

THROUGH THE LENS OF GRUNGE: DISTORTION OF SUBCULTURES IN
GENTRIFIED SEATTLE

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the effects of gentrification on subcultures in Seattle using grunge as an interpretive lens. Distortion is theorized as both an artistic/aesthetic practice and a translator of social/subcultural phenomena to understand the ambivalent and ironic sensibilities found within the study of grunge and Seattle subcultures, in both the early 1990s and present day. The research begins with an analysis of grunge in the popular culture industry in the 1990s to track instances of social breach and cultural creation/destruction, and then further examined through the model of early subcultural studies. The problematics that arise are then reappraised within an analysis of grunge in the post-subcultural model, which makes space for study of the current activity and subcultural participation of grunge. A case study of the current socio-political and economic issues in Seattle is then presented. Grunge is then revealed to be presently practiced and understood in both dominant culture and subcultural formations as a spectrum of nostalgia and revivalism. Here, the ironies and ambivalences of grunge style, practice, and form are revealed and studied as paradoxical concepts. These complex webs are finally understood to be generative spaces for the creation of new meaning through retroactive forms of performance, both artistically and culturally.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my partner, who embarked with me on the journey of my graduate studies, has been there since the very beginning, and supported me every step of the way.

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1. INTRODUCTION: THEORIZING DISTORTION

From the perspective of the physics of sound, a number of elements combine to form distortion: the clipping of an audio signal by increasing its amplitude past a maximum overhead level, which leads to the exciting and sustainment of overtone harmonies, and finally a compression of the overall sound, such that it can be contained to some degree in order to avoid unpleasant feedback of the signal. Distortion is often understood as an undesirable effect, as it may damage amplification, speaker systems and human ears, thus it serves as a cue for sound engineers in both live and studio settings to decrease the signal volume. This has also historically hindered distortion from being appreciated as an aesthetic value. However, the evolution of electric/amplified guitar and its place in rock music has continually made space for distortion to be appreciated as a distinct affective feature. Still, there remains a desire for distortion to be contained and tasteful, where certain descriptors such as “warm” and “smooth” are utilized in the chase for a beautiful distorted guitar sound. It is useful to expose the inherent contradictory and paradoxical nature of the desire to produce such distorted sounds; at its core, distortion is unrefined, uncontrolled, and sustained destruction. To desire and attempt to make it sound aesthetically pleasing in traditional terms of artistic beauty is in many ways a counterproductive project. This paradoxical phenomenology of distortion can be expanded to fit the discussion of subculture to deepen the understanding of both distortion itself and subculture symbiotically; this project can be satisfied in few other ways than a creative, artistic, and performative medium. Read the

following passage twice, substituting the catch phrases and key words in the brackets the second time.

Distortion represents dissonance in sound/[the social sphere]. With the production of each distorted note/[subcultural formation], the overtones/[influences] are exposed, excited, and sustained. The volume/[popularity] of the signal/[subcultural products] is boosted/[commodified] past its bearable level/[in the mainstream]. The sound/[social drama] is then compressed/[hegemonized], so that it rests/[is confined] perpetually on the cusp of losing control/[losing its meaning] and damaging the auditory sensors/[the death of the subculture]. The effort to make distortion/[subculture] desirable and aesthetically pleasing/[a product of popular, mainstream culture] is thus a task that is contradictory/[oppressive and denigrating] to its purpose and meaning/[social relevance and necessity] and to the principles of its very existence/[its existence as an expressive device and emotional outlet]. Artists/[grunge artists] who embrace/[embody] distortion/[dissonant contradiction] and accentuate/[purvey] its raw/[trenchant], unrefined/[contradictory], and uncontrolled/[ironic] nature will find themselves subcategorized/[exiled] into a smaller genre/[lower status] of music/[culture] and sound art/[society]. Audiences/[the grunge subculture] who embrace/[participate in and circulate] distortion/[dissonant contradiction] will find resonance/[identification] and catharsis/[a voice] in the harshness/[truth and organic intellect] of the sound/[subcultural messages], facilitating a connection/[tribal formation] in a manner that is unachievable/[impossible] through other modes of communication/[reality and normal social life].

2. THROUGH THE LENS OF GRUNGE

“Our little tribe [group], it’s always been and always will until the end¹.”

Nirvana, “Smells Like Teen Spirit”
As sung live at Del Mar Fairgrounds, CA
December 28, 1991

Kurt Cobain, songwriter/guitarist/singer for grunge rock band Nirvana, though heralded as the voice of the generation², often approached the role with a sense of irony, deviance, and defiance. The above lyric is just one small example; instead of singing the lyric “group” as sung on the (by the date of this performance) world famous recording of the band’s hit single, here he opted for the more evocative “tribe.” In a performative sense, this substitution conjures a deeper meaning of the lyric/song and adds greater depth to the band’s stature as a sub/culturally impactful entity. Yet, it is impossible to know exactly what Cobain meant by this spontaneous switch; is Cobain consenting and assuming the position of leader, strongly asserting that grunge and its followers are a distinctive group amongst mass society, declaring that it shall never permeate fully into the dominant social framework, always to remain on the outside, the periphery, until its subcultural death? Or, is Cobain simply responding with sarcastic play to the growing spectacularization of grunge in the media, where social, style, and class-based difference is demarcated, packaged, and broadcast to dominant society as a new “Other”? Either

¹ Nirvana. "Smells Like Teen Spirit." *From the Muddy Banks of the Wishkah*, Geffen, 1996.

² Ferguson, Sarah. “Kurt Cobain and the politics of damage.” *The Rock History Reader*, edited by Theo Cateforis, Routledge, pp. 283-5.

way, this performative moment compels us to understand grunge within the discourse of the popular culture production industry and subcultural studies.

2.1 Grunge in the Cultural Industry and Subcultural Studies Model of the CCCS

The industry of popular culture production in America has long been dedicated to accumulating massive amounts of money by selling cultural products to the masses, most prominently mediated by (but not limited to) radio, television, film, and music. For the first half of the twentieth century, chief producers and public relations representatives of cultural production companies packaged and sold products that were conceived and created within the company itself, creating a hardened exterior that worked to deflect the outside (audience and critic) influence and opinion. This growing idea of branding, where the appearance of a certain production company on a given cultural product garners higher expectations for quality and success, became paramount to the industry in this time. The cultural production companies thus imposed a framework of what their audience should be experiencing as American popular culture, and further assumed their products were both desired and in-demand by their massive audiences, ultimately asserting their cultural dominance and impact. However, a key shift can be analyzed within one faction of the cultural production industry that brings to light the topic of subculture that is in question.

In his article, “Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music,” Richard Peterson analyzes the industrial and social conditions that led to the explosion of rock ‘n’ roll music in the mainstream and popular culture industries, which revolutionized the

circulation, exchange, and communication of social phenomena and popular cultural products. Whereas previously the cultural production industries made decisions for their imposed popular cultural frameworks based on internal visions of producers, the shift from radio shows to the television freed the radio airwaves for popular music to thrive and become audience-centric, being envisioned as a jukebox for the most popular songs at the top of the charts to be played around the clock. This exploited a blindness of the cultural industry to the true desires of the young baby-boomer audience, who were much less interested in the corporate-approved big band crooners such as Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole than they were the raucous rockers such as Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. With this rise of new music came new social contentions and anxieties, as the content of rock 'n' roll music portrayed the cutting edge of youthful, rebellious, and deviant energies within the up-and-coming generation in an unprecedented manner, that of which was packaged and sold by the familiar cultural production companies. This led to the creation of a more organic model wherein the desires and demands of society shifted the operations of popular culture productions more instantaneously, leaving the dominant society in a dubious position to keep track and reconcile with emergent popular cultures.

Cultural production companies continue to operate in this manner; looking retrospectively will reveal that the speed at which new forms of culture rise and fall, so quickly as to call them merely “fads” and “trends,” is accelerating in the 21st century, alongside its hosting technology. In this blur of sound and vision, it is pertinent to look for not only linear patterns of artistic and social progression, but cyclical as well. In

order to fully understand this, it is necessary to analyze further the moments of breach wherein the cutting-edge appears in the mainstream, and how this is recuperated by society at large. Further, in order to fully understand grunge and situate it within the popular culture production industry, its roots in subculture must be defined and analyzed.

In the 1960s and '70s, the British School and Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies brought to scholarly attention and focus the phenomena of culture forming, happening, and cycling in the apparently peripheral, marginal, and subordinated factions of society³. Thus arose a theory of subculture, most notably penned by Dick Hebdige in his account of punks, teds, and mods in his work, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). Hebdige described the appropriation of signs, signifiers, and symbols executed in a resistant fashion by members of these subcultural groups. These signs were at once circulating in dominant frameworks of mass society, embedded with markedly different, hegemonic meaning, thus sparking anxiety amongst dominant society once the re-appropriated signs and their new subcultural practices were re-circulated into mass media by news, television, and radio (Hebdige 84-5). Subcultures, according to Hebdige and Stuart Hall, came to represent social decline by these processes of mediation and encoding/decoding (94). Hebdige saw the resistant actions of subcultures as “heroic,” creating a fetish of the “spectacular subculture” in the field of sociology that continued for the next two decades (18-9).

³ Clark, John, et. al. “Subcultures, Cultures, and Class,” in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, Hutchinson, 1976, pp. 35-45.

Grunge began in the mid-1980s in and around Seattle, Washington. A number of conditions led to the creation and formation of grunge subculture. The Pacific Northwest boasted perfect conditions for lumber and coal industries, as well as shipbuilding, wholesale trade and fishing industries, but with that came less of a need for a cultural arts industry to thrive in the area. Additionally, the geographic situation of the Pacific Northwest, its isolation and distance from then larger major cities of Vancouver, Portland, and San Francisco made it less desirable for transient cultures such as national or regional touring acts (mainstream rock bands) to visit and perform. The perpetually inclement weather conditions, rain and dark grey skies, were a cause of chronic depression and seasonal affective disorder. In the decade leading into grunge, the hardening of conservatism, capitalism, neoliberalism, and introduction of trickle-down economics by the Reagan Administration caused economic anxiety amongst working class groups. Fear-mongering of a drug crisis orchestrated by the President and mass media in the United States scapegoated working class and people of color. Social crises including AIDS and racism flourished, unchecked and neglected by positions of power. Thus, on the national front, social unease was brewing, and with the local/regional conditions already impacting artist and bohemian groups in Seattle and the Pacific Northwest, a breach was forthcoming. On top of all that, 1980s pop culture produced hair metal at its musical forefront, creating a culture that glorified the sexual objectification of women and was dominated by hyper-masculinized men. Change was not just brewing, it was necessary.

Grunge challenged the conditions that aggravated its creators enough to organize and perform it. The key method of challenge was irony and parody. Creators of grunge enjoyed the guitar-oriented and drum-heavy hard rock of the late 1970s and heavy metal and punk of the early 1980s, but rejected and ultimately mocked the construction of hyper-masculinized men who, on top of their influential sound and style, touted misogyny and sexism in their lyrics and treatment of women in particular. Citing the ridiculousness of the culture, grunge musicians sought to make entertainment for themselves by wielding the powerful sound and experimenting with the conflation of ego in a strictly performance and composition-based sense. Thus, on stage and in performance, grunge musicians could essentially pull a prank on their audience and get away with it. The music performance of grunge was the main expressive device employed as a response to its formative conditions.

Other stylistic or symbolic factors of grunge, including fashion, were borne of practicality and necessity, or were habits formed by the conditions that permeated the dominant understanding of the subculture. Grunge fashion can be observed from a number of perspectives. One perspective is that grunge fashion does not exist; it is not a choice to be fashionable, nor is it one to be anti-fashionable in the resistant punk sense⁴, but the choice to be non-fashionable as an alternative to anti-/fashionable. Thus, it is plain dress, not fashion. The other perspective is rooted in practicality; flannels and heavy-duty work boots were essential for the nine months of bad weather that residents

⁴ McRobbie, Angela. "Second-Hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket," in *Zoot Suits and Second-Hand Dresses*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1989.

of the Pacific Northwest experienced. In addition, secondhand clothes became popular due to limited resources of cutting-edge fashion, and were significantly more affordable compared to clothes sold at outlet malls. Thus, to place symbolic depth and meaning to the fashion of grunge is an extraneous effort; it was not a formative principle of the subculture. But, the portrayal of grunge in mass media and mainstream culture is where symbolism of grunge fashion emerges, along with new interpretations of the music and an association with substance abuse.

In the early 1990s, both grunge and its location of origin experienced a “boom” in two regards: an economic boom, where the city of Seattle expanded its technology industry and welcomed young new workers as citizens at a rapid pace; and a cultural boom, wherein the subculture that had been rumbling in the underground elevated to a national and worldwide trend. In its representation within mass media and mainstream culture, grunge was not all poorly received, but as the model of subcultural theory suggests, the dominant sphere will find peripheral culture to exploit in order to maintain power and hegemonic control. According to Hebdige, acts of “deviant behavior” and/or “identification of a distinctive uniform” saturate the media as triggers for moral panic, but as well “are used to ‘explain’ the subculture’s original transgression of sartorial codes,” (*Subculture* 93). Thus, grunge was tied to the same tropes that represented punk subculture in the decade prior, instilling an image of anarchy, apathy, riotousness and nihilism in the practice of grunge. Even positive appraisals of grunge in mainstream media, such as the November 1992 *New York Times* article “Grunge: A Success Story” pigeonholed the subculture as the “generation of greasy Caucasian youths in ripped

jeans, untucked flannel and stomping boots [who] spent their formative years watching television, inhaling beer or pot, listening to old Black Sabbath albums⁵.“ Tabloid magazines provided coverage of private relationship drama between grunge musicians just as they did Hollywood and pop music stars of the decade before, but this time accentuating claims of heavy drug use to facilitate their manufactured and commodified gossip. The infamous example lies in the September 1992 issue of the magazine *Vanity Fair*, where the story of Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love’s “strange love“ pitched an accusation that Love was using heroin while pregnant with the couple’s first child, Frances Bean Cobain⁶. Love later revealed there was some truth to the matter⁷, but at the time the accusation was based on conjecture and the prominent stereotype of grunge musicians as heroin addicts. Thus, grunge was not portrayed in mass media and mainstream culture as an expressive device responding to its formative conditions; it was inflated to further a claim that the up-and-coming generation it was associated with were slackers, and the face of reason behind social anxiety and decline. The result was a damaging widespread perception of the subculture in the mass media and dominant social framework.

Clearly, inserting grunge into the subcultural theoretical model does not bode well for its success as a constructive, expressive, and positive art/culture form. Perhaps it

⁵ Marin, Rick. “Grunge: A Success Story.” *The New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1992.

⁶ Hirschberg, Lynn. “Strange Love: The Story of Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love,” *Vanity Fair*, 1 September 1992.

⁷ Marcus, Stephanie. “Courtney Love Admits To Using Heroin While Pregnant With Frances Bean.” *The Huffington Post*, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 28 Jan. 2015.

truly was not. The grunge subculture is one fraught with tragedy; many deaths occurred in the scene and were too often caused by heroin overdose and suicide. The first death that had major impact in both the local/regional subculture as well as in the early mainstream/national interest of grunge was Andrew Wood, singer of Mother Love Bone, who died of a heroin overdose. The second was Stefanie Sargent, guitarist of 7 Year Bitch, who also died of complications with heroin. The third, which had perhaps the greatest worldwide impact, was the suicide death of Kurt Cobain. Further, the grunge subculture sought to expose the state of popular rock for its apparent ridiculousness and mistreatment of women. Many male grunge musicians vocally advocated for female rights, and showed their support by inviting bands of the neighboring riot grrrl subculture on their headlining tours as opening acts, including L7, Bikini Kill, and 7 Year Bitch. However, the overwhelming “headlining“ of all-male grunge bands resulted in the culture still being largely male-dominated and centric. Perhaps the problem lies in the theorization of grunge in an earlier form of subcultural scholarship that yielded these still-popular and widespread understandings of grunge. Perhaps, then, post-subcultural studies can serve as an antidote, and yield a proper reflection on the mid-1980s to mid-1990s grunge in Seattle, as well as offer a competent reflexive analysis of the current iteration of grunge and Seattle in the 2010s.

2.2 Understanding Grunge from the Post-Subcultural Studies Model

In the 1990s, with the emergence of globalization studies, came a collection of criticism of the CCCS subcultural studies model and theory. Geoff Stahl, in his article

“Renovating Subcultural Theory,” compartmentalized the criticisms into three categories: the first highlights the limited scope of understanding style as response to exclusion, and further how this linear model of style as response to exclusion negates the re-circulation and re-appropriation of resistant style as re-imagination and re-creation of meaning in new contexts and re-drawn boundaries. The second stems from the idea that re-drawn boundaries that are constantly in flux and uses it to posit that mutual creation of an “Other”—the mainstream media as subcultural other, and vice versa, the subculture as the mainstream other—neglects the operation of each group in opposite contexts, where indeed much of subcultural and mainstream sustainability exists. The third criticism again re-draws and re-configures subcultural boundaries to observe how subcultures form and originate based on more than just class-based circumstances; race, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation and aesthetic preference potentially serve as a basis of formation and creation of culture and style equally as does class (Stahl 28-9). These three ideas become crucial to an understanding of subculture as it intersects with postmodern, globalization, and performance studies. These tenets also highlight the impact of virtualized spaces and/as imagined communities, i.e. the internet, which challenges and deepens the understanding of spatial/geographic and temporal/ephemeral frames as vital to subcultural formation and activity (Stahl 36-8). This reimagined and reconfigured model that is post-subcultural theory could thus be utilized to reappraise grunge and form a dissenting opinion from the previous reading in the CCCS subcultural model. However, in order to illuminate the new considerations and problems that have arisen since the formative era of grunge, and to properly insert it into the post-

subcultural discourse and field of study, a post-subcultural reading of the present conditions in Seattle is necessary.

Seattle currently faces a different set of conditions that bring it into a postmodern and post-subcultural scholarly discourse. The tactics used to maintain the trend of upward mobility for two decades began to have counteractive and counterproductive effects. The most prominent issue that has arose is gentrification, in tandem with a housing and homelessness crisis. While companies like Amazon are still hiring tons of new employees who will live and work in the city, the influx of these residents is not enough to fill the luxury apartments and condos that are cropping up excessively across neighborhoods in Seattle. These complexes are also not affordable enough for service or cultural arts industry workers to rent, regardless of their longer tenancy in the city. New buildings and construction projects of this nature do not necessarily exist without any rhyme or reason; in general, they are agreements that benefit billionaire corporations and multinational developers, and they become promising package deals for Seattle city government and urban planners to invest in. With the claim that the housing will be affordable, and enticement of facilities for retail or food service within the complex, many citizens of Seattle are also willing to consent to the promise of development. To problematize this situation further from the perspective of post-subcultural scholarly discourse, it is not only middle class and/or high income citizens that approve of these disruptive activities, it is also artist, bohemian, and working class groups that consent. The model and theory of “heroic” subculture thus does not account for the operation of

subcultural groups within the dominant social and economic framework, but it needs to be reconsidered at this juncture.

In my auto-ethnographic field work in Seattle, I spoke with people of different occupations, ages, sexes, genders, races, and identities. Conversations and discussions with these local Seattleites were easy to strike up in casual, public, and everyday spaces, and served as the essence of the data that I collected; coffee shops, record stores, bars, restaurants, museums, art galleries, libraries, and various venues for performing arts served as perfect, ideal locations for me to explore the city in my own regard as well as gain some insider information. When questioned about the presence of gentrification and a pressing housing crisis in the area surrounding their place of business, I was surprised to hear neither defiant resistance nor overwhelming enthusiasm, but a shade of ambivalence. Instead of rushing to the conclusion that high-rise apartments with boutique stores and microbreweries below are indicative of social and economic decline, there was hope for the promise of upward mobility. There was an expressed expectation for the efficacy of the development projects, and room for skepticism towards the results of such, but overall there was an enthusiasm surrounding the prospect of their locale participating in a seemingly higher-class social and economic setting. This, of course, does not shift the actual results, and the looming threat of gentrification still held significant negative impacts in the retelling of these residents' experiences. It is also necessary to clarify here that the colloquial nature of my conversations with Seattleites about gentrification naturally posited "corporations" in a general sense as the antagonist in each situation; while it does not serve a quantitative or data-based scholarly discourse,

this evidence is essential to understanding the operations and principles of subcultures in Seattle.

As much as there was hope for an imagined egalitarian, cosmopolitan, futuristic society in Seattle, there was real anxiety towards to disruption of housing and destruction of culture. Some spoke of having constantly moved place to place, neighborhood to neighborhood around Seattle due to rising costs of living and introduction of gentrified spaces in the area, while others spoke of unsureness about their relocation to Seattle from other major cities, from which they fled due to similar concerns. Close to the discussion of non-affordability is the growing presence of the homelessness crisis in Seattle, where the risk of becoming homeless is closer to reality than most are comfortable with. This marks an ephemerality of living, and by extension existence, that comes as a negative effect of the rapid rate of change afflicting Seattle's society and economy.

Interestingly, the vanishing and destruction of cultural space appears to be an equally-balanced concern alongside the housing and homelessness crises. After all, both sets of problems ostensibly have similar roots in gentrification and corporate development projects. Further, the rate at which cultural space is changing is comparable to the rate at which non-affordability and homelessness are growing. The amount of suffering that each issue causes cannot truly be measured for comparison, assuming that most people would rather have space to live than space to express or participate in culture, but it is worthy to note that the disappearance of a cultural space has massive impact on communities and formulated groups of people. So too does an individual

becoming homeless, but the impacts of such on a community are less apparent, and to a fault.

The most illuminating example of the vanishing and destruction of cultural space I witnessed in my experience and auto-ethnographic research in Seattle was the effort to save the Showbox, a historic venue in the Belltown district that was in danger of being demolished by a corporate developer to build a 44-story building. An event at the Northwest Film Forum in Capitol Hill on August 9th, 2018, featured presentations from various cultural and housing organizations and communities, including the recently-orchestrated effort “Save the Showbox,” and a panel discussion from leaders of community organizations, artist collectives, and city government employees from economic and cultural departments. The presentations offered insight as to how the vanishing of art and cultural space is deeply emotionally and subjectively affective on an individual basis, as well as highly negatively impactful on a communal and social basis. There were also presentations from organizations combating the housing crisis that shared information and progress of initiatives, which transitioned the atmosphere from sentimental and emotional to educational and politically active. Finally, the panel discussion offered a combination of these themes as to model how these discussions and concerns can take place in everyday engagements and activities. The discussion illuminated how citizens, regardless of their class, income, housing, occupation, social or economic background or understanding, can be equipped with the most basic and essential understandings of their surrounding society and economy to aptly voice their

opinion, which if enacted upon will ultimately make positive change and difference in the issues of society.

Thus, in the postmodern era, is no longer a form of resistance (expressly, it is not “punk”) to embody exclusion, to deny participation in the dominant social and economic framework; on the contrary, it *is* “punk” (now dismissed from its once essential meaning of ardent resistance) to be armed with social and economic intellect and consciousness, such that forms of alternative expression may be facilitated *within* the dominant social and economic framework, in harmony. Dylan Clark theorizes this phenomena, which he classifies as “post-punk,“ adding further that “today’s punks refuse to pay the spectacular rent [...] they find that a new breed of subculture offers them ideological shelter and warmth⁸“ (234). Does this circumvent hegemony, still a crushing and oppressive power system, or consent to it? This problematic can be further explained and explored by shifting back to grunge, in both its formative and current iteration, to expose a paradox, one of a postmodern kind.

⁸ Clark, Dylan. 2003. “The Death and Life of Punk, The Last Subculture,” in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), pp. 223-36

3. THE TWO SPIRITS OF GRUNGE: NOSTALGIA AND REVIVALISM

In many ways, grunge has always been two-spirited, composed of a duality. It began with passively resisting the evidently marginalizing and exclusionary factors that in turn led to its own creation; socio-geographic isolation, climatic depression, cultural apathy and alienation were the sparks that ignited artists to organize, create, and perform. It also began with embodying from the state of popular rock music what was aesthetically resonant and showed potential to serve as a creative, expressive, even an emotional outlet; distorted, drop-tuned⁹, slow and sludgy guitar riffs, drums that sound like cannons, screaming and searingly high-pitched vocals, and lyrics that conveyed apathy, alienation, and disillusionment towards present conditions. This embodiment was executed while simultaneously rejecting what was overtly oppressive and damaging of that culture; misogyny and sexual objectification of females, and exploitation and mainstreaming of culture for corporatist, capitalist gain. Thus, grunge is a perpetual performance of embodiment and rejection, of give and take, and of this for that. Thus, the existence of grunge is in a liminal space and one of a paradoxical nature.

Like the general definition of grunge, the resurgence of grunge can be analyzed as a duality. In one regard, the resurgence of grunge is a recirculation, reappraisal, and re-commodification of the “original grunge movement” artifacts; suddenly, it seemed, the lyrics of Kurt Cobain and funeral-like darkness of Nirvana’s stripped-down *MTV*

⁹The lowest pitch in the standard tuning of a guitar is E2, but hard rock and heavy metal popularized tuning this pitch a whole step down to D2, so that the bottom, lowest three strings of the guitar strummed open would produce a D “power chord;” such chords are the underpinning of all rock and roll music.

Unplugged performance garnered some newfound aesthetic value amongst the younger generation, if not an updated emotional resonance, and could be found remastered and repackaged in physical media form and decorated across blogs and social media websites such as Tumblr. In addition to the virtual scape, grunge reentered the fashion scape, where band logos, depictions of famous members, and previously encoded symbols were redesigned and sold at fast-fashion outlets such as Urban Outfitters, Forever 21, and H&M. However, band logos, designs, and symbols more faithful to their original artifact or iteration simultaneously began to be sold at larger department stores, such as Target and Kohls. This dichotomy suggests both a refreshment and rebirth, in the form of the newly branded “soft grunge,” as well as an induction to a preexisting classics/classic rock category. This could be construed as a death of “cool,” or an act of selling out in the classical subcultural sense, but post-modern/post-subcultural discourse encourages us to examine the co-existence of these outcomes rather than the ostensible “death“ of only one.

In the other regard, the resurgence of grunge is a re-appropriation of the stylistic, compositional, and subcultural elements in the creation of new media, particularly music. Perhaps the biggest proponents of the creative resurgence of grunge were music journalists who identified new tendencies towards certain sonic trends in the early 2010s as “grunge-y,” even as “grunge throwback” or “grunge revival.“ Whether this was premeditated or a concerted effort by the creators of the music was variable; some artists, such as east coast bands Title Fight, Citizen, Nothing, U.K. band Basement, and Australian band Violent Soho, embodied the likening to the 1990s grunge style, citing

the music as highly influential to the development of their own artistic sound and style, and embraced the claim to leadership of the grunge revival. Other artists, such as east coast bands Superheaven, Creepoid, and U.K. band Yuck, are less tolerant of the comparison, rejecting any claims of imitation, and prefer their music not be pigeonholed or pinned down to one specific genre, style, or revivalist moment/movement¹⁰¹¹¹². This division of the grunge revival suggests a dichotomy of embodiment and rejection, similar to that found in the formative grunge movement concerning the hard rock and heavy metal it was appropriating from. Whatever the motive, it is clear that grunge music reappeared in the indie/alternative music discourse in the 2010s with new interest, considerations, challenges, and resulted in the creation of new meaning, significance, and resonance of the style, particularly with a younger, newcomer crowd.

The dualities and dichotomies of the grunge revival presented here are indicative of certain postmodern conditions, that of which can be analyzed and problematized through a post-subcultural framework. Postmodernism and postmodern theory brought about fresh concepts of pastiche, simulacra, bricolage, and copies of copies¹³; these terminologies and understandings can be utilized effortlessly to describe this resurgence of grunge. The presence of rejection and criticism, where some artists might deny any

¹⁰ Ballam-Cross, Paul. "11 Bands Leading the '90s Alt-Rock Revival in Australia." *Reverb.com*, 21 May 2018.

¹¹ Korchok, Nika. "Title Fight Fine-Tunes Its Sound with Newfound '90s Grunge on 'Hyperview'." *The Tufts Daily*, 30 Jan 2015.

¹² Senior, Nicholas. "Superheaven Produce Some Of The Best Alt / Grunge Since The Genre's Heyday." *New Noise Magazine*, 14 July 2015.

¹³ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

association to the grunge revival or reject comparison to the 1990s grunge movement, overlaps with certain post-subcultural theory and criticism. David Muggleton argues in “The Post-Subculturalist” that the transformation of subcultural style into mere simulacra, with the disappearance of roots in ‘particular sociotemporal contexts’ and ties to ‘underlying structural relations,’ voids any capacity for authenticity or originality, reducing creations to signs absent of depth and/or meaning (196). Lawrence Grossberg, however, in “Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life,” argues that authenticity remains present in the ‘disarticulation of affect and ideology’ and a differentiation of creative practices and alliances, and in confronting a particular *indifference*, wherein there is a ‘celebration of the affectivity of investment’ and simultaneously a [refusal] to discriminate between different sites and forms of investment,’ postmodern subcultural boundaries remain in a state of flux and are able to be redrawn (228). This resonates with ideologies of artists who embrace associations to the grunge revival and who embody affective impact, influence, and inspiration from and in comparison to 1990s grunge. Furthermore, the recontextualization of the social landscape in the virtual, “imagined” communities of the internet alleviates the necessity for ‘sociotemporal contexts’ and ‘underlying structural relations’ to manifest necessarily in “real” or traditional social frameworks. Thus, the practice of a subculture and circulation of style, commodity, and capital is still rooted in such but identified and expressed through new mediums, spaces, and frontiers; this can be further read and demonstrated by noting the widespread origins of the aforementioned revival grunge bands.

Another principle of postmodernism applicable to this scenario is that of disillusionment, disenfranchisement, and ‘disaffection with contemporary life’ as ethnomusicologist Tamara E. Livingston has articulated in an analysis of music revivals; this could suffice as further justification in support of an organic, authentic recall of a previous creative and expressive practice. However, Livingston also illuminated that music revivals tend to reach a point of stasis, wherein the inherent contradictory nature of such a practice begins to unfurl and topple the cultural stability of a music revival in the present¹⁴. Thus, grunge viably operates in postmodern frameworks as a music revival, one where contentions in popular and scholarly discursive modes serve as key paradoxical underpinnings to the new formulation of a past practice.

Having ontologically situated the grunge revival and its paradox in the discourse of post-subcultural and postmodern theory, some more sense can yet be made of why grunge has experienced a resurgence in the last decade. A key postmodern condition was withheld to make room for more pertinent discussion; that of the obsession and fetishization of nostalgia. In his book, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past*, Simon Reynolds theorizes the phenomenon emergent in the 2000s into the 2010s wherein creators and consumers of new media are fixated on popular culture of decades’ past, accessed as both lived memory and imagined memory, rather than being concerned about a present sense of self or future sense of developing and/or creating new culture. Reynolds offers differing interpretations of nostalgia; the most prominent understanding

¹⁴ Livingston, Tamara E. “Music Revivals: Towards a General Theory,” in *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 1999.

of nostalgia is the individual and collective memory aching in response to temporal distance from products of the past, a habit Reynolds sees that is increasingly consuming more and more of daily life. The upshot of nostalgia, Reynolds argues, is that it in fact maintains the potential to act subversively and creatively. He writes,

certain periods in the life of an individual or a culture are more intense, exciting ... simply better than others; the impulse to go back there may ultimately be counterproductive, but it's perfectly understandable. Nostalgia-driven moments can function as ways of getting through doldrums eras, keeping faith until the next 'up' phase. The past can [also] be used to critique what's absent in the present (239).

From here, as Reynolds suggests, nostalgia can be used to account for a longing of the past, a pacification of the present, as well as a critique of the present in order to affect the outcome of the future. Thus, nostalgia can pivot in order to account for all aspects of the current state of grunge and the grunge revival, but firstly, a generational distinction is necessary to be made.

At this juncture, it will be useful to recall previous observations regarding nostalgia for grunge's past and the grunge revival and situate them on opposite ends of a spectrum. The intention here is to establish two modes of grunge praxis, classifying nostalgia for grunge's past (herein grunge nostalgia) as an indicator of traditional and conservative cultural participation and thinking, and the grunge revival as an indicator of progressive and subversive cultural participation and thinking, and highlight areas of intersection, crossover, and *distortion* in order to articulate an ultimate paradoxical observation and argument. As such, the traditional and conservative practice of grunge nostalgia is a fetishization and obsession of 1990s grunge artifacts and lived memory, and those artifacts appearing repackaged (new, officially licensed t-shirts depicting

“classic” designs), remastered (reissues of “classic” albums), and resold in comfortable and familiar corporatized spaces (department stores and outlet malls). Further, observable sufficient conditions emerge in the dynamics of this faction of grunge nostalgia, borrowed from subcultural theory, are that of age and class. For example, the reunion of “classic” 1990s grunge bands and touring of their “classic” albums are often booked in large stadiums and arenas, which often garner higher ticket prices, thus marketing is geared towards nostalgists who are more likely to afford and expend upon such commodities. Grunge nostalgia in its most intense manifestation, that of which is a yearning for the “simpler” past and “the way things used to be,” that Reynolds warns is increasingly consuming a dangerous amount of daily life and mental capacity, can plague a society with any hope of making cultural development or social progress; in short, I argue that grunge nostalgia is a disease.

The progressive and subversive practice of the grunge revival creates and exchanges new compositions, performances, encoded with new interpretations and meanings of grunge as a stylistic and subcultural practice based on a collective imagined memory. Though it is inherently contradictory to seek authentic artistic and creative expression and pop/subcultural clout through a previously established and ephemerally deceased practice, grunge revivalists confront such with indifference and ambivalence. In a similar manner to that of which grunge nostalgia artifacts are produced, distributed, and consumed, grunge revival commodities such as albums pressed to vinyl records and/or cassette tapes, t-shirts with appropriative, “rip-off”, or pastiche designs that simulate 1990s grunge artifacts, and tours in support of new albums are circulated to

maintain economic sustenance and establish cultural capital, so that the artists can support themselves and continue to participate, create, and perform in their cultural field. Likewise to sufficient conditions of grunge nostalgia, age and class emerge to denote the dynamics and demographics of the grunge revival. The cost of producing, distributing, and consuming grunge revival commodities is often far cheaper than the grunge nostalgia counterpart, as the market value for indie/alternative and DIY is maintained low in order to ensure inclusion of youth and working class¹⁵. Grunge revivalism in its most intense manifestation, a subculture based solely in creation and exchange of simulacra, pacifies disillusionment towards present conditions by merely lifting a previous practice, one that is displaced by time, space, and lived memory, but one that is proven to have satisfied similar goals for similar groups in similar situations in the past. The grunge revival, however, has the potential to generate space for making of new meaning and maps of affect and ideology, where the boundaries are free to shift and change to accommodate intersecting identities and emergent conditions and challenges. In short, I argue that the grunge revival is an antidote to a society fraught with disenfranchisement, and a reflexive activator for a group that hopes to affect positive change in their society and surroundings, as well as push for the progression of culture, creativity, and expression.

¹⁵ Important to note here is the problem of inclusion/exclusion in music subcultures; venues often double as bars, and thus underage people are usually not allowed to attend concerts in such spaces. “All ages” and free/very low cost concerts are much more likely to draw larger, more participatory crowds.

At the root of the issues of grunge nostalgia and the grunge revival, the common denominator is grunge itself. Therefore, grunge is actively and simultaneously a disease and an antidote. This ultimate paradox can be explained by returning to the current state of Seattle and analyzing the confluence of gentrification and grunge.

3.1 Grunge Nostalgia and Grunge Revivalism in Seattle, 2018

Grunge is currently alive and dead, present and absent, embalmed and vanished in Seattle. Grunge nostalgia can be accessed with minimal effort: the Museum of Popular Culture in the Seattle Center downtown is home to a permanent exhibit of the band Nirvana, which includes artifacts such as instruments and clothes used on tour, in the studio, and in music videos, original prints of concert posters, cassettes and master tapes, and handwritten lyrics, notes and documents from band members, friends, and management. The same museum hosted a temporary exhibit of the band Pearl Jam that opened in mid-August, 2018, and included artifacts of the same nature that were personally selected, curated, and provided courtesy of the band members, and focused on the philanthropic efforts of the band over the course of their career. “Stalking Seattle: A Rock ‘n’ Roll Sightseeing Tour” is owned and operated by one woman who takes a maximum of seven passengers in her minivan on a two hour tour of landmark locations of 1990s Seattle grunge, including venues, clubs, bars, restaurants, public parks where famous photographs of grunge musicians were taken, neighborhoods and districts, shooting locations for the grunge-inspired 1992 film *Singles*, and the home where Kurt

Cobain and Courtney Love resided at the time of his death¹⁶ These experiences can sedate the nostalgic ache of lived memory and longing for culture's past, but they also have the potential to inform nostalgists, completists, connoisseurs and fans more deeply about grunge history. This, again referencing Reynolds, could possibly enliven interpolated audiences to consider what was progressive about a past culture, as well as consider what might be missing from the present iteration of the culture and from society. In my experience, these glimpses of hope within grunge nostalgia were few and far between, and buried beneath loud displays of counter-productivity.

The first site of intersection on the grunge nostalgia/grunge revivalism spectrum as I see relevant to this research is myself. At 10 years old, I began learning to play the electric guitar after some years of being heavily interested in and extensively listening to rock music from my father's CD collection. Of the first bands I gravitated towards to listen and learn was Nirvana, for the simplicity of their songs, their construction and practicality, were attainable to play at my level and thus enjoyable. However, what cannot be overlooked is the subtler attraction I had to the sound of the heavily-distorted guitars, the pummeling drums, and the grainy vocals singing lyrics of a rebellious revolution. I followed the path of fanhood further with Nirvana and other grunge staples such as Pearl Jam and Soundgarden by wearing t-shirts depicting their names and faces, buying reissued and remastered anniversary CD's and DVD's, watching countless live and music videos on YouTube, and coming together with friends to discuss the music

¹⁶ The detached garage that was the scene of Cobain's death has since been demolished, but the current tenets of the house still see visitors just outside their premises on a daily basis.

and attempt to play it for ourselves. As I entered college, I was constantly in search of my own unique artistic voice, with respect to the older artists that were at my foundation and core, and adoration for the new artists that were seemingly doing the same while pushing the cutting-edge boundaries. I found myself listening to grunge music in heavy rotation, searching deeper than I did in my adolescent phase for darker, stranger, heavier bands, which brought me to (the) Melvins, Failure, and TAD. Soon, I was writing songs that, when learning them with band mates to perform them live, I would describe as “rip-offs” of certain songs, riffs, sounds, or ideas from the shrine of grunge I had established. Thus, my trajectory can be seen as a transition from grunge nostalgia to grunge revivalism, however there were still remaining elements of nostalgia that I had yet to reconcile with.

