



Central European University, Budapest

Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

The social life of death: Suicide and self-destruction in the Seattle Grunge Scene

M.A Thesis

By: Yotam Kramer

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1. Introduction

'I think its gonna rain when I die' (Layne Staley, Alice in Chains)

More than a century after Durkheim redefined sociology in his study of suicide (1996[1897]), society's role in affecting our most private behaviours has been well established. Cultural norms are central in motivating western young females to starve themselves to death (anorexia, Gordon 1988) or in mobilizing men and women to suicide and murder in the name of god (Leenaars 2004). In light of this, the present research seeks to identify the social motivations that play a role in the high rate of suicide and self-harm that has been found among rock musicians (For example: Bellis et al. 2007; Kenny 2016).

The Seattle grunge scene will be used as an exemplary case study, as many grunge bands were among the most popular rock musicians in the beginning of the 90s, became symbols of rock subculture and rigorously executed the spirit of rock and roll. From the dozen bands considered as the core of grunge music, six members have brought about their deaths at an early age through the extensive use of drugs, or through suicide (Yarm 2011).

A major criticism of the fourfold schema of suicide presented by Durkheim (2002[1897]) addresses the difficulty in distinguishing anomic from egoistic suicide (for a review: Abrutyn and Mueller 2014). Durkheim placed egoistic and altruistic suicides on opposite poles, depending on the lack of or access to social integration and regulation. It will be argued that both can occur simultaneously due to the special social position of the famous rock artist: alienation from society alongside high integration and identification with rock sub-culture.

This study's main hypothesis is that the high rate of early deaths among famous grunge musicians can best be explained through an investigation of grunge subculture and two related processes: the development of the subculture in a specific macro-social context, and the execution of the subculture's values by the musicians that have come to symbolise it. An understanding of both the cultural context in which values has been developed and the effects of fame and commodification on the individual will be shown as necessary for a comprehensive sociological explanation on the tragic end of many of the Seattle grunge group members.

Different social layers will be studied as contributors to the fast development and ending of the scene. While the study supports Simmel's view (Simmel 1972:13) that the individual and society create a *continuum* and that therefore one cannot separate the macro from the micro level, the introductory part will discuss different levels of social effect and how these are conveyed in the Grunge scene.

On the Macro-level two main notions will be addressed. The first is the Marxist tradition of commodification as the expansion of the commodity form in capitalism (Marx 2011[1867]) and the famous critique of the standardization and homogeneity of art and media under the capitalist regime delivered by the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Noeri 2002[1944]).

These notions will be followed by a brief demonstration of the relationship between social changes and musical styles through the exploration of the relationship between shifts in capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001) and the evolution of popular music (Mauch et al. 2015).

Fame brought a sudden change to grunge subculture. In Bourdieu's terms (1983), from being a highly isolated and *restricted field* of production, in which members seek recognition within the field and are rewarded with symbolic capital due to their 'disinterest' in external appreciation, it

rapidly became a *large-scale field of production* that seeks large audiences and is dependent on financial and power rewards. It will be argued that these conflicting demands (disinterest in economy and striving for success) played a central role in the difficulties experienced by most members of the grunge scene.

In modernity, the self can be seen as a ‘reflexive project’ (Giddens 1991), and in this view suicide and self-destructiveness are hypothesized as existential acts and outcomes of pure decision, rather than as a product of objective suffering or psychic pathology (Zizek 2007). In the last part of the essay, suicide and self-harm in grunge musicians will be explained as acts of self-affirmation (Muschert 2006) through the acting-out of values grounded in rock and grunge ethics (Berger 2008).

Staley’s and Cobain’s deaths had not caught their audiences by surprise. These deaths were ‘expected’ not by psychologists, but by society. The nature of these suicides and the fact that these acts communicated something cultural calls for an investigation of the place in which society and the individual meet. As a social phenomenon, they deserve a sociological autopsy rather than a psychological one.

This research project revitalizes classical theories of suicide, using a unique source of data. To my knowledge it is the first sociological study that uses biographical data and song lyrics of grunge musicians that had committed suicide or had died at an early age as a result of prolonged self-harm. Biographical data serves to recognize different social factors that have played an important role in the development of grunge subculture. Content analysis of song lyrics provides a unique opportunity to gain a developmental picture into the embodiment of social values and changes in self-perception that precede destructive behaviour.

2. Literature review

2.1 Macro-System

2.1.1 *On Commodification*

The concept of commodity retains its interest and importance due to its development within Marxist theory, as a key to understanding the social relations that organize the capitalist system (Marx 2011[1867]). The capitalist system's dynamics expand commodification from the material to the immaterial, such that many realms that have previously been seen as private become targets for possession (Bennett, Grossberg, and Morris 2013).

The most famous and influential critique of the standardization, regularity, and homogeneity of art and media under the capitalist regime has been delivered by the Frankfurt School in the famous article "The cultural industry: Enlightenment as mass deception" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002[1944]). A central argument in the article is that through the commodification of culture and the diminishing of differences between art (which has a capacity to present alternatives to current reality) and entertainment (which provides short-term relief from everyday hardship), capitalism prevents the revolutionary potential of the masses from developing. The uniformity of cultural forms symbolizes the absolute power of capitalism over cultural production. Administrations hold an authoritative stance towards consumers, and any spontaneous public displays of creativity are controlled and absorbed by the industry. As cultural products are classified and organized through the labelling of costumers and prices, they become qualitatively non- differentiated, each in its own category.

While in the past, artistic flaws could be seen as expressions of suffering and of negative truth, the new perfection dismisses the tensions between culture and real life. As imitation becomes

absolute, culture “cease[s] to be anything but style” (6). Being ‘just’ style, culture obeys the social hierarchy, and does not offer an alternative. It simply proves the goal of liberalism, and anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in.

Consumers are helpless victims, confined to accepting what is offered to them. Through the experience of schematic, readymade clichés that don’t leave room for imagination or the engagement of any psychological mechanisms, consumers are stripped of their individuality. From the first note of a song or the starting scene of a movie one can know which narrative, length, and style one can expect. Cultural forms and real life become indistinguishable, both characterized by the unification of mental states and by the individual’s lack of defiance of authority.

In recent decades, as a consequence of globalization and the accelerated interconnectedness of far-flung people, critical studies on commodification have become fashionable and commodification had been related to numerous subjects (Gilbert 2008). Exploring the effects of commodification on different objects reveals results that resemble in many ways the classical analysis demonstrated by Adorno and Horkheimer. Examples for these similarities can be found in Shepherd’s description of the trivialisation and simplification of historically complex narratives caused by growing crowds in historical museums (2002), the simplification, de-authentication and standardization of traditional Irish music (Kaul 2014) or the “Alienation of human properties” through the commodification of culture and society (Collins 2011).

A recent trend within commodification studies is to shift from focusing on production to focusing on (and against) consumption. While some writers criticize this shift for producing an incomplete picture that dismisses production (for example - Carrier and Heyman 1997), other

writers stress the importance of avoiding “simple demoralizing of consumption and commodification” (Miller 1995:147). Instead, the suggestion is to distinguish between ‘benign’ and ‘evil’ forms of consumption. Similarly, in a comprehensive review of anti-consumerist studies in the age of ecological crisis, Gilbert argues “against the commodification of everything” (2008), and stresses the fundamentality of consumption in contemporary culture, and the need for scholars to fully recognize “what is in stake in the move towards a society which was not organized primarily around consumption and commodities” (564).

This essay will attempt to assess the relevance of the concept of commodification through the evaluation of the effect of fame and of becoming a ‘mass producer’ on the four leading bands within the Seattle Grunge scene.

As grunge subculture idealizes values of authenticity and freedom (which stand in opposition to commercialization) and as the four bands have become very popular ‘mass producers’ (see Appendix A), analysis of lyrics of early songs (presumably, before commodification) and late songs (after band members had become stars) might reveal important data on the effects of fame. In two out of the four bands that will be analysed, at least one member (the songwriter) had hastened his own death at an early age through the extensive use of drugs or through suicide.

2.1.2 Popular Music as a Reflection of Historical Social Changes

In a recent study by Mauch et al. (2015), comprehensive empirical quantitative data on the evolution of popular music is presented. For this purpose, the authors investigated US Billboard Hot 100 songs over 50 years (1960-2010), using both text-mining tools and an investigation of musical properties. Overall, about 17,000 songs were analysed. These are the main findings from this research:

Evaluating musical topics (chords and sequences), findings suggest a rise in the use of chords related to popular soft music (minor seventh chords) until the year 1977. Another recognized trend was a distinct rise and then decline in the combination of chord changes common to big-stadium performances in the period 1978-1990. Three different trends emerged in the 1990s: fast energetic speech (from 1993), use of piano (1995) and integration of electronic music with traditional forms (1997). Overall, recent years are characterized by a diversity of styles in comparison to earlier times.

Similar findings were found when all songs were analysed in relation to their musical genre. Strong shifts can be found in the period 1975-1988 (decline of classic rock, soul, jazz, easy listening and soul, alongside with an increase in dance, hip hop, electronic music, rap, heavy metal and grunge). A second shift evident since the early 90s is an ongoing trend towards a larger variety of styles (no dominance of one genre and an overall average popularity of all music styles), along with a rise in genre synthesis (such as dance-pop or electronic-rock).

Overall since the 60s, the findings of the study suggest that music diversity has not declined, and that in the last 3 decades diversity is growing rapidly.

The authors conclude that while music is continually evolving, there are long periods in which musical evolution is ceaseless, and other periods in which changes are small and music is

relatively static. Due to these characteristics, they suggest that the evolution of music occurs through “revolutions”.

While not trying to give sociological, historical or political explanations, the authors simply recognize three distinct periods of time: from the beginning of the research in 1960 to 1983, 1983-1991, and post-1991.

Integration of the historical context described in *The Cultural Industry, Empire* (Hardt and Negri 2001) and empirical findings on the evolution of popular music (Mauch et al. 2015) suggests that a relationship between shifts in the forms of capitalism and in the forms of popular music can be demonstrated.

The shifts, or “revolutions” (Mauch et al. 2015) in music lead to the identification of three distinct musical eras that correspond with three forms of capitalism: the ‘cultural industry’ described by the Frankfurt School of thinkers, a transitional time (represented by generation X, grunge music and the rise of popular ‘light heavy metal’) and the post-liberal era which is characterized by a fusion of styles and shifts in the forms of consumption.

The following present a description of the relationship between these three political eras and music that was most popular in these areas:

The first is the era of popular music, lasting until the mid-70s, in which a small number of genres were popular. The most common musical topics, or chord sequences, were minor seventh chords, which make for soft, simple and catchy music. These characteristics correspond with the Frankfurt School’s description of the culture industry as creating monotonous, simple music in which the listener does not need to be engaged in any mental activity.

The second era presents a transition period from the early 80s until the mid-90s. In the mid-80s musical topics designed for huge stadium performances became popular, representing the peak of music's 'capitalist consumption'.

The third era appeared during the 90s, characterised by a complete disappearance of topics popular in the 80s, a change that highlights the movement from material (live performance) to technological, immaterial consumption (home listening to music, networks). This change corresponds to the form of capitalism described in *Empire* (274). Specifically, the Foucauldian theorization (1991[1945]) that is used to explain the movement from self-discipline to control, in which institutions no longer act as mediators between sovereignty and the individual and self-discipline is achieved through "flattening of vertical instances towards the horizontality of the circuits of control" (330) is relevant. While in modernity subjectivities were produced in relation to external standards (and therefore were standardized themselves), in the society of control any standardization poses an obstacle to necessary flexibility, and therefore ceases to exist. The third era of music (mid-90s to the present) can be seen as a musical manifestation of the collapse of walls (330) and the disappearance of musical institutions, as well as the move from vertical instances (such as radio and TV channels) towards the horizontality of consumption (such as internet based audiences). These shifts are clearly established in the findings regarding the constant increase in variety in popular musical genres and the synthesis or "Multitude" (Mauch et al. 2015) of different musical styles.

2.2 Mezzo-System

2.2.1 *Subcultures, Rock Culture and the Grunge Alternative Rock Scene*

While rock is usually seen as a musical genre, it is more accurately described as a musical culture. The term rock encompasses many musical dominances and includes different musical styles that vary from country blues to heavy metal. It is also related to very different audiences, environments, historical circumstances and performances. A central part of rock culture is about “taking it seriously, as something that is more than just entertainment” (Fabbri 2012).

Many rock historians agree that a central feature of rock involves the dismissal of all aspects of mass-distributed music, such as the triviality, catchiness and softness represented in pop music.

The emergence of rock occurred when the baby-boom generation had reached its adolescence, and it has maintained its identification with youth, adolescence and values related to that age, such as the search for meaning or the attempt to come to grips with self-identity (Frith 2001).

In his comprehensive review of rock music styles and meanings, Keithley concludes that despite changes in music and themes throughout rock’s history, narratives that have been consistently central to all rock scenes are of intense feelings of freedom, rebellion, marginality, uniqueness and authenticity (2001:109).

A subculture can be defined as a smaller cultural group within a larger group, which shares a heritage, specific values and interests (Gelder 2007). The number of subcultures that exist is enormous, as is the number of shared values and interests. Some subcultures are formed around shared values and goals, while others are made of individuals that share genetic and inborn traits and backgrounds. The relationship between individual and subculture often begins in

adolescence, as part of a search for a shared identity. Often, being part of a subculture involves shared rituals and shared aesthetic performances (Greif et al. 2010).

The grunge music scene belongs to the alternative genre (Bennett 2009). The Seattle music scene was centred on about a dozen bands with musical styles reflecting a nexus of different musical genres such as folk, country and punk music. While it is hard to single out a specific musical style, two characteristics of grunge music that critics widely agree on are its very high decibel level and noisiness (Bell 1998) and the honesty of the music.

While the emergence of rock occurred when the baby-boom generation had reached its adolescence, and it has maintained its identification with youth adolescence values such as the search for meaning or the attempt to ‘come to grips’ with self-identity (Frith 2001), grunge subculture, led by generation X or the first to be raised in the age of postmodernism (Strong 2011), had idealized mainly values of authentic expressions of the most private internal content such as death, despair, pain and the striving for freedom. It will be argued that such identifications played an important role in the development of the scene.

The cultural centre of grunge in the late 80s and early 90s was Seattle, especially after the formation of music label *Sub Pop* in 1988, which initially focused on releasing albums of heavy-guitar Seattle based bands. After a long period in which grunge slowly generated fan interest, its big turning point came with the release of *Nirvana*’s second album with the David Geffen Company, *Nevermind* (1991). Unexpectedly, the album immediately became a huge success, replacing a Michael Jackson album as the number one selling record within 6 weeks of its release, an event that had immediately relocated grunge music into the mainstream. Seattle had

become the unrivalled Mecca of modern alternative rock music. In 1994, the seven best-selling Seattle bands provided their major labels with over \$200 million in gross revenue (Strong 2011).

As *Nirvana*'s hit-album symbolized the beginning of the 'grunge era', for many, Cobain's suicide on the 8th of April, 1994 represented its end. Others argue that the end of the era should be noted as the demise of *Soundgarden* in 1997 (Shuker 2005:130). Regardless of a specific date, grunge was over sometime in the mid-to-late 1990s.

In addition to Kurt Cobain, many other grunge musicians had self-destructed during the 90s. *Hole* bassist Kristen Pfaff and *Blind Melon* singer Shannon Hoon both died of a heroin overdose. Other musicians central to the scene stopped playing due to drug addictions, and some lost their life as a result of substance abuse (for example, *Alice in Chains*' singer Layne Staley in 2002 and Mike Starr, the band's bass player, in 2011). Other bands, such as *Pearl Jam*, continued to record albums and to perform, but as a result of changes in musical style and localization of performance these efforts are generally not considered part of the Seattle grunge scene (Bannister 2006).

2.2.2 *Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Production and Consumption*

At the centre of Bourdieu's piece on the field of cultural production (1983) is a criticism of both internists' approaches that evaluate works of arts solely through their content, and art critics that see art as a simple expression of the social circumstances in which it was created (for example, art as a reflection of bourgeois interests). For Bourdieu, art should be evaluated always within the social context in which it was made, without descending to extreme forms of subjectivism or objectivism.

The significance of both producers and consumers of cultural context is highlighted throughout Bourdieu's work, as aesthetics not only in arts but also in everyday life were classified as social subjects (1986). Cultural production is shaped through social practices like education and tradition, and therefore individual preferences act as signals of being a part of a specific social group.

Applying and expanding on his famous field theory, Bourdieu makes use of the concepts of habitus, capital and field to untangle the relationship between the individual and the social (or agency and structure) in the cultural field. Cultural production is divided into opposing hierarchies, the autonomous (within the field) and heteronomous (between different fields) principles. A third variable that plays a central role is financial independence (a notion that had clear negative effects on many grunge musicians, see section 4.1.1, especially part 4).

In the article, Bourdieu performs a historical review to explain how the field of cultural production has become relatively autonomous and dependent on its internal logic rather than on the field of production itself. The author sees this characteristic as a positive facet of cultural production (opposed to the view of Marxist thinkers), stressing that independence from the field of power is not a result of internal characteristics (as in the objective view). As independence grew out of specific historical particularities, it is partial and relative.

Two sub-fields are described. The first is the *large-scale production field* which depends on inter-field power relations (heteronomous principle) in search of financial capital and large audiences. The second, the *restricted field of production*, is relatively free from the economic field. In the restricted field success is achieved through recognition of members within the subfield (homogeneous principle). In contrast to the large-scale production field in which

economic and power capital are targeted, in the restricted subfield symbolic capital plays a major role, and rather than following the demands of the market, autonomy is appreciated by subfield members. Since symbolic capital that is gained through ‘disinterestedness’ in economic success is important, the restricted field functions on laws that oppose the large scale production field, hence the second part of the article’s name: ‘economic world reversed’ (1983).

The significance of Bourdieu’s theory to this essay is related to two notions. First, the sudden and immediate fame that moved grunge musicians from the restricted field of production to the large-scale field of production immediately created new and conflicting demands – economic success (large scale field), which is in opposition to the old subcultural demands for ‘disinterest in fame and money’ (restricted field). These inconsistencies played a central role in the conflicts and difficulties that led to the deterioration of the well-being of many of Grunge musicians (See section 4.1.2, part 2).

The second significance of Bourdieu’s work is related to his views on cultural production as a result of both external social environments and individual actions, and the importance of the relationship between aesthetic perception and social status, a notion that highlights the interaction between the producer and his audiences. Both notions are in concordance with the need to evaluate subcultures in an interactional process between the macro and the micro level, a thesis that this essay pursues.

2.3 Micro-System

2.3.1 *Suicide: Classical and Contemporary Views*

Wikipedia lists 167 rock musicians that committed suicide, and the list of rock musicians that died from ‘prolonged self-harm’ is much longer. Rock stars use more drugs and alcohol (Raeburn 1987), have a higher mortality than matched populations from 3 to 25 years after becoming famous, and the risk is at its peak in the first 5 years of fame. Overall they have a 1.7 times higher mortality rate (Bellis et al. 2007), and a higher suicide potential (Joiner and Rudd 2007) than demographically matched populations.

In her comprehensive study, Kenny (2016) used a sample of 12,000 male musicians from different genres, and while accidental death (including overdose) was related to about 20% of all deaths, the rates were significantly higher for rock (24.4%) and for metal musicians (36.2%) than for other genres. While 7% of all deaths were due to suicide, the rate was significantly higher for rock musicians (about 15%). The lowest suicide rate within genres was for gospel musicians (0.9%). Overall, these findings suggest that rock musicians are a distinguished social group that tends to die young.

In his model of suicide, Durkheim presented a fourfold schema: egoism, anomie, altruism and fatalism. The four forms of suicidal behaviour are related to different social circumstances, depending on lack or access to integration and regulation. In *anomie*, low social integration leads to a disorganized society, which results in a high suicide rate. Frequently anomie is caused by social changes.

A different angle to the sociological study of suicide comes from the study of the self. Goffman focused on the emergence of self in social interactions (1967), while Turner’s research (1967) described the ‘real-self’ as located within a social context. Institutional individuals experience

themselves most authentically when complying with social commitments, while impulsive individuals feel real when engaging in self-discovery and active self-creation. Suicides of both types are ‘self-affirming’ for individuals who find themselves in circumstances that threaten their perception of ‘who they are in their social context’. In his last letter, Kurt Cobain describes the discrepancy between his own feelings and his audience’s expectations as a main factor in his decision to end his life (Charles 2001). In Turner’s view, whether it was an institutional behaviour that fits the expectation of fans, or a fulfilment of individual needs (self-confirmation), it is a ‘self-affirming’ death.

An early example of self-affirming suicide is the ‘samsonic suicide’ for the purpose of revenge in African societies (Jeffreys 1952). Modern history presents a large variety of social circumstances in which suicide can be viewed as encompassing moral values. Examples for such cases can be found in acts of activists who burn themselves, suicide bombers and assisted suicides (Manning 2012). Suicide of ‘self-affirmation’ through social interaction is especially clear when a suicide note had been written, or when suicide is demonstrative.

An important notion is that of the ‘aesthetic suicide’. Foucault (1989) suggested an aesthetic conception of the self as one that emphasises the self as a product of one’s own will and self-shaping. In light of this view, aesthetic suicide (Osborne 2005) is characterized as a chosen act that expresses freedom or pure will. A powerful description can be found in Antonin Artaud’s words: “If I kill myself it won’t be to destroy myself, but to rebuild myself.... I would reintroduce my designs into nature through suicide” (Sellin 1968:158). Many examples of aesthetic suicide can be found among hara-kiri acts, in which the dramatic, ritualized suicidal act can be best defined as a performance (Pinguet 1993:281).

A central objection to the concept of aesthetic suicide is the argument that if the suicide attempt is successful there is no longer any subject (for example Blanchot 1989). An opposing argument can be derived from Durkheim's (2002[1897]) founding statement that suicidal acts don't bring one's social self to an end. Many examples in which the suicide prolongs one's social existence can be found in history and in literature.

Within rock culture, examples of early deaths that prolonged the social self of the artists are numerous. *Nirvana* front man Kurt Cobain ended his suicide note writing: "It is better to burn out than to fade away", and the deaths at an early age of Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Amy Winehouse and other famous rock musicians have long illustrated how their social being outlasts the destruction of their bodily self. Jim Morrison's grave became one of Paris's most visited tourist attractions. Amy Winehouse's album sales broke records after her death. So did *Nirvana*'s after Cobain's death.

2.3.2 *Society and the Individual*

For Durkheim (2001:2[1912]), society is a reality unto itself, "grounded in the nature of things" (2), a "separated universe" that contains all cultural knowledge. Therefore, suicide can be explained through the investigation of society by itself. As 'Man is double: in him are two beings' (p.15), the individual's basis is his body while his social being represents morals and knowledge that have been learned through observation. The social being and the individual can be defined and differentiated, and the collective representation consists of social knowledge that is qualitatively different from individual content (15).

In contrast, for Simmel, individuals are different from each other, and cannot be recreated or fully understood only by society (9). In Simmel's approach society can be represented as one

pole in a continuum that creates dialectical tension between society and core individual characteristics. For Simmel, both elements have a continuous effect on the way in which we perceive our environment. Here, the degree to which a person is differentiated from society varies between individuals and different social situations, though individuals are part of society and society is part of the individuals and the two can never be completely separated from one another (15). In some situations (for example, when a person meets a police officer) the perception of the other is dominated by an a priori principle (social knowledge). In other situations (for example, intimate relationships) the non-social elements are dominant, and individuals see predominantly the ‘core self’ of others. Both social and individual knowledge are always present in our perception of others. One of the most consistent findings of this research (see section 4.1.2) is that upon attaining fame all grunge artists have come to replace most of their intimate relationships with ones which reflected their social identity. It can be understood from Simmel’s theory that after becoming famous, one’s ‘core self’ ceased to be dominant in these individuals’ relationships and was replaced by social identity.

Giddens’ structuration theory (Giddens 1986) expands on Simmel’s views, and relates the notion of the inseparability of the individual and society to modernity. His theory was developed as a critique of structural functionalist theories that discount the role of the individual, and instead presents humans as individuals that possess agency in which reflexive mirroring of actions takes place and manifests individuality (p.224). On the other hand, the individual does not act in empty space but within society, and social institutions create structures and social rules that affect behaviours and actions, often unconsciously. For Giddens, the social structure both enables the individual’s actions and is an outcome of the same actions, a notion that has been termed as the “duality of structure” (238). Such notion highlights the transactional view and the reciprocal

relationship between individual and society, and corresponds to the thesis that is presented in this paper, that subculture (social reactions) is both created by individuals and at the same time determines to some degree their behaviour.

3. Method

3.1 General Design

The case study of the Seattle grunge scene will be used as an exemplary case of a successful rock scene in which many participants died at a young age due to self-destructive behaviour. While the grunge scene shares many characteristics with other rock scenes (for example its musical style, use of instruments, values expressed in lyrics and so forth), and has achieved significant success, it has a clear geographic and temporal specification and the bands forming the scene are easily recognizable. These provide an opportunity to attribute specific characteristics to the scene, as well as to carefully formulate general hypotheses on rock culture in general. Specifically, the focus of this research will be on the first ten years (1987-1997) of the existence of the four most successful bands within the grunge scene – *Nirvana*, *Alice in Chains*, *Soundgarden* and *Pearl Jam*.

The selection of these four bands is useful not only because these bands have sold the most albums, but also because of the specific similarities and differences between them.

All bands consist of 3 or 4 male performers that were in their early 20s when they became famous. While two of the four bands stopped playing as a result of the death of their front-man (Cobain's suicide in the case of *Nirvana* and Staley's overdose for *Alice in Chains*), both *Pearl Jam* (which has sold more performance tickets than any other band over the past two decades) and *Soundgarden* (recently revived) are still 'rocking around the world'. As suggested by Ragin

(1992:218), the case study will be used to create an 'operational closure' between theory and data.

3.2 *Biographical Sociology*

Biographical sociology has become a vast and constantly changing and expanding method in social studies over the last 30 years (Bornat 2008). The use of biographical sociology is promising for the current research as it enables the researcher to gain an understanding of both the larger historical scene and its meaning for inner lives (Mills 2000), and thus to create a further understanding of the relationship between external events and the self-perception of the individuals who make up the case study.

In an attempt to organize the “umbrella term of loosely related activities”, Bornat (2008) makes a distinction between three main biographical research methodologies. In brief, the development of the *biographical interpretative method* is usually credited to Fritz Schütze, a German sociologist that worked in the 1980s and was influenced by the Chicago School and the work of Ervin Goffman. Central to this method is separation from the chronological story, and analysis only of the meanings given to stories by interviewees. A second methodological cluster in Bornat's review consists of *oral history* methods, in which the interview process itself is seen as a historical event, and analysis is directed not at the content but at the sounds, turns of speech, forms and styles that are recorded during the interview (Portelli 1997).

As this essay uses evidence from different books that include both interview material from several sources and a 'historical perspective' made out of media coverage, a third type of biographical method is most suitable. *Narrative analysis* does not aim to separate the story from its meaning, but rather to see the story as “a greater sum of parts than the particularities of events” (348). Historical chronology and narratives that are interpreted through language,

symbolic representations and cultural forms, will all be used as layers to be analysed and combined to give access to a deeper understanding of context (Duque 2009).

