The Grunge Movement and Its Lasting Influence on Society and Design Aesthetic

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Images

Fig. 1: David Carson Design: Ray Gun. (n.d.). [image]

Fig. 2: Instagram - Chris Ashworth. (n.d.). [image]
Available at: https://www.instagram.com/ashworthchris/?hl=en [Accessed 19 Mar. 2018].

Fig. 3: Marc Jacobs’s Perry Ellis Grunge Show. (2015). [image]

Fig. 4: Wolf Alice - Creature Songs (EP). (2014). [image]
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In this essay, I am going to discuss how the aesthetics of the grunge movement in the 1990s has had a lasting influence on society. This essay will be focusing on the time period between the ‘90s, as this was when the grunge movement started, and late 2000s. I am going to be proving that the aspects of the movements in the ‘90s are still being used in society in the 21st Century. I am going to explore the subject using semiotics, particularly the work of Barthes.

The Grunge movement originated in Seattle in the late ‘80s/early ‘90s as a result of the emergence of Nirvana, Mudhoney and Pearl Jam. They were writing music about issues that would usually be ignored, such as rape, domestic violence, and addiction. They brought with them an iconic dress sense featuring plaid shirts, baggy nightdresses and Doc Martens. This would quickly become the latest fashion trend. Grunge was everywhere, and, as Rick Poynor notes: “grunge, like punk, was energetic, disrespectful, angry (or perhaps angry-seeming) and subcultural in origin” (Poynor, 2013). Grunge was also a reaction to the era of punk-rock that came before (with bands such as Guns N’ Roses) and the ‘movement for the people’.

Although the movement originated in Seattle, the meanings for its emergence could be applied globally. Grunge was a form of retaliation against society, particularly political leaders such as Thatcher and Blair and the issues that these brought with them (aids, war and unemployment). As a result, Generation X became anti-establishment and anti-rules.

Breaking rules in graphic design in the ‘90s rose to popularity due to David Carson who was widely known for breaking grids, hierarchy and typographic rules, and for his work with the magazine ‘Ray Gun’. By 1997, The Independent was hailing him as a “hero of deconstruction”. (Blackwell, 1997). Grunge also rose to popularity as a reaction to the clean, precise design style that was being used in graphic design. This approach to design started the trend of grunge design and typography, known as ‘the Ray Gun effect’, with many designers imitating his style of work. Design schools went through years of re-evaluation as every principle they taught was now open to question and scrutiny. Grunge in graphic design was being seen in more than just magazines, reaching across to band posters and video game packaging.
On the surface, designs of the grunge movement denoted messy, distorted typography and blurred images; but these messy and deconstructed images were connotative of the subculture’s desire to rebel against the system, reflecting “a wider reluctance in society to submit to any form of imposed, external authority” (Poynor, 2013), further reinforcing the anti-establishment mindset of the subculture.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig. 1**

The image above is famous piece of artwork by David Carson. The image denotes an article written in dingbats featuring an image of the singer. The image connotes what the grunge movement in graphic design was trying to do: by turning text into dingbats, he is breaking the rules in the best possible way. The text is completely illegible and messy. It connotes the idea of breaking the norm, choosing instead to do what you want to do, and not letting rules restrict this. The colours are vibrant and eye-catching, which almost takes away from the fact that you can’t actually read the article.

The popularity of grunge can still be seen in design today. Many designers are taking inspiration from the Ray Gun and David Carson era which is perhaps due to the state of society being insecure, particularly with issues such as radicalisation. Graphic design continues to reflect how the general consensus of society is that of outrage and conflict against issues such as the rise of terrorism, and political leaders such as Donald Trump.

One designer in particular who has continued to use grunge in graphic design is Chris Ashworth, who was the art director of Ray Gun magazine in 1997. He carried on the iconography of grunge design that David Carson created, and is still working in the industry to this day.
This is one example of Chris Ashworth’s work. The image denotes some stereotypical grunge elements, such as the slightly distorted text, but is it a cleaner and smoother interpretation. The black and white connotes the simple nature of the artwork and lets the texture take the main focal point. There is a contrast between the word ‘Fire’ and the simple way it is written, it does not create a sense of emergency or panic, rather creating a sense of mundane and the ordinary.

It is interesting to see how a trend from the ‘90s has come full circle to being used in design in today’s society, and its purpose is more or less the same as it was in the ‘90s: to voice a retaliation to the situation that society is in.

It is not uncommon to see grunge elements individually being incorporated into graphic design such as dirty textures like ripped paper and stained wood. Whilst these previously would have been created by hand and are now more digitised, it is easy to see how grunge in graphic design today has taken inspiration from the popular movement in the early ‘90s.

Grunge was also very popular in music and fashion in the ‘90s, and the two went hand in hand. The youth of the grunge movement, who were brought up with hippies and raised with punk, took the components of punk fashion and reinterpreted them into their own aesthetic. The popularity of the fashion style was due to the rise in popularity of grunge bands like Nