

Musical Semantics and Interpretations Traditions

The Hermeneutics of Kurt Cobain

*“He's the one
Who likes all our pretty songs
And he likes to sing along
And he likes to shoot his gun
But he don't know what it means”*

- Lyrics for In Bloom (In Utero, 1991), my emphasis

1 – Introduction

In this essay I will analyze from an inquisitive and hermeneutical point of view the phenomenon of Nirvana, a relatively short-lived Seattle-based rock band from the first part of the 90's, sometimes characterised as the founders of *grunge* and a heavy influence behind the “alternative” sound of the 90's. I will give special emphasis on the figurehead singer/guitarist Kurt Cobain, whose death at the age of 27 effectively immortalized him, since – or so the story goes – he never “sold out” or gave up his ideals and values, but instead *chose death* over commercialization. Did he choose death or did death choose him? Then, away from the social-hermeneutical aspects, I will turn towards the intimate, psycho-sexual side of Nirvana, i.e. the music *per se*, with special emphasis on Cobain's enigmatic lyrics as *subversive communication*. I will not consider the group dynamics of the band, such as the role of the drummer or the bass player, since that would complicate my analysis too much. I recognize that what I'm analyzing are less the compositional skills or achievements of the Nirvana than the mythology and the media phenomenon that surrounds it all. Still, with the conviction that not *all* is MTV or marketing, I will try to achieve a level of analysis which treats the subject-matter with a due degree of respect; I treat Cobain as one of the masters in pop music (whether he would like that word or not), and certainly a man of extreme charisma and tragedy. Finally: Cobain as a *communicator*, alternative rock as *politics*. Although the deification of the man is necessarily bracketed for the purposes of the analysis, divine inspiration lingers.

2 - Kurt Cobain: Authentic/Inauthentic?

Kurt Cobain is one of the icons of our time. In a recent listing of the greatest heroes of rock'n'roll of all time in the New Musical Express (NME) magazine, Kurt Cobain took the number one position by popular vote¹. Kurt Cobain as a man, and Nirvana as a band, has been associated with the MTV Generation, the 1990's, rock'n'roll, alternative, grunge, Seattle underground, malcontent youth, Generation X, urban angst, drug abuse, the cult of youth, suicide (/murder?) and in general the hostile attitude (derived from punk, thus often called "post-punk") towards "selling out" or becoming too "commercial". Of course, as Naomi Klein argues in her *No Logo*, the big record companies (who ultimately took in Nirvana, too) are more than capable of taking in anti-commercial angst and turning it into an epitome of commercial success. Indeed, whatever appeals to the target market of young people (which increasingly means anti-corporate music) is immediately taken in to the publishing and marketing world and turned into a pop product: *manufactured cool*. This is the paradox of being successful while being dismissive of the so-called mainstream: How to make a living *and* still remain "cool" and "underground"? He once said, and often hinted, that "*famous is the last thing I wanted to be*"². He certainly seemed relatively unaffected by fame in his habits, demeanour, appearance, circle of friends, and his way of speaking. Still, there is no denying that already *Nevermind*, perhaps their greatest album, was the result of carefully crafted production. Well, whatever production magic the producer wizards brought in to the recording of their classic albums *Nevermind* and *In Utero*, the compositions were always by Kurt Cobain, and there were few helping hands besides a few sound engineers and mixing specialists. The same cannot be said for many current artists, who often do not even write their own songs, let alone have their heart in the right place. Perhaps the uncomfortable relationship between Cobain and the record companies (Warner) was a factor in his suicidal behaviour, encouraging (hard) drug use and an unstable personality subject to interpersonal difficulties. The Wikipedia article speculates he was bipolar, although I would be sceptical of posthumous diagnoses. This sort of psychoanalysis is typical of our fallen heroes: to understand the mind of the gods, we speculate for the reasons why they did what they did. In *No Logo*, Klein reports one sad case which must have at either amused or irritated Cobain: Wal-Mart, a significant sales motor for albums in the United States, "*refus[ed] to carry Nirvana's second hit album, In Utero, even though the band's previous album had gone quadruple*