As a die-hard fan and an imagined nostalgist of grunge myself, I was greatly looking forward to the prospect of an “authentic” grunge experience in my visit to Seattle. I was seeking resonance and cultivation of my inspiration and identification with the subculture. Upon visiting the Museum of Pop Culture, taking the “Stalking Seattle” tour, and visiting the iconic places and spaces I had only seen in pictures and videos, I was let down; not disappointed, but instead directed to new expectations and interpretations of what I was experiencing. I realized that visiting the graves of grunge would not do anything to deepen my personal attachment or greater inform my practice of the subculture, nor would it truly provide more knowledge for my research; it was as useful as imagining a stage to be a grunge club in late-1980s Seattle, and no more fruitful than the archival access I already had. My visit to the Nirvana exhibit was the

moment of realization. I stared deeply into the wood grain of Cobain's guitar, Novoselić's bass, and Grohl's drums to find a cosmetic flaw unique to my eye, or to hallucinate and witness the instruments move as they might have in performance; in the end, it was like staring at a dead insect embalmed in amber. Had I been left with this and only this, I would have been sorely disappointed. But I remained in the exhibit while plenty museum-goers cycled in and out, gauging responses from the audiences both out of research interest and to possibly see that someone might have felt the same way I was in that moment. Finally, I stopped looking for answers and began listening. The exhibit's atmospheric sound was designed with a constant oscillating feedback, likely from an electric guitar; it is this sound that I heard the potential for subversion and creativity, for life and future within the exhibit. To me, the sound represented the myriad Nirvanas that had formed and died since the first, the promise of the subculture that it will never truly cease to exist so long as its boundaries are prepped for shift and change, and there is a need for an creative and artistic emotional outlet. In the words of Krist Novoselić, which decorate the wall adjacent to the entrance to the Nirvana exhibit, "Music is an art form that thrives on reinvention."

Grunge revivalism manifests itself in Seattle less opaquely than its nostalgic counterpart, as instances of such are not fixed, harder to predict and identify, and ephemeral; in a word, performance. Grunge revivalism reveals itself as ethos in an otherwise unsuspecting conversation, as an unrefined sound or uncontrolled feedback from a guitar amplifier in a live performance, as a double-take on the fashionable statement of a passerby, as a discovery of a new band playing in the coffee shop or

record store. Its boundaries are not fixed, nor are they indoctrinated; it is there for those who are aware of it and those who are vigilant of it—“insiders”—and for the rest it is a modicum of daily social life. However, grunge revivalism can manifest itself in spaces and places where it might be expected; if an upcoming performance at a specific venue bills an artist or group that describe themselves or have been described as “grunge,” one might reasonably expect to experience grunge. Whether or not this expectation is fulfilled is truly subjective, and for the “insider/s” to determine. As unspoken and variable as grunge revivalism is, there were a few key experiences in my visit to Seattle that are interpreted by me as such, though on the surface level they may appear to be episodes of my grunge nostalgia taking hold.

The flagship grunge record label, Sub Pop, celebrated its 30th anniversary in August of 2018 with a series of free concerts, including an all-day festival consisting of twelve bands across three stages on Alki Beach, a photographic exhibit within a coffee shop/record store/radio station headquarters in the Seattle Center complex, and an official “Sub Pop Day” declared by the Seattle city government. Backtracking slightly to account for all my experiences related to Sub Pop and grunge revivalism, my first order of scholarly business upon arriving to Seattle was to visit the Sub Pop Airport Store in Concourse C of the Sea-Tac airport. Despite the store’s placement in a heavily constructed space, a nonplace for that matter, among other heavily-corporatized stores and restaurants, it plays along with the outer constructions and frameworks, commodifies its instantly recognizable brand and ownership of “classic” grunge artifacts, in order to support the new indie/alternative artists at its core. Thus, Sub Pop

successfully undermines the system of the hegemonic pop culture industry, and is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent in the fields of nostalgia and revivalism. In other words, the massive prank of “achieving world domination” the founders set out to pull upon starting the business is still running. This mischief that I encountered firsthand carried through to the festival on August 11th, 2018.

The Sub Pop 30th Anniversary Festival was essentially a performative and performance-based manifestation of their signature prank. With stages named after terms from a fake “grunge lexicon” that a record store clerk-turned-Sub Pop CEO hoaxed on the media in the early 1990s,¹⁷ the bands on the bill included newcomers, recent and rising stars, and some of the first bands to be signed on the label. The day began with newer, lesser-known acts on the smaller stages while the headlining stages were still being set up and sound checked. This, to me, was a striking moment: with few audience members around to witness, new creations grace a modest stage helmed by artists exuding new life and culture. I was witnessing those who hold the pen write cultural history before my eyes. I entered a realm that I understood to be authentically grunge revivalism.

Later in the day, I encountered further ramifications of grunge revivalism, the shifting of boundaries. The artists Clipping (stylized as ‘clipping.’) took to the stage to deliver the most left-field performance of the day. Two men behind a DJ table and MacBook computers accompanied Daveed Diggs of *Hamilton* fame in a performance of

¹⁷Marin, Rick. “Grunge: A Success Story.” *The New York Times*, 15 Nov. 1992.

the most avant-garde electronic rap in the market. This afternoon crowd, consisting of families and young children, youth and elderly, bobbed their heads along and repeatedly sang the word “shooter” in time as per the request of Diggs in a song that paints a visceral portrait and critique of gun violence in America. This is grunge revivalism, as affective as Eddie Vedder’s performative statement on Pearl Jam’s *MTV Unplugged* concert, wherein he wrote “PRO CHOICE” on his arm in large letters with a magic marker.

The bigger bands on the bill were booked later in the day, and the festival grounds started to become more crowded accordingly. While longtime rap kings Shabazz Palaces performed on one of the two headlining stages, the smaller stage was being set for a highly anticipated moment for myself, plenty of other festival-goers, and the label: a performance from Mudhoney. This is the band who, after the colloquial death of grunge, declared themselves the only true grunge band, contingent upon the existence of such a thing. The moment I knew this performance would represent the grunge revival rather than the ache of grunge nostalgia was when frontman Mark Arm walked on stage well before the downbeat to set up his own gear; he was met with a substantial applause and cheers from the excitedly anticipatory audience, to which his response was a furrow of his brow, a confused expression, and a sarcastic shrug that simply read, “what's the big deal?” He then turned to drummer Dan Peters, who had been on stage for some time checking the microphones on his kit, and appeared to express his caustic disbelief for the incident. During the performance, in between songs, Arm duped the crowd with various quips and cranks, all with clear and precise