The current study uses six different biographies. For *Nirvana*, two books have been reviewed. The first is *Heavier Than Heaven* (Cross 2002), written by the well-respected music journalist Charles R. Cross, who was editor of Seattle's *Rocket* magazine during the heyday of grunge culture, and who has written many other books on musicians (such as on *Led Zeppelin* and Bruce Springsteen). The book incorporates more than 400 interviews with Cobain's family and other members of the grunge scene (interviews that took place after Cobain's death) as well as magazine articles, Cobain's diaries, and past literature. The second book used for this section is *Come as You Are* (Azerrad 1993), written by acclaimed *Rolling Stone* journalist Michael Azerrad at the height of the band's success and incorporating interviews with all band members.

While the latter book is used to capture the narrative that accompanied the band's success, the former provides a better historical perspective as it was written many years after the decline of grunge.

For *Alice in Chains*, journalist David de Sola's recent book *Alice in Chains: The Untold Story* (de Sola 2015) was used, as it is the most comprehensive account of the band's history. The book is made out of more than 250 personal interviews with band members, family and friends, along with more than 150 published press interviews that were made in the past with deceased band members.

Unlike for the above-mentioned bands, in which a band member has died and for whom biographies are not "official" or approved by the record companies, for *Soundgarden* and for *Pearl Jam* the most recent, band-approved biographies were used. Both *Soundgarden: New*

Metal Crown (Nickson 1995) and *Pearl Jam Twenty* (Jam and Crowe 2013) were written with the bands' full collaboration and use comprehensive archival material and interviews with all band members.

In addition, two general books on the grunge scene were used for the biographical analysis:

Everybody Loves our Town: A History of Grunge (Yarm 2011) is a book that contains thousands of quotes taken from interviews with individuals involved in the Seattle grunge scene. *Grunge: Music and Memory* (Strong 2011) is a book based on the author's PhD research, which explores how grunge is being perceived and represented in the memory of fans that have grown up with it.

As the different biographies have been written from different perspectives, at different times and using different methods, they won't be used to compare the histories of the different bands, but rather to supplement each other in creating a varied pictures of events. For a comparison between bands, only song lyrics will be used.

3.3 Song Lyrics

Content analysis involves the extraction of desired information from texts by systematically identifying specified characteristics sought by the research. It can be used with a variety of verbal sources such as interviews, speeches, written biographies and song lyrics (for a review: Smith 2000). Content analysis can take both quantitative and qualitative forms. In quantitative content analysis units such as specific words or categories that include words with similar meanings are counted and statistically analysed (Weber 1992:37). In contrast, qualitative content analysis "pays attention to unique themes that illustrate the range of meanings of the phenomena rather than the statistical significance of the occurrence of particular texts or concepts" (Zhang and Wildemuth 2005:309). It has been widely used in anthropology, qualitative sociology and

psychology in order to avoid the reductive elements of quantitative methods and to explore the underlying meanings of messages. As this study aims to identify complex unique themes related to the representation and identifications of rock artists with the cultural ethics, qualitative content analysis will be used.

The first three songs written for the first and for the last albums of *Nirvana*, *Pearl Jam*, *Alice in Chains* and *Soundgarden* (in the cases of *Pearl Jam* and *Soundgarden*, the last album before the decline of the grunge scene in 1997 will be used), for an overall of 24 songs, were subjected to a two-step analysis: qualitative content analysis, and narrative analysis assisted by secondary literature (such as interviews, biographies, experts opinions).

4. Results

4.1 Analysis of Biographies

4.1.1 Influence of the Macro-Historical Background

Social changes and new subjectivities: Washington is the state in which most members of the grunge scene were born and began their musical careers. During the 50s and 60s, most towns and cities in Washington were characterized by close social communities in which neighbours helped each other, and where families maintained strong ties with the help of the community and the church (Azerrad 1993:66). Unlike California, in Seattle individuals spent much time indoors, forming groups with plenty of time to listen to music and to practise playing. These characteristics had an effect both on the music of the scene, as musicians were influenced by a large variety of styles and were highly qualified, and on the creation of a strong community of musicians (Jam and Crowe 2013:58).

During the early 70s Washington experienced significant social changes, as it was one of the first American areas to face the end of the ‘golden-era’ of capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001).

As the timber industry suffered the consequences of off-shore competition, rising unemployment pushed individuals to try their luck elsewhere, and Washington became one of the few states in the USA with a declining population during the early 80s. Changes in financial and occupational structures had a direct effect on many of the grunge scene members. For example, Layne Staley’s father, a third-generation car salesman, lost his job and source of income. Kurt Cobain’s father worked at the timber industry and also lost his job during that time.

Social changes led to the emergence of new subjectivities throughout the 70s. Mainly, the strong communal relationships were slowly replaced by ambitions for more comfortable lives and for wealth. This new reality was described by Chris Cornell (*Soundgarden*) as “Suburbs, but not

really suburbia. Lower-middle class white, with a pretence of being something a bit better” (Nickson 1995:87).

In the changing social environment individuals travelled and consumed (for example, in 1975 Cobain visited Disneyland), while on the other hand severe financial difficulties led to constant familial strains. Salary in the timber industry (in which Cobain’s father and most adults in his home town, Aberdeen, were employed) was very low, about \$6000 a year.

Divorce: A change that had a profound influence on members of the grunge scene was the rapid increase in the rate of divorce in the 70s, following the passing of the ‘no-fault divorce’ law (Kay 1987). Most grunge musicians came from divorced families (this includes all members of *Nirvana* and *Alice in Chains*, and overall 14 out of the 16 musicians in the four examined bands). Evidence strongly suggests that parents’ divorce had an important effect on the development of all individuals within the scene, as expressed by Sean Kinney (*Alice in Chains*): “Suddenly families started to break around me. My parents got divorced as many other typical white-bread suburban upbringing” (de Sola 2015:52). When Cobain’s mother filed for divorce, it took the whole family by surprise as no one had ever divorced in the family before. It seems that his parents’ divorce is one of two events (the other one is becoming famous) which had the most negative effect on Cobain’s wellbeing (each of these events was accompanied by a massive consumption of drugs – marijuana and LSD after the divorce, heroin after attaining fame). From the day of his parents’ divorce Cobain had not lived in the same house for a period longer than 18 months, and the first suicidal signs (for example, a film Cobain made at 15 in which he pretends to commit suicide while cutting his wrists) became apparent. Similarly for Staley, evidence shows the vital role his parents’ divorce played in his life. Unlike his younger sister, Staley refused to take on his stepfather’s last name, and a conflict regarding his relationship with

his biological father and stepfather accompanied him throughout his adult life. The divorce of *Alice in Chains* guitarist Jerry Cantrell's parents left the family in a difficult state, for a long while dependent on welfare and food stamps. *Pearl Jam* front-man Eddie Vedder's parents divorced when he was a baby, and he grew up not knowing that his stepfather is not his biological father (he met his real father a few times throughout his childhood, introduced as a family friend), and only learned the truth at age 16. The lyrics of *Pearl Jam*'s first (and biggest) hit, 'Alive', describe this story.

Effect of commodification: Alongside the self-destructiveness found throughout the band members' adolescent period, there are many signs of healthy development and hopes for having normative lives. Many of both Staley's and Cobain's teachers, classmates and girlfriends described them as regular children, "different from the outcast and troubled unsociable kids" (about Cobain. In Cross 2002:112). Athletics were a part of Cobain's identity as a high school freshman, and at times of financial crisis he even considered joining the navy. Staley on the other hand was not athletic, though invested in woodworking and overall a good student (de Sola 2015:95). Evidence consistently suggests that the period before becoming famous was probably the happiest in most band members' lives. All band members were off drugs before becoming famous, working hard on their music and boasting about their work and possible future success to family and close friends. Cobain held hopes of a normative life, and just before marrying Courtney Love said in an interview: "I've never felt so secure in my life, and so happy. There are plenty of things I would like to do when I'm older" (Azerrad 1993:198).

Symbolically, the first drug overdose (out of more than a dozen) that nearly took Cobain's life early in his career (1991) took place on his first night of big success (the release of a single and a televised performance). Throughout his career a relationship between success, drug use and

overdosing can easily be established. Cobain overdosed again after his first appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, and again on the night in which he won several *MTV Music Awards*.

Another episode occurred on the night *Nevermind* replaced Michael Jackson's album *Dangerous* at the top of the charts. After Cobain's death Eddie Vedder (probably the second most famous grunge musician at the time) made a direct connection between Cobain's death and fame, and openly talked about the pressure and difficulties he experienced due to success, saying he can understand Cobain's act.

Detailed descriptions of the negative effects of becoming famous can be found. Below is a list of the main difficulties:

Invasion of privacy: Throughout their career most grunge members openly wrote and spoke against the press and the effects of fame. What might initially have seemed like part of the rock scene's code began to appear more personal as fame was attained. Cobain described in countless interviews his frustration with the continuous interferences in his life, the lack of privacy, and the constant demands people made of him wherever he was. After the birth of Frances (Cobain's and Love's daughter, 1992) press involvement in Cobain's life became more threatening as reports of the couple's lifestyle threatened their custodial rights of their daughter, and a magazine article (in *Vanity Fair*) led to a long court battle and restrictions on their rights to take care of her (an agreement was reached in which other family members were responsible for the safety of the child, while the parents could spend as much time as they wanted with her).

Staley's friends unequivocally testified to his suffering from the intrusions to his privacy. Early on he started to disguise himself when in public, and consistently lied about not being a part of *Alice in Chains* when recognized. To his friends Staley confessed that when fans "run by you it feels like they clump dreadlocks out of your head and your scalp is bleeding" (de Sola

2015:185). Even when he was in rehab for heroin addiction, Staley suffered from his fame as a ‘celebrity junkie’. He later said that his fame had often prevented him from attending rehabilitation programs.

Vedder severely suffered from stalking, and had to build a wall next to his house after a fan tried to smash his car into it (Jam and Crowe 2013:185). The song “Lukin” (1996, No Code) describes how Vedder had to hide at his friend’s house as fans were waiting around his home: “I stop at the supermarket, people stare like I’m a dog” (“Lukin”, Lyrics).

Difficulties during performance tours: *Nirvana*’s first European tour (1992) was experienced by Cobain as “designed to physically and psychologically break the band members” (Azerrad 1993:170), and throughout its short career the band was pushed to perform to a schedule that was perceived as torturous by its members. Worthy of note is the unplugged MTV show in which Cobain had to be heavily medicated before going on stage, and the last tour that was cut short a few days before Cobain’s first suicide attempt and a few weeks before his death.

Staley was highly anxious and from an early stage in his career used to self-medicate before performances (de Sola 2015:258). Many of the different band members testified that they could never sleep after a performance (Nickson 1995:188).

Drug availability: Fame brought to band members a constant availability of drugs, as dealers and drugs ‘found their way to them’. Additionally, financial security allowed them to spend long periods in their homes while consuming very expensive drugs (For example, Staley: de Sola 2015:192).

Pressure from music industry and band members to ‘keep on going’: Despite being just out of rehab and expressing strong resistance and worries about his abilities to survive a long

performance tour, the record company, producers and bandmates all persuaded Cobain to continue playing, as tens of millions of dollars were at stake. Even his wife Courtney Love, who knew about his fragile condition, urged Cobain to perform as such a tour was to secure his and his family's financial future. It was during this tour that Cobain had his final relapse into heroin. A few weeks later, in his second (and final) suicide note, Cobain mentioned his inability to enjoy playing in front of audiences as a central reason for his decision to end his life.

Similarly, despite Staley's wish to quit the band (he even offered to help find his replacement), band members and producers pushed him to continue to record albums. The band worked around Staley's drug use (and used the few moments in each day in which he could sing) in order to complete their last album. This process had been described as "really painful, involving hours and hours of waiting for Staley to be able to sing for a few minutes"(Yarm 2011:166).

4.1.2 The Development of the Self within Grunge Subculture

The Seattle music scene was centred on about a dozen bands with musical styles reflecting a nexus of different musical genres such as folk, country and punk music. While it is hard to single out a specific musical style, two characteristics of grunge music that critics widely agree on are its very high decibel level and noisiness (Bell 1998) and the honesty of the music. For grunge, authenticity was about maintaining artistic integrity, without falling into the trappings of commercialism (Giovanni 2012). *Alice in Chains'* guitarist Jerry Cantrell described their music as "a way to express things that we wouldn't talk about – things that are heavy and dark" (de Sola 2015:6). As Chris Cornell (*Soundgarden*) explained, "growing up in a detached city, most of the inhabitants did not know what is cool. As a result, trying to be ourselves and express our most private and dark internal realities became the most important value" (Nickson 1995:145).

As described earlier, the core band musicians were facing social changes such as a decrease in social integration (community played a smaller role) and changes in financial and familial structures (divorce). They were looking for new identities, and found it in grunge culture. It was Cobain's first exposure to grunge rock (back then called punk-rock) in a 1983 *Black Flag* concert which made him write in his journal: "this is what I was looking for [underlined twice] ... I found my special purpose" (Cross 2002:166). Similar life-changing (or perhaps self-changing) experiences were reported by other grunge musicians when exposed to the musical performances of artists such as *Van Halen*, *Ozzy Osbourne* and *Twisted Sister*. These experiences were usually accompanied by a change in the circle of friends from schoolmates to rock band members.

Most members of the four groups have shifted their daily jobs into working within the grunge industry. Staley worked and lived in the *Music Bank*, the rehearsal studio of most grunge bands. Cobain didn't hesitate to choose becoming a roadie for the *Melvins*, an extremely physically demanding job, over more financially rewarding opportunities.

One of the most noticeable changes after becoming part of grunge subculture was a changing attitude towards institutions. For example, Cobain's school, once described as an idyllic 'second home', had become a symbol of society's role in restricting one's individuality (resembling the traditional views of punk culture).

A sign of the new developing self is evident in the many name changes among grunge musicians (9 out of 16 band members did not use their birth name as artists). As these individuals invented for themselves new names and identities, intimate relationships came to be replaced with interactions based on their 'rock star' identities. A telling example of these changes is found in

the fact that once-close acquaintances of *Nirvana*'s front-man (such as ex-girlfriends) started spelling his name as "Kurd" (a nickname he chose as his rocker identity), and were to be found standing in line for his autograph. Soon, the intimate relationships with bandmates changed as well. All four bands' front-men moved out of the bands' tour busses and used private vehicles, and avoided personal relations with their bandmates for long periods of time. *Nirvana* bassist Krist Novoselic, for example, who followed Cobain from the beginning, was not invited to his wedding ceremony with Courtney Love.

Tension between Success and Grunge Values against Commercialism

Evident throughout the history of grunge is the never-ending tension between success (and money) and rock and punk's moral code which is opposed to commercialization and the capitalist striving for money and success. Most core group grunge musicians openly testified to their hopes of become rock stars (for example, Cobain (de Sola 2015:48), Staney (de Sola 2015:48), Starr (de Sola 2015:122), Wood (Nickson 1995:48)), but these were generally kept hidden, as they were opposed to grunge ethics. Cobain hoped secretly to become bigger than U2 or R.E.M (popular bands that Cobain admired) but was careful not to mention his ambitions in musical circles.

Among the many examples of behaviours that demonstrate 'anti-capitalist' codes are the clothes worn by band members (for example, to one of his biggest nights in which *Nirvana* performed on *Saturday Night Live*, Cobain wore the same clothes he did the previous two days: tennis shoes, torn jeans and a T-shirt advertising an obscure band). Another example is found in new habitual behaviours which became part of grunge subculture, such as stage diving (in which audience members climb on stage and jump onto the crowd), the destruction of musical

instruments on stage which had become a prominent aspect of every performance, and the use of very dark symbols on album art and in performances.

The media and MTV played a central role in grunge's success (both *Alice in Chains'* "Man in a Box" and *Nirvana's* "Smells Like Teen Spirit" were chosen by MTV administrators as 'buzzclips' and were intentionally aired frequently (de Sola 2015:185).

The contradiction between success and grunge ethics was dealt with in different ways, such as distinguishing the bands' identities from that of their mass following. For example, for a while *Nirvana's* band members considered calling their second album *Sheep* as a de-evaluative description of their audience. In a 1992 letter to *Rolling Stone* magazine (which was never sent) Cobain regarded the magazine's readership as middle-aged ex-hippies-turned-hypocrites. Eventually, the second album was released as *Nevermind*, both an attitude (apathy) towards life which is concordant with traditional punk-rock culture, and a grammatically incorrect statement, symbolizing the movement against institutions.

Pearl Jam expressed their opposition to commercialization and commodification in several ways. Early in his career, Vedder refused to grant interviews to popular magazines (such as *Time*) as he feared that becoming mainstream will cost him his success (*Time* ignored his request and placed him on the cover of the magazine in October of 1993). When the band won their first Grammy and got on-stage, Vedder said "I think that this prize doesn't mean anything. I don't have anything to say. That's how it feels".

Later, *Pearl Jam* initiated a boycott against *Ticketmaster*, a ticket distributor that had a monopoly on the business. The band further demonstrated their resistance to the music industry's perceived greed by setting a limit on the price of tickets and releasing all of their performance material (or

bootlegs, a move that significantly decreased their label's income). The song "This is Not for you" (Vitalogy, 1994) was said by Vedder to be directed against the music industry and "all the people that are between the musicians, and their audience". The song lyrics contain the following: "got so crowded, I can't make room. Where did they come from? And you dare say it belongs to you... to you... this is not for you... fuck you!".

4.1.3 Drug use and suicide as acts of self-confirmation

As mentioned in the memoir of Duff McKagan (*Guns 'N Roses'* Seattle-born bassist), around 1982 Seattle experienced a huge inflow of heroin, and death by overdose became almost a commonplace. "As Ronald Reagan became president and jobs disappeared, smack oozed into the vacuum left in people's lives" (in Yarm 2011:155). Heroin-related deaths increased dramatically in Seattle during the 90s and reached a record level of 410 cases in a six month period (de Sola 2015:182): "there was plenty of rock, stolen cars, and drugs where I grew up" (Chris Cornell in Nickson 1995)

Andrew Wood, Chris Cornell's roommate and singer of *Mother Love Bone*, an early grunge band whose members included *Pearl Jam*'s future guitarist and bass player, was the first famous victim of heroin in the grunge scene. After his death an album (*Temple of the Dog*) was made by Cornell and the members of *Pearl Jam* as a tribute. Nine out of the 16 members of the four core bands attended his funeral in 1990.