1: <http://www.nme.com/news/nirvana/23019> (NME issue May 10, 2006)

2: Azerrad, 1993, p. 254 (quoted on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurt_cobain)

platinum, because it objected to the back-cover artwork portraying fetuses"³. In an effort to consolidate profits, Warner complied to change the art work. They also, incomprehensibly, changed the title of one of the tracks from *Rape Me* to *Waif Me*. This is artistic censorship, and utter nonsense. Klein puts the blame for compliance on Nirvana themselves, but I would rather say that attacks on artistic integrity like this are precisely the sort of things that Cobain found himself unable to cope with, and he must have felt betrayed as a result. That is why he ultimately never sold out, and died an authentic rock'n'roll death – authentic, that is to say, for the purposes of the mythical narrative. In the next chapter, I analyze the archetypes behind the hero myth.

3 - The Cult of the Anti-Taboo: "The Good Die Young"

The aforementioned fact that Kurt Cobain died at the age of 27 (April 5, 1994) adds fuel to the myth and legend surrounding him. In fact, there is a fair bit of numerical mysticism surrounding the age of 27 in these circles. On the one hand, the age of 27 is a completely arbitrary break-off point between youth and adulthood (just as arbitrary as the age of 16 or 18), and arguably *never before in the history of man* have people been able to prolong a state of do-nothing care-free existence to that late a stage, but I think one reason is the proximity of this age to just before the feared turning of the internal clock to 30, that magical milestone. People think in terms of numbers and symbols, and when one more digit is added to one's years on Earth, one is confronted with the persuasive power of the "objective" facts. So, 27 is just as good an age as any other to die young. And that is exactly what people have done: Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison (of The Doors), Brian Jones (of The Rolling Stones) and Kurt Cobain all died at the age of 27, and *all* from drug-related incidents. "27 Forever", goes one slogan. This fascination with the death of the rock stars requires a bit of background analysis. It goes back as far as the origins of rock'n'roll. Death, and especially *untimely* death, is related to the fact that rock music belongs primarily within the subculture of the youth. This could be called the *Peter Pan* myth; to stay young and live forever. Elvis Presley was already in the 1950's considered corruptive influence on the young, and indeed his most avid fans were teenage girls, experiencing often for the first time feelings of intense sensuality at the presence of a young man with highly suggestive shaking and moving of the hips. The conservative critics of the music were not mistaken as to its power and effect; they were just fearful, as all parents are, of their

