them and bands classified as other genres and (as discussed in the above example of Nirvana and Kurt Cobain), it seems that Jones's 'strategy for meaning making' would actually be applicable to most examples of well-known grunge bands; therefore it is safe to conclude that it is Journalists and the media who are responsible for taking the term originally used for a few bands on the small time Deep Six compilation, and applying it to every band from Seattle vaguely resembling rock during a 10 year period, in order to generate a culture which they can (and did) sell.

While some of these Seattle bands have successfully evaded the backwash of Nirvana's success, other bands have managed to 'cash in' and use it to their advantage while still maintaining an acceptable level of authenticity among the media and their audience, whether doing so intentionally or not.

It is impossible to say if the global explosion of grunge culture would have occurred for these other bands without Nirvana, however whether Grunge died with Kurt Cobain or not, a lot of these bands and bands influenced by them are still continuing to make music in a similar style, although they are generally being classified and received as other genres by the media and audience of today.

It would seem to me that the only thing that died in 1994 was a famous musician and the Cultural Capital associated with the word Grunge.

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