

Popular Culture Essay using the band Nirvana as a case study (2008)

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Stuart Hall argues that the meanings of popular culture forever transform from stages of incorporation – distortion – resistance – negotiation – and recuperation. Discuss these processes of ideological and cultural struggles in the realm of popular culture. (Use one example of popular culture to make your case).

Birmingham School theorists, such as Stuart Hall argue that the meanings of popular culture forever transform from stages of incorporation, distortion, resistance, negotiation and recuperation. While the media may originally object to something new and radical because it contains an anti-hegemonic message or its unfamiliarity scares them, ultimately (as Antonio Gramsci's theorises) it will be incorporated into the mainstream media and in this process the original meanings are often lost along the way (Ives [referencing Gramsci], 2004, p64). But because of the constantly changing realm of popular culture, audience perspectives may also be constantly changing. Music and the genre of Rock and Roll in particular is one area that this is especially predominant in. The US rock group Nirvana, whose career began in 1987 and ended tragically in 1994, when lead singer Kurt Cobain committed suicide are a prime example of this. Hall's theory will be analysed by looking at how Nirvana lead the way and pioneered the grunge craze, the meanings behind some of Nirvana's music, as well as how Cobain's death and commercialism has affected these meanings.

Examining the lyrics of many of Nirvana's songs may provide some insight into the mind of Kurt Cobain as he was the key lyricist of the band. While the lyrics might not always make sense, they almost always had an important message at their core even if that message might not always be immediately obvious. Cobain didn't want every song to have a definitive message but took a more post modern approach and wrote songs that were more open ended text's that can be interpreted in many different ways by his audience (Novoselic, 2004, p20). With this said there were times when he was very vocal about the meanings of his songs. It has been stated by the band that the song *Polly* in particular, tells the story of the true events of the rape and torture of a 14 year old girl that occurred in 1987. The lyrics "think she wants some water to put out the blow torch" refer to the girl being abducted on the way home from a punk rock show and tortured by a man who hung the 14 year old girl upside down in his trailer park home and tortured her with a blow torch, a razor, and hot wax. She eventually escaped by acting bored and flirting with her captor, which is referred to in the lines "she's just as bored as me" and "she caught me off my guard, it amazes the will of instinct" (Azerrad, 1993, p170). The topic of rape is obviously a very serious subject and by featuring this song on the album *Nevermind*, Nirvana was able to get their message of what a terrible occurrence this was and how things like this should never take place again, across to the millions of people who purchased the album worldwide. Furthermore on the follow up compilation album *Incesticide*, Cobain had a message printed on the liner notes that referred to a similar incident, "Last year, a girl was raped by two wastes of sperm and eggs while they sang the lyrics to our song 'Polly'. I have a hard time carrying on knowing there are plankton like that in our audience" (Cobain, 1992, liner notes). Cobain was actively using his music to try and stop these injustices. However several years on the song may have lost much of its meaning; the album may still be being sold around

the world but without the band around to reinforce the context people may overlook its original meaning. The original song was never released as a single but came with the *Nevermind* album that contained lyrics for all the songs on the CD/cassette. Kurt Cobain's singing style often made for a vocally interesting sound but also meant that many of his lyrics were extremely hard to decipher. When you couple these facts with the ability to download the song online from places such as iTunes as a single song without any lyrics, many of today's fans would likely miss the point of the song entirely and just enjoy it for its entertainment and escapism values (Dubner, 2007, p6). While there are still diehard fans who go out of their way to find out the meanings behind *Polly* and other Nirvana songs, this distortion of the songs true meaning over time will mean that most modern listeners will never know what Cobain was singing about.

The new found popularity that came from the exploitation of Nirvana's music for commercial purposes is perhaps one such reason for this. This would cause literary modernists to not regard Nirvana's work in very high esteem. They would almost immediately disregard it because they would see it as popular music produced for the masses and therefore low culture. This is largely in part to the band's cult status due to the saturation of their music throughout popular culture today as well as the bands history and publicity of Cobain's death throughout all forms of media. It could be argued that, since Cobain's death left the rights to his music in the hands of many separate parties, including his wife Courtney Love who went on to sell a large portion of her rights to further parties, this has caused their catalog of songs to become used in many commercial ventures. A version of *Smells Like Teen Spirit* appeared in the 2001, Baz Luhrmann film *Moulin Rouge*, the popular song *Heart Shaped Box* appeared in the videogame *Guitar Hero II* and there are countless other examples. This has caused the meanings behind the music to become largely tamed and domesticated and literary modernists would say that listening to these songs would be a purely escapist activity and a waste of time that only supports the false needs, created by marketing and the music industry to listen to and purchase this kind of music. They may also argue that their music promotes the idea of commodity fetishism and that consumers who listen to their album are only doing so because they feel the need to keep up with all the latest trends. It is estimated that the world music industry was worth \$19.6bn in 2007 (Matheson, 2007, p4) and that consumers who buy their cd's are only contributing to this capitalist society. Their opinion of Nirvana's work may have changed slightly since its original inception, at a time before the meaning of their songs had been distorted by the media. As Nirvana is largely credited as the band that made 'alternative' music popular and created modern rock, literary modernists couldn't have as easily dismissed Nirvana's early work on the grounds of its popularity. This is because a lot of their early albums weren't commercially released and therefore weren't heard by the majority of their fans until they had a big commercial success a few years later, so when recording these early albums they were not 'popular' artists. This isn't to say that literary modernists would have supported Nirvana's early work, quite the opposite in fact. They simply would not have been able to (at the time) ignore it on popularity alone and would have had different reasons for dismissing it; such as a perceived lack of any enlightening or educational qualities that their preferred style of music from classical composers such as Beethoven and Chopin may provide, as well as the escapist nature mentioned previously. Frankfurt school theorists may agree with these points on some level, but would also acknowledge and praise the subversive nature of their music for its potential to change our society.