3: Klein 2000, p.167

children growing up to be too different than themselves. The one wish all parents have, although subconsciously, is for the children to remain asexual, i.e. pre-pubescent. The sensual groove of the blues man or the rock'n'roll artist was a tool, like television or books, for the young to assimilate a new, independent identity and emotional make-up. Sexuality by any other name... Well, "rock" itself has been suggested to derive from slang for the act of coitus. Whatever the case, the unholy trinity of the 60's (and, I dare say, of the post-WWII period) – sex, drugs and rock'n'roll – suggests the triple sensuality involved in the imagery of the rock concert, so aptly typified by that infamous Beatles concert in the United States, where tens of thousands of young fans were screaming so loud that the four performers could barely hear themselves, let alone allow to audience to hear them play! Beatles, soon after, embraced not only marijuana but LSD, Indian mysticism, pacifism and sonic experimentation, all in the spirit of the age. This spirit of the age included (and still does today, whenever one imitates or models one's self after the 60's spirit) a general disregard for taboos. Sexuality may appear as sexual innuendo in the lyrics, sexually suggestive body language, as exaggerated celebration of the *maleness* of the group (admittedly sometimes to the point of homosexual, bisexual or androgynous appearance), and also in the relatively *whorish* behaviour of the so-called "groupies", or devoted fans, who follow the band around, even to the point of offering sexual favours (or so the legend goes, but what else do we have except legend and myth?). Sexuality, of course, is all-pervasive, and it acts as the glue which binds the two other ingredients together: drugs and music. If a psychoanalytical theory is to be offered on the sexual side of the rock'n'roll mythos, I would suggest a neo-Reichian approach, something that binds together the individualistic body politics of Generation X (or is it "Y" or "Z" already?) with the sensuality and sexuality, hyper-sensitized and over-stimulated, of an anarchically organized community spirit. When I speak of individualism as something inherently social, I mean events, happenings, be-ins, concerts, gatherings, get-togethers, festivals and others instances where people, out of their own volition, commingle and coagulate, for the purposes of a celebration of shared principles of anarchic organization, whether spontaneously arising (as in some recent protests-turned-parties on the streets of metropolises all around the world) or pre-organized. The visible and communicable experiences of such individualistic social structures may include elements like piercings, tattoos, loose clothing, informal speech (plus a new slang vocabulary to go with it), sexual experimentation, having an open mind, risky (even suicidal) behaviour, copious amounts of drugs (both legal and illegal), various acts of civil disobedience (or sheer lawlessness), a heterogeneity of ideologies and ideas, differentiation through marginalization, undertaking of psychological development goals, and a general favouring of the "now" over the "long-term" – placing the contemporaneous over the traditional. But from a semiotic point-of-view, it is not simply a breaking of rules that is a marked

characteristic of this sort of rock'n'roll spirit. Simultaneously there arises an abundance of new languages, new sign systems and new rules. Such rules are the sub-cultures of the sub-culture. They may also be called “types”, “groups”, “attitudes” or “genres”, depending on the context: So, we can talk about the *rebellious type*, the *Goths as a group*, the *punk attitude*, or the *genre of grunge*. Approximately, and with a bit of interpretive freedom, these are all examples or sub-categories of what musicologists mean by the concept of **topic**, since all of these appear fully recognizable as *intra-musical* and *intra-lyrical* styles, figures and elements. In Leo Ratner's words, topics are simply “*subjects for musical discourse*”⁴. In another words, topics are the informational or semantic constituents of the musical code that either space- or time-shift to another location or to another text. The reference involved may be actual and active, or completely fictive and passive. Topics may actually be generated or at least interpreted *within* any given text (or musical piece), and thus topics do not have a fixed reference to any “real world” or causal agent *per se*, but rather appear as inventions as often as borrowings or as stylistic constrictions. Välimäki, too, clarifies this relationship between the musical and extra-musical: “*Musical meaning is not viewed as imminent in and of itself, and in this way purely (or only) musical; [---] According to postmodern orientation, music and the rest of culture do not exist as two different spheres.*”⁵ In the next chapter, I analyze some of Nirvana's lyrical and sonic strategies in search of meaningful musical discourse.

4 – Can You Hear The Teen Spirit?

In the previous chapter I focused on the general and generic characteristics involved in any rock'n'roll hero myth, much of which is borrowed directly from classical hero myth – or maybe it's not a question of borrowings but rather of spontaneous surfacing of archetypes out of the Collective Unconscious. Next I will try to hunt down cues and topics, in search of a kind of “hermeneutical window”. I will try to find something that serves the purpose of *socializing* an individual, whether Cobain or the listener (implied and actual) or even a fictive subject of the lyrical narrative. The target audience, I take, is a relatively young person, with a young person's worries. It is no wonder that the greatest hit by Nirvana is called “Smells Like Teen Spirit”, since there are clear suggestions that people operate by taking in clues and associations that direct them to both informative and