awareness of his constructed stature as the self-proclaimed true grunger. Drinking wine from the bottle on stage, at one point between songs he held it up to the audience and declared, “for the last two years, this has been the official wine of the summer.” Upon informing the audience of the new 7” split single featuring Mudhoney and Hot Snakes available for sale at the nearby Sub Pop merchandise tent, he indicated that the record was one of four as part of a special, limited series. In the most sardonic voice and demeanor he could conjure, with his microphone in hand he leaned towards the audience and spat, “Collect them all!” Somewhat expected at a festivity such as this, Arm took a moment to offer gratitude for their hosts and longtime label, but in a true grunge fashion: “I just want to say, happy birthday to Sub Pop. But honestly, it's really not that big of a deal. They're 30, we're 30... it's not that hard. Call me when you're 60.” Amidst performances of their songs of both “classic” and new repertoire, Arm often resorted to screaming at the top of his lungs for extended periods of time, sometimes inserting the top of the microphone into his mouth such that the speakers would clip and distort. Doing so while staring deep into the crowd, it was apparent that in one way or another he had seen it all before, even faces like mine that he's never seen. This, to me, was the pinnacle of grunge revivalism; performing the artifacts subject to aching nostalgia, but reclaiming them in a performative act of ambivalence and distortion.

Ambivalence and distortion are two key terms that I intend to pedestal in this project. The first term will be approached empirically, and the second artistically, but ultimately I argue that the two terms are synonymous, symbiotic, and synergetic.

4. CONCLUSIONS: AMBIVALENCE AND DISTORTION

A mutual existence of grunge nostalgia and grunge revivalism in Seattle suggests a paradox of grunge as a disease and simultaneously an antidote, but the co-existence and performance of these two can be analyzed as ambivalence, categorized into successes and failures. Another brief case study from my auto-ethnographic experience in Seattle will suffice for a theorization of this concept. Pearl Jam, one of the three canonized grunge bands alongside Nirvana and Soundgarden, crafted a momentous series of concerts in their hometown of Seattle on August 8th and 10th, 2018. Aptly titled “The Home Shows,” the concert series maximized the rarity of the band performing in Seattle, and coalesced the opportunity with a humanitarian and philanthropic cause, that of donating the profits and benefits of the production to the homelessness crisis in Seattle. By the time I arrived in Seattle, on the same day as the first concert in the series, I had no knowledge of the events but did notice many co-passengers on my flights from Houston and Las Vegas wearing Pearl Jam merchandise. It was not until I saw a mural outside of the Sub Pop Airport Store advertising the concert series that I learned of the happenings. Admittedly, I initially scoffed at the overt sentimentalism behind the title of the concert series, but retracted when I realized it had a double-meaning within its humanitarian cause. In getting from the airport to the city, I encountered many Pearl Jam tourists in transit, mostly white, middle aged, and middle class. They spoke amongst themselves, sharing where they had been traveling from to attend the concerts; one had travelled from Boston, a couple from Florida, and a larger group from a European country. The following day I visited Easy Street Records, and to

my dismay I realized upon arriving that the establishment serves as an official site for Pearl Jam “pop-up shops.” The restaurant was packed with Pearl Jam tourists, and the kitchen and servers were clearly short-staffed. I asked my server if the restaurant was always so busy, and she responded that it was just the hype of Pearl Jam and their tourists causing the physical and emotional distress. Playing on the televisions in the establishment was the 1996 documentary *hype!*, a piece that criticizes the overblown and exhausted tendencies of the mainstreaming of grunge. I asked the clerk in the record store section if the documentary was always playing in the store, and he responded that it only plays when Pearl Jam comes to town. These small moments denote a success of passive resistance on behalf of ambivalence towards an obtuse manifestation of grunge nostalgia, and further, an ambivalence towards traditional and conservative nostalgists that are wreaking some form of cultural havoc meanwhile applying a substantial force of social and economic pressure on a working class, food and retail service-based industry.

Walking the streets of Pioneer Square the following day, before, during, and after Bill Speidel’s Underground Tour, I encountered countless more Pearl Jam tourists, who were again identifiable by their touting of the band's merchandise and often white, often middle class, and often middle-aged demographic. I also encountered in this area the nominal crisis of which Pearl Jam intended to bring attention and relief to; that of the homelessness crisis. Within Pioneer Square is Occidental Square Park, where groups of homeless people reside and congregate. While walking through, I witnessed a number of Pearl Jam tourists cold-shoulder people asking for help or money. This is indicative of a failure on behalf the nostalgist-leaning ambivalence, and a failure to launch of a

potential revivalist manifestation; Pearl Jam tourists, conservative nostalgists, are clearly partaking in grunge nostalgia in a broader conservative manner, to reminisce in a simpler time, meanwhile rejecting subjects that were intentionally brought to the forefront by the object of their nostalgic crux.

The successes and failures of ambivalence stretch beyond the Pearl Jam affair into daily social life of subcultural Seattleites, where they are much more symptomatic of the structural and systemic manifestations of generational adversity and gentrification. Whether or not they are involved in the grunge revival, or any revivalist movement for that matter, those partaking in subcultural formations in Seattle are affected by these conditions in myriad ways. Navigating through this continually oppressive, destructive, and disruptive system by way of ambivalence ensures a degree of economic and social stability, but also necessitates some form of resistance, either passively in the form of irony and parody or actively by arming the individual and the community with socio-political and economic intellect and consciousness. Artists and creatives in this faction are the ones equipped with the appropriate tools necessary to circulate and re-circulate new products that will be encoded with resonant meanings amongst audiences and creators alike. Further, the artistic processes of creating and producing media are undoubtedly affected by the conditions that surround their creation, as illuminated in the origin of the grunge movement. The sonic manifestation of these conditions, present in all forms of grunge and its forebears, is distortion.

Distortion is the device that brings into focus all aspects of grunge, gentrification, and ambivalence. With my project, I hope to invite my audience to listen to the sound of

subculture, a distortion all its own, when words and scholarship can no longer account for its phenomenology. After all, it is through creative artistic and sonic mediums that subcultures will express what is inside of them, the ideas and meanings of the collective group and the emotions of the individual, that of which is energized and expelled in response to the formative conditions of their situation. Art is not created in a vacuum, it reflects its surroundings, including other the art forms and products that were previously conceived and created. Art suffices a need for an emotional outlet, an expressive device that can challenge, support, and bring awareness to the state of society and culture that surrounds it. Art can often be the only medium that subcultural members can employ to express themselves, expose oppressive systems of power, and continue to fight for equality, sustenance, and survival. In the case of Seattle and its crises of gentrification, the housing and homelessness crisis, certain voices and messages may only be heard and made known through the lens of grunge.

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