Cobain may have agreed with the Frankfurt school theorists to some degree, as he too despised the mainstream media. Nirvana's bass player Krist Novoselic was quoted by *Rolling Stone magazine*, saying "Kurt really despised the mainstream. That's what Smells Like Teen Spirit was all about: The mass mentality of conformity." (Fricke, 1999). Smells Like Teen Spirit indisputably became Nirvana's most popular and most recognisable track and was embraced by the mainstream audience. This popularity could lead to the situation to be seen as the media subverting the original meaning but post modernists might also see it as a resistant move by the band against this mass media. Cobain explained "I was trying to write the ultimate pop song. I was basically trying to rip off The Pixies." (Abramovich, 2004, p1 [quoting Rolling Stones, 1994]). Ultimately it was a song about conformity, which Cobain knew the masses would love but not understand. By the mainstream adopting the song like they did, he would be able to prove his point and put up a bit of resistance against the process of popular culture absorbing his work. The name of the song was derived after Cobain spent the night with Tobi Vail, the lead singer of the band *Bikini Kill* and another member of the band spray painted "Kurt Smells Like Teen Spirit" on his bedroom wall. As Vail wore 'Teen Spirit' deodorant, the message was implying that Vail had marked Cobain with her scent. Cobain didn't know this when he wrote the song and upon its release, Teen Spirit deodorant sales increased significantly when the song became a hit. This meant that right from the start, the song was contributing to capitalism in more ways than Cobain originally intended and the process of incorporation had already begun. The song *In Bloom*, contained similar anti-mainstream themes and also demonstrated Nirvana's cultural struggle. The lyrics of the chorus "he's the one, who likes all our pretty songs and he likes to sing along and he likes to shoot his gun. But he don't know what it means" were fairly straight forward in indicating this. It was about someone who just follows the trends, despite not understanding them. Nirvana had plenty of fans who fell into this category, despite Cobain's disdain for these kinds of people. The band however was able to put up some resistance when it came to making the music video for Smells Like Teen Spirit. The cheerleaders featured in the clip wore 'sleeve' tattoos and the symbol for anarchy on their outfits as a mark of protest. The producers did conversely reject Nirvana's proposal of having the cheerleaders' fat and unattractive (Azerrad, 1993, p191-193), which was perhaps an early sign of the taming and domesticating that would occur to their music and that the band would have to struggle to get their ideology across to new audiences

Post modernists however may praise the bands work. As briefly mentioned, the genres that we now know as 'modern rock' and 'grunge' didn't exist before Nirvana. Nirvana and a similar band of the time, *Pearl Jam* were forging new ground in the field. They started out by playing songs that were labeled as 'alternative' which was a term used to describe anything out of the mainstream. Once they achieved success with the album *Nevermind*, which reached number 2 in Australia's ARIA charts and number 1 in America's Billboard 200 charts and UK's Album charts (Schnack, 2006), people had to come up with a new term for their style of music because it was obviously popular despite the 'alternative' moniker. Post modernists would commend them for pioneering a new genre, namely the 'grunge' craze, which was characterized by angst-ridden lyrics, loud guitars and in particular the clothes and bands appearance. They wore baggy second hand clothes and flannel shirts which were often ripped and their hair was generally unkempt. This style that became synonymous with grunge, originated from what these bands chose to wear, not what was popular and it became a uniform for lovers of the music. However it didn't take long for Nirvana's unique look to become a fashion trend that sold for premium

prices in stores, which went completely against the original meaning. It could be argued that as soon as the term grunge was coined, Nirvana had taken a big step to becoming tamed and incorporated by the media. While somewhat ironically this very idea is one of the main things that grunge was fighting against and could be seen as both a hegemonic and counter hegemonic move for Nirvana. Post modernists may also continue by arguing that similarly, without the increased exposure provided by the record labels and MTV, Nirvana's fan base would have never gone on to grow as large as it has. Nirvana used the media against itself to get their message out to more and more people and although they would reach the mainstream audience that Cobain despised, they would at the same time be reaching more people who understood the true intentions and meanings behind their songs. While it's a possibility that they reached more people through this mainstream exposure who didn't understand the bands messages than those who did, it is in this way that the band could at least recuperate some of their original intent back from the media who were in the process of incorporating and distorting Nirvana's work.

It could be argued that although Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School theorists are correct in that the meanings of popular culture are constantly changing and there may always be elements present of resistance and recuperation, the amount of distortion created by the mainstream media will nearly always be greater. Cobain had a fear that could almost be described as paranoid, that despite their original intentions, Nirvana's music would end up being milked and exploited beyond their control, for monetary gain (Schnack, 2006). Looking back on his position, it seems his fears may have been founded.

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