4: Ratner 1980, p.9

5: Välimäki, 2005, p.10

transformative experiences. Many of these transformative experiences are unique to the turbulent period between childhood and adulthood (I will treat these two age categories as relatively unproblematic for the present purposes). So, the target group of young people, however much influenced by other factors, is constantly on the lookout for something that would speak to them, in their language. My suggestion is that Nirvana, and Kurt Cobain especially, took on the function of “a socializing machine”. It had this role for a few years with special intensity, perhaps culminating in the 1993 MTV Unplugged concert, shortly before Cobain’s death. This function is not the role of the *teacher*, or the exemplary *leader*, or even the mythical *hero* as such. This “machine” (a term I primarily borrow from Deleuze) is cold, even distant, but it lives primarily off the warm, human blood of young virgins, quite literally. The intelligence and the emotions of the songs are always re-enacted in the host every time Nirvana is played anew. This is somewhat *vampirical*, since it involves sucking people into a different world, but the consent of the audience is mostly there, and it is often a preferable reality to the reality that one’s parents or teachers or priests are proposing. They, perhaps, are the true vampires. So, instead of focusing on the role of the media, or the corporations, or any other intermediate power broker, in the framework of interpreting, packaging, routing and selling the musical message, I would focus on the surprisingly powerful role played by consumers and the musicians themselves, as co-conspirators in an effort to divert capital investment towards various alternative and underground channels (as opposed to, say, armament production). This is anti-corporate terrorism where the only weapon is the power of suggestion, and where there arises a communication channel, available on CD as well as on MTV, between marginalized and otherwise disconnected powers (individuals, artists, minds), because *no* business and *no* corporation can resist the temptation of *money*. Little do they know that they are advocating social change which will ultimately make *them* (the consensus builders) irrelevant. To be sure, there *is* considerable doubt as to whether social change thus achieved is long-lasting, or even more than illusory. Klein is correct in questioning the power of the “alternative” artists to function within a corrupt system. But the system is a mechanism for destroying itself from the inside. Of course it’s corrupt; that’s why viral and anarchic music will be so easily consumed by it, precipitating its downfall! In our post-post-modern age there are various powerful and coy political movements which embrace, thanks to the rock’n’roll spirit of “Anti-Taboo”, a kind of post-political politics, and which can too easily be dismissed as mere anti-social behaviour or total political disengagement. In a word, *totalizing* political commitment has been forfeited in favour of *viral* and *micro* politics. This could be shrugged off as mere *niche* campaigning or as false comfort to the dispossessed and the disenchanting. But do we not hear a radical message, however obscure, when Cobain sings the chorus to Smells Like Teen Spirit: “*With the lights out its less dangerous / Here*

we are now Entertain us / I feel stupid and contagious / Here We are now / Entertain us / A mulatto / An albino / A mosquito / My libido“? We certainly do not hear the words and *understand* them, since Cobain’s voice is often melismatic and always an expression of pure *khora*, pure bodily roar (i.e. mostly incomprehensible!). He is singing what he wrote, and he wrote his body into it, as a *primal scream* of sort. The seeming incoherency of the last four stanzas, cried out in the song with incredible force, represents the two sexes competing for dominance: Of course, I mean *of course* the last line is “*my libido*”, since the phallus always asserts itself as the last, final truth. And of course it represents the internal consciousness of a teenage boy, obsessed with the tactile and non-visual stimuli “*with the lights out*”. But what precedes it shows a surprising ambivalence, since the semantic content of *mulatto*, *albino* and *mosquito* represents the semiotic over the symbolic, in Kristeva’s terminology. In another show of ambivalence, or semantic drift, the refrain “*hello, hello, hello, hello*” disintegrates eventually into “*...hello, how low*”, as if falling into a trance through the power of repetition. Cobain, elsewhere, utilizes similar motifs, similar topics of semantic and semiotic *association-through-dissolution*. In Pennyroyal Tea, he sings: “*Sit and drink pennyroyal tea / Distil the life that’s inside of me / Sit and drink pennyroyal tea / I’m anaemic royalty.*” This is not mere rhyme, since the final “e”-sound in each line is stretched to an “honest”-sounding vibrato, which is almost something like “the confessions of a vowel”, undulating in a secret rhythm. It’s all very corporeal, very suggestive, seemingly antedating language itself (i.e. body as the *ur-language*).

So how does this help to create communication channels and loops which facilitate the dissolution of the existing alienating social structures? By fastening people together in the social understanding of sensual and sexual similarities, with *desire as the bond that ties the community together*. Desire, and the production and manipulation of desire. In a way, the rock’n’roll ethos *always* implied some “primal scream”, something pre-symbolic. Cobain’s forceful, even *bestial* and animalistic voice is a kind of follow-up to such anarchic “anti-corporate advertisement messages” as “*turn on, tune in, drop out*” (Leary) or “*love is all you need*” (Beatles). His voice is the sirens calling, or perhaps the twisted smile of Charles Manson. His voice alone is the centrepiece of Nirvana, which is illustrated by the fact that in many Nirvana songs it sounds like *the guitars are accompanying the singer*, and not the other way around. For example, in Smells Like Teen Spirit, Lithium and Come As You Are, the guitar solos are pretty much a simple repeat of the melodic chorus of Cobain. For sure, there are other more clearly sensual bands than Nirvana out there, but Kurt Cobain utilizes his body as a mechanism of transporting some very powerful emotional and sexual messages, space-shifting (from Seattle to Finland) and time-shifting (from 1993 to 2007) the experience of youth via corporate channels. Cobain himself is reported to have said that he aimed to create almost “nursery

rhymes” – simple and effective, catchy and pure – which would imply that subconsciously he aimed at targeting, and communicating with, the *pre-pubescent* mind, no doubt with the intention of establishing a communication channel, or a viral pathway throughout the corporate matrix, which would sensualize and sexualize the young mind, not when he or she is 16, but when he or she is 12 or even 8. After all, reading Freud and modern psychology, we know sexuality is a present condition throughout a person’s development, in polymorphously perverse forms and appearances.

5 – Conclusive Remarks: Cobain R.I.P.

Much else could be said; for example, the “grunge” sound could be analyzed as a form of confrontation with *pure noise* inherent as a possibility in the distorted electric guitars routed through amplifiers and compressors. Songs like “Scentless Apprentice” approach chaos and noise. But even in the obvious “pop” songs there are elements of distortion to the point of sadomasochism, to the point of pain-as-pleasure. This is a kind of reaching for the limit, and transgressing many boundaries in search of the ultimate sound. The sound is crunched, or “grunged” into a kind of “Wall of Sound”, and comparisons to Phil Spector’s production technique could well be made. “Grunge” is an effect of instruments and production, but also a description of the power of anarchic self-expression. I have explored Kurt Cobain first as a cultural, or media myth. This I saw to be only a small part of the story, and in fact not a major reason for the success of Nirvana – if anything, the posthumous myth, and the myth of youth, is the *consequence*, and not the cause, of the socializing effects of Nirvana. Nirvana was seen to be an example of the 60’s spirit; indeed, he has been compared to Lennon in creativity, and to Hendrix in the tragic brevity of his life. He is another “avatar” of the rock’n’roll pantheon, he is a prince to *the King* himself – he gets his divine right to rule by being a direct, if epigenetic, descendent of Elvis.

Lithium, though the song is obviously titled after mood stabilizer drugs, illustrates the sort of socializing situation the listener is put into: “*I’m so happy cause today / I’ve found my friends / They’re in my head*”. Indeed, when one listens, when you listen, when I listen to Nirvana, I experience friendship; there is a bond, a social bond, a bridge of communion – because “today” I have psychological imprints (“in my head”) which tell me “I’ve found my friends”; and my friends? *They are everywhere*. This is subversive creation of social identity. It may be escapism, but it’s escapism into a *possible* world, as opposed to pure virtual reality. It’s not only socio-psychology and sexology, it’s also theology (again from Lithium): “*And I’m not scared / Light my candles, in a daze / ‘coz I’ve found god*”. And then, my friends, it explodes into a kind of Nirvana.

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