In retrospect, Wood's death cannot be seen as an isolated incident, but rather as a precursor for the events to come. Not only had none of the band members avoided heroin as a response to their friend's death, but rather the opposite: heroin and drug use became a symbol of grunge music, a part of the moral code and of the newly developed self of its members.

All 16 members of the four core grunge bands used a large variety of drugs, and most have publicly admitted to have been addicted to different drugs, including heroin, throughout their lives. Three out of the 16 died at a young age while on drugs (Cobain, Staley, Starr), and 9 of the 16 musicians attended rehab at least once. As an ex-junkie (post-rehab), *Pearl Jam* guitarist Mike McCready reached out to Staley and offered to help with his addiction, and together they recorded an album (*Above*) about drug abuse and rehab in a group made of ex-junkies (*Mad Season*). While McCready has stayed clean since, Staley never really stopped using drugs.

The centrality of drug use and especially heroin within the grunge scene can be further demonstrated by Cobain's hiding of his abstinence when he was 21 and clean off drugs. He would often draw 'needle stains' (small red dots on his arms and legs) before concerts, in pretence of being a drug user. "Heroin" first appeared as a rude cartoon figure drawn by Cobain in the eighth grade. While yet unknowledgeable about the substance, Cobain idealized the drug used by many rockers before him. By 1991, heroin had stopped being an occasional drug and, as *Nirvana's* fame grew, the front-man consciously decided to use the drug on a regular basis. The word 'junky' had become a part of his explicit identity.

Staley started using heroin in his early 20s and, like many members of grunge culture, openly praised the effects of the drug. In a famous interview he stated: "When I took that first hit, for the first time in my life, I got on my knees and thanked god for feeling good" (de Sola 2015:183). A few of Staley's friends testified that he started to use drugs as he believed that there is something 'glamorous' about it, and a positive attitude towards the use of hard drugs is expressed in many of his band's song lyrics, such as the two songs written by Staley while in rehab (1992). "But we are an elite race of our own, the stoners, junkies and freaks. Are you happy? I am, man... What's my drug of choice? Well what have you got? I don't go broke and I do it a lot... If you let

yourself go and opened your mind, I'll bet you'd be doing (drugs) like me. And it ain't so bad" ("Junkhead"), "Stick your arm for some real fun" ("God Smack").

Once he started using heroin, Staley used continuously throughout the last decade of his life (with the exception of very short periods after rehabs), the result of a decision to simply never stop using drugs. Staley spent his last three years mostly at home, saying to his friends and relatives that he is happy existing in a state of drug use and solitude (de Sola 2015:302). In an interview, he described drug use as flirting with death, relating the themes of many of his songs. Staley knew that he was to die of drug use, and nevertheless decided to continue (de Sola 2015:305).

Cobain's Suicide as Self-Confirmation

Despite his efforts to hide it, most of Cobain's acquaintances testified that one of his most striking characteristics was a self-consciousness and sensitivity to the way he was perceived by others (narcissistic needs were mentioned in the eulogy given by Love a few days after his suicide). Being uneasy about his low weight and knobby knees, Cobain never wore short trousers. His every interview was carefully calculated, and each of his letters was drafted and redrafted endlessly. Stories told by Cobain about his past were often mixed with fantasy so as to present a greater character, the purposefully misspelled "Kurd Cobain".

Despite the negative effects on his psychological wellbeing and in spite of his wife's pleas, Cobain could not resist reading every review and article written about him on a daily basis (Cross 2002:265). He was obsessed with reviews (many of which were published every single day).

The notion of suicide had been perceived by Cobain early on as part of the success of rock culture. Already at sixteen a friend (John Fields) heard Cobain's plan to "be a superstar musician, kill myself and go out in a flame of glory" (Cross 2002:112). Over the years many heard Cobain declare his admiration for Jimmy Hendrix and Jim Morrison's paths and early ends.

As mentioned, Cobain's fantasy of suicide had been demonstrated in his artwork and movies as a teenager, but as time went on he talked about it more openly and publicly. In 1993, virtually every interview Cobain gave included some reference to suicide (Cross 2002:265). He made plenty of interviews in that year.

In an early rehabilitation attempt, one medical doctor told Cobain that like Shakespeare's most famous character, he too should decide if he wants 'to be, or not to be'. A few days later he left the clinic with a decision to continue his drug abuse, or what seems like a rational decision 'not to be'.

Cobain made two suicide attempts, and prepared suicide notes for both. Both were planned beforehand and involved many symbolic acts. Both were attempts at communicating something. In the first suicide attempt's letter (in which Cobain took more than 60 sleeping pills and was found on the verge of death by his wife) 'Hamlet's dilemma' was mentioned, as well as a decision to cease being. A few weeks later Cobain took no chances. After making an effort to have positive last encounters with his family and close friends (such as spending an affectionate afternoon with his two-year-old daughter, a long loving conversation with his wife and being uncharacteristically positive towards many of his family members), Cobain picked up the

shotgun he had hidden in a secret cubbyhole in his mansion, went to the garden house, wrote a long suicide letter, used a large amount of heroin for the last time and shot himself.

4.2 Analysis of Song lyrics:

4.2.1 *Content analysis*

Chris Cornell testified that the most important narrative in grunge is the expression of internal emotions, especially the ones that most people tends to hide (Nickson 1995:202). Indeed, the three most common themes in lyrics of all bands are negative emotions (73 times), positive emotions (55 times) and death (45 times).

Negative emotions appeared in 88% of analysed songs. Repeatedly found negative emotions include despair (“In the darkest hole”, from *Alice in Chains*’ “Sludge Factory”), pain (“Cut myself on angel hair and baby’s breath”, *Nirvana*, “Heart Shaped Box”), anger (“I’m still alive. Don’t I deserve to be? Is that a question?” *Pearl Jam*, “Alive”) and madness (“when he’s happy he looks insane”, *Pearl Jam*, “Even Flow”).

Positive emotions are often related to hope (and often mixed with negative emotions, as in “Once, upon a time, I could love myself”, *Pearl Jam*, “Once”), experiences of beauty (“All of seventeen, Eyes of purple green” (*Soundgarden*, “Flower”) and appreciation (“You’re god and you’ve got big hands” (*Pearl Jam*, “Sometime”).

The third most common theme, found in the lyrics of 18 out of the 24 songs, is death, often in conjecture with pain and despair. Among the numerous examples: “I die smothered in Andy’s

Clutch” (*Nirvana*, “Floyd the Barber”), “Please, Plan my Funeral” (*Alice in Chains*, “Sludge Factory”), “And we die young” (*Alice in Chains*, “We Die Young”).

Aggressive content is the fourth most common theme (25 times), and often appears with death and negative emotions. Examples for such content include “The skulls beneath my feet” (*Soundgarden*, “Rhinosaur”) and “I’m the dog that got beat. Shove my nose in shit” (*Alice in Chains*, “Man in a Box”).

Other common themes are the restriction of freedom (19 times), and sex (17 times). Here differences between bands and timing (before and after fame, See 4.2.3) are clearly noticeable. Among the examples for restriction of freedom is “If I can’t be my own, I’d be better dead” (*Alice in Chains*, “Nutshell”). An example for sexual content is “Floyd breathes hard, I hear a zip, pee-pee pressed against my lip” (*Nirvana*, “Floyd the Barber”). Other found themes such as existential questions, romantic relationships, direct commodification and nonsense are directly related to changes in lyrics due to fame, and will be discussed in part 4.2.3.

4.2.2 Shifts in Content as a Result of Fame, and Comparisons Between Bands

In the following table, the overall sums for the coding of early (pre-fame) and late albums for each group are presented. The green arrows highlight shifts in lyric content in bands that survived fame and remained successful. The red arrows highlight shifts in lyric content in bands in which the front-man (and songwriter) brought death upon himself at an early age.

Band	Positive emotion	Negative emotion	Death	Aggression	Freedom restriction	Sex	Existential Questions	Romantic relationship	Direct-commodification	Nonsense
Pearl jam (early)	12	6	7	1		3				
(last album)	9	7				6	6	6		
Soundgarden	11	7	5		2	6				2
(last album)	7	7			2	1	14			
Alice in Chains	7	16	11	9	3				1	
(last album)		19	11	9	6			9		
Nirvana (early)	8	4	6	2	1	3		2		4
(last album)	3	7	5	4	5	4	3	5		

Table 1: overall sums coding of early and late albums for each group

The analysis suggests several important relevant findings:

For all bands, shifts from early to late albums accompanied a homogeneity in the content of lyrics (overall, less variety in coding). In addition, differences in the content of early and late song lyrics were found for all bands.

In early albums, for all bands both positive and negative emotion codes were present (along with other codes).

The most notable difference between bands in which early death had and had not occurred is in aggressive content in lyrics. In the former case there are many themes of aggression (in both early and late records), while in bands that continued to be successful there is no aggressive content. These findings correlate with findings from psychological testing (for example, aggression in the Rorschach test as a suicide predictor, see Mihura, Nathan-Montano, and Alperin 2003).

For the two bands that have continued to exist after becoming famous, themes shifted from death (both bands) and nonsense (*Soundgarden*), towards lyrics related to existential problems (*Pearl Jam*) and romantic relationships (*Soundgarden*).

In contrast, for the two bands in which the songwriter brought an early death upon himself, shifts in themes are from positive emotions (both) and nonsense (*Nirvana*), towards direct references to the negative effect of commodification (both), and to restriction of freedom (both), which can be seen as a side effect of commodification.

4.2.3 Evaluation of the Effects of Fame Using Narrative Analysis Assisted by Secondary Literature

The general themes and meanings of each song were summarized (see Appendix B), with the use of biographical data (books and personal journals, references are in the text). These are the main themes that emerge:

Bands that Continued to be Successful after Becoming Famous

On *Pearl Jam*'s first album, songs consist of three bizarre and painful experiences (a man that descends into madness and becomes a serial killer, a mentally ill homeless person, and a person

discovering that his mother, with whom he has had an incestuous relationship, lied to him about the identity of his father). In the second album two songs are related to questioning one's existence, possibilities, transcendence, and the existence of a 'higher power', and the third is about struggles in a romantic relationship (Neely 1998).

Comparing *Soundgarden*'s early and late album lyrics reveals a shift from somewhat bizarre songs (such as the song "665", consisting of a one minute piece, which when played reversed [From end to start – the album was originally released on vinyl] reveals a short Santa Claus poem, or a song that contain two sentences repeated again and again) into lyrics that are focused exclusively on romantic relationships and the joys and pain that accompany them (Nickson 1995).

Bands in which the Songwriters had Hastened their Own Death

On *Alice in Chains*' first album is a song about the homicide of drug dealers, and two songs which revolve around themes of desperation, restriction of freedom and being attacked by others. In the later album, all three songs include direct, aggressive anger aimed at the media and the record industry. In the first song anger is expressed regarding false rumours about the death/morbid state of the band's front-man (Strong 2011), the next song reveals Staley's frustration with his lack of privacy: "My gift of self is raped, my privacy is raked..." ("Nutshell"). The title of the third song, "Sludge Factory", targets the record industry, and the song levels direct accusations at it: "Call me up congratulations ain't the real why, / There's no pressure besides brilliance let's say by day nine, / Endless corporate ignorance lets me control time" (Sola 2015).

Nirvana's debut album begins with an obscure song that some journalists and fans interpret as describing a sexual relationship, oral sex, or masturbation (Yarm 2011), followed by a story in

which a guy goes to the barber for a shave but instead gets urinated on and murdered. The third song is about the need to keep one's freedom while in a relationship. The last album contains a song Cobain wrote to his father, from an adult's viewpoint, telling him that he doesn't hate him, nor love him, and wants to maintain his freedom to not have a father-son relationship. This song is followed by an obscure song about unbearable pain and death. The third song, "Rape me", is both an anti-rape song and a critique of the music industry (Charles 2001). In both cases, the song is a teasing by the victim of his perpetrator: "Rape me. Rape me again. Hate me. Hate me again".

Analysing the lyrical shifts strongly suggests that band front-men that hastened their own deaths (but not those who did not) express difficulties adjusting to the media's invasion of privacy. Both Cobain (*Nirvana*, "Rape me") and Staley (*Alice in Chains*, "Nutshell") explicitly equate the media's relationship to them with rape. Lyrics that express anger towards the record industry and the way it uses individuals' talent while ignoring them as individuals (*Alice in Chains*, "Sludge factory") perfectly resonate with Adorno and Horkheimer's theory. And so do the findings from the qualitative content analysis.

5. Discussion

“Every disturbance of equilibrium, even though it achieved greater comfort and a heightening of general vitality, is an impulse to voluntary death” (Durkheim 1996:256). The case study of the Seattle grunge scene presents an astonishing example of people that experienced a rapid social change, from an isolated group of musicians to world famous mega-rockers, and in which along with wealth and fame, the disturbance of equilibrium brought also pain and death.

While this study strongly corresponds to Durkheim’s famous observation on the relationship between social disorganization and suicide, it also suggests that in contrast with Durkheim’s thinking the individual and the social cannot be separated, and that integration between the macro and the micro level is necessary for understanding suicide and self-harm within a subculture. Along with the anomy caused by change, turning into cultural symbols had made rockers self-identity a synonym with their social identity (Simmel 1972). Acting out the values embodied in grunge subculture had a crucial role in the tragic early ending of many of the scene members’ lives.

On the macro-level, evidence suggests that in addition to the social changes resulting from fame, the historical circumstances in which the grunge scene evolved also played a central role in the development of grunge subculture and the individuals that were a part of it. As Washington was one of the first states to experience the end of the ‘golden-era’ of capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2001), new subjectivities evolved in which individuals strived for capital and success, but suffered from financial deprivation. Repeatedly described by grunge members is a vacuum, created by the lack of jobs during the Reagan administration (Nickson 1995) and the loss of communal ties and institutions, a vacuum that was to be filled by drugs and dreams of stardom. The new subjectivities, described in the simple words of Cobain as “a neighborhood in which

white trash posed as middle class” (Azerrad 1993:125) were followed by an increase in the rate of divorce (Kay 1987) which was especially high (more than 75%) in the families of the core group grunge musicians. As literature consistently reveals a relationship between divorce and suicide (Scourfield et al. 2012), it should be seen an intermediate variable between social changes and the high rate of early deaths within the grunge scene.

Evidence reveals a strong effect of commodification on both the producers and their products, but in both cases the term seems to be insufficient as a description of the complex effects of fame. One hypothesis that emerges is that commodification standardises and regulates most cultural forms, and that some individuals (somehow characterized with aggression) react to commodification by self-destruction. Ironically, this formula illustrates the reality described by the Frankfurt School’s critique in which the “cultural industry” crushes its insubordinates (3).

Shifts from the early to the late albums of all grunge core bands were characterised by an increasing homogeneity, but the effect of fame on the regularity and trivialization of song lyrics is particularly evident in bands that have continued to be successful after becoming famous. For these bands, not only did lyrics become less varied, but their content also shifted from avant-garde, experimental themes (Bourdieu 1983) such as nonsense, death and sex towards conventional topics (or in Adorno’s word, “readymade clichés” [6]) such as romantic relationships and existential questions. Aggressive content was found to be the main differentiator between the two groups of bands. As the group that was to disintegrate experienced fame, not only did it continue to write about aggression and death, but its ‘neutral’ and ‘happy’ themes (positive emotions) were replaced by a preoccupation with restriction of freedom and the negative effects of commodification.

Differences between bands in the effects of commodification on the content of song lyrics highlight the problematic nature of the trend “against the commodification of everything” (Gilbert 2008) and the attempt to differentiate between ‘benign’ and ‘evil’ consumption (Carrier and Heyman 1997). While consumption (and fame) played an important role in both the self-destruction and the creativity of artists in the grunge scene, evidence suggests that it might be impossible to distinguish between ‘bad and good consumption’ of music, as to a large degree, the differentiation between positive and negative effects of commodification depends on unpredicted variables within the individual producer rather than on the consumers.

Evidence strongly suggests that fame and commodification played a crucial part in the deterioration of the well-being of many grunge musicians. The record industry (or as it had been called in *Alice in Chains*’ song title: “Sludge Factory”) and financial demands (made also by family members) to produce and perform under circumstances that are experienced as “designed to physically and psychologically break the band members” (Cobain. In: Cross 2002) had a direct adverse effect on group members. Nevertheless, these effects do not account for the whole story, just as the invasion of privacy by the media and the availability of drugs which accompanied success and caused many difficulties produce only a partial explanation for the rapid ending of the Seattle grunge scene. The development of grunge culture must therefore be approached.

Grunge subculture borrowed many of its themes and rules from rock and punk culture, and as had been demonstrated through both biographies and song lyrics, the scene’s values centred on authentic expression of negative emotions, anti-commercialism and narratives that relate to death, pain and freedom. In addition and somehow paradoxically (and tragically), instead of making heroin an enemy, the early death of Andrew Wood from a heroin overdose turned the

drug into a symbol of the grunge scene. Evidence consistently shows that the self-identity of core group grunge musicians became inseparable from grunge subcultural values and with grunge's identification with death, drug use and opposition to institutions, a notion that can be symbolised by the replacement of birth names and intimate relationships with stage names and an obsession with fan and media coverage.

Bourdieu's theorisation (Bourdieu 1983) on the reversal of rules in restricted fields of cultural production compared to the economic field have a strong explanatory power regarding the importance of investigating subcultures for understanding the high rate of early death within specific rock scenes, and vice versa. Due to its unique characteristics, grunge culture presents a convincing example for the relevance of Bourdieu's cultural theory of fields, and stands against accusations of the 'reverse' notion as pretentious and of the field theory of cultural production as inapplicable (for a review: Hilgers and Mangez 2015). The development of grunge subculture in a highly isolated environment in which strong communal relationships were dominant and authenticity and identification with the subculture's norms were appreciated over external capitalist tendencies, along with the fact that grunge experienced one of the most rapid growths in commercial success in musical history (Strong 2011:37), marks a clear example of a shift from the *restricted field of production* in which members seek recognition through symbolic capital within the field to a *large-scale field of production* in which reward is obtained in financial and power capital. This shift created tension between success and grunge values against commercialism, a tension that had a destructive effect on many band members.

One personal characteristic shared by early-death grunge musicians is a high consciousness of how they were perceived by their audiences. Cobain obsessively followed articles (hundreds of them) and media coverage about himself and calculated each of his public exposures (Cross

2002:197), while Staley hid himself from the public, and suffered from severe anxiety before performances. Both consistently expressed their loyalty to grunge ethics in endless magazine interviews (Cobain), in their song lyrics (for example, a direct recommendation to use heroin by Staley in the song “Junkhead”), and in their public and private behaviours. Cobain and Staley expressed early in their career their wish to die at an early age and their admiration of rock stars (such as Jimmy Hendrix and Jim Morrison) who have died and ‘eternalised’ themselves. Cobain chose to follow in these artists’ steps, ending his suicide letter with the sentence “It is better to burn out than to fade away”, and his act can be seen as an aesthetic suicide (Osborne 2005), as it was a chosen act that expresses freedom and pure decision. Like Milan Kundera’s protagonist, the symbols of grunge culture “didn’t want to vanish. They were thinking of suicide because they saw it as a way to stay... To engrave themselves forever on all our memories” (In: Immortality. Kundera 1999:189).

Both front-men have decided never to quit heroin, knowing that it will lead to an early death. As the individuals’ ‘core’ and ‘social’ selves became identical, confronting the conflict between grunge subcultural values and worldwide success provided only a single solution that was perceived as being loyal to the musical scene they symbolised. In Turner’s terms (1967) these deaths are ‘self-affirming’, as both Cobain and Staley found themselves in circumstances that threatened their perception of who they are in their social context. Cobain’s ‘demonstrative’ suicide (Manning 2012) and his suicide letter meant to communicate cultural values and not simply to stop an objective suffering.

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Appendix A: Album list and information about initial selling rate

Pearl Jam: *Early Album: Ten*, released in August 1991. While commercial success was initially low (selling about 6,000 copies in the first six months), one year later album sells had exploded and by the end of 1992 it became one of the best-selling albums of the era. Universally considered today to be a high-water mark of the Seattle grunge scene.

Late Album: No code. Pearl Jam's 4th Album was release in August 1996. It is Pearl Jam's last album before the decline of the grunge scene in 1997, when the band was at the height of its success. It sold 366,500 copies in its first week of release.

Alice in Chines: *Early Album: Facelift*. Alice in Chains' debut album was released in August 1990. Again, following a slow start (selling about 300 copies in the first six months), a year later album sales have risen and by the end of 1991 it was one of the 100 best-selling albums in the US.

Late Album: Alice in Chains. Alice in Chains' 4th album was released in October 1995 (it is Alice in Chains' last studio album before the death of Layne Staley from a drug overdose), when the band was at the height of its success. It sold 155,000 copies in its first week of release.

Nirvana: *Early Album: Bleach*. Nirvana's debut album was released in June 1989, but was a commercial failure (less than 100 records were initially sold). It was re-released in 1991, after the huge success of Nirvana's second album, *Nevermind*, and has sold more than 1.7 million copies since.

Late Album: In Utero. Nirvana's 3rd and final album was released in September 1993 when the band was at the height of its success. It sold 170,000 copies in its first week of release, and more than 7 million to this day.

Soundgarden: *Early album: Ultramega OK*. Soundgarden's debut album was released in October 1988, but was a commercial failure (less than 1,000 records were initially sold).

Late Album: Down on the upside. Soundgarden's 5th album was released in May 1996, at the height of the band's success. It is the band's last album before their reunion in 2012. It sold 200,000 copies in its first week of release.

Appendix B: Song coding

Band:	Album	Song title	Song description	Coding
Pearl Jam	Ten	<i>Once</i>	The story of a man who descends into madness and becomes a serial killer.	PE (5) NE (5).
Pearl Jam	Ten	<i>Even Flow</i>	A description of the experience of being a homeless man who is mentally ill.	PE (7) NE (1)
Pearl Jam	Ten	<i>Alive</i>	A person discovering that his father had actually died in his childhood and that the person he sees as his father is his stepfather. He understands that his incestuous relationship with his mother is related to this.	Death (7) Aggression (6) Sex (3)
Pearl Jam	No-code	<i>Sometimes</i>	Obscure and contains 9 different sentences that begin with the word 'sometimes'. It is said to be written about questioning one's existence, possibilities and the existence of a 'higher power'.	Existential (3) PE (2) NE (1)
Pearl Jam	No-code	<i>Hail Hail</i>	Two persons struggling to hold their relationship together.	PE (6) NE (6) Relationship (4)
Pearl Jam	No-code	<i>Who we are</i>	Obscure and contains 12 sentences, a few including question marks and questions about who we are. The songwriter wrote that the song had been written about questioning one's existence, and about options for transcendence and 'something above'.	PE (1) Existential (3) Relationship (2)
Alice in Chains	Facelift	<i>We die young</i>	Gang violence, drug dealing and kids that get shot when they are still young.	NE (6) Death (5) Aggression (5)

Alice in Chains	Faceli ft	<i>Man In a Box</i>	Written about the censorship of the masses. Reveals an experience of a man who has lost his freedom, is desperate and begs for help.	Commodification (1) Freedom (3) Death (3) NE (3) PE (4)
Alice in Chains	Faceli ft	<i>Bleed the freak</i>	Has been said to be written about 'us against the world, and people that put you down'.	NE (7) Aggression (4) Death (4) PE (3)
Alice in Chains	Alice in Chains	<i>Grind</i>	Against journalism and the media, an expression of anger about false rumours regarding the death/morbid state of the band's frontman Layne Staley.	Commodification (2) NE (5) Death (6) aggression (5) Freedom (2)
Alice in Chains	Alice in Chains	<i>Nutshell</i>	Dark lyrics dealing with loneliness, despair and death. The lyrics are also thought to be an expression of Staley's frustration with lack of privacy.	commodification (3) NE (7) Death (2) Freedom (2) Aggression (2)
Alice in Chains	Alice in Chains	<i>Sludge Factory</i>	Direct and elaborated accusation of the record industry. A narrative of death and anger.	Commodification (4) NE (7) Freedom (2) Aggression (2)
Nirvana	Bleach	<i>Blew</i>	Consists of 8 lines. There is no agreement upon the meaning of this song, some interpret this as a description of sexual relationship, oral sex, masturbation, as well as a wish to break out from society's restrictions.	NE (2) PE (2) Sex (2) Nonsense (4)
Nirvana	Bleach	<i>Floyd the barber</i>	A short story about a guy that goes to the barber for a shave, but instead gets urinated on and murdered by suffocation.	NE (6) Aggression (2) Death (2) Sex (2)

Nirvana	Bleach	<i>About a girl</i>	Written by Cobain to his girlfriend at time, asking her to fulfil some of his needs but to let him keep his freedom and not to restrict it.	PE (2), Death (4) Freedom (1) sex (1), relationship (2)
Nirvana	In Utero	<i>Serve the servants</i>	A letter Cobain wrote to his father (journals), from the point of a view of an adult who looks back on his past, telling his father that he doesn't hate him, nor love him, and wants to maintain his freedom not to have a father-son relationship.	Freedom (3) NE (3) relationship (2)
Nirvana	In Utero	<i>heart shaped box</i>	Complex lyrics (such as a letter to the Cobain's wife Courtney Love, references to uterus). The lyrics contain direct references to unbearable pain and death.	Death (5) freedom (2) relationship (3) PE (1)
Nirvana	In Utero	<i>Rape me</i>	Double meaning. The first is that it is an anti-rape song, while the second is that this song is directed at the music industry. In both cases, the song is a teasing by the victim.	commodification (5), aggression (4), sex (4) NE (4) PE(1)
Soundgarden	Ultra mega OK	<i>Flower</i>	About a girl who becomes a woman and invests everything in vanity, which then burns out fast.	PE (5), sex (2) death (2), Nonsense (2)
Soundgarden	Ultra mega OK	<i>All Your Lies</i>	Very obscure, begins with a repetition of the sentence "all your fears are lies" four times, and then a few more sentences about relationships.	NE (4) sex (3) death (2), PE (3) Freedom (1)

Soundgarde n	Ultra mega OK	665	A very short piece, in which the sentence “It’s creeping in so slow, trapping it, nobody’s home”. When played reversed (originally was released on vinyl) a short Santa Claus poem is dictated.	Nonsense (2) PE (2) NE (3) Freedom (1)
Soundgarde n	Down on the upside	<i>Pretty noose</i>	About a bad girlfriend experience.	Relationship (5) sex (1) NE (3) PE(2) freedom (2)
Soundgarde n	Down on the upside	<i>Rhinosau r</i>	Pretending in relationships, saying you love when you hate, hurting the other with a smile.	Relationship (5)NE (3)
Soundgarde n	Down on the upside	<i>Zero chance</i>	Loneliness and loss of hope related to the end of a relationship.	Relationship (4) NE (1) Death (1) PE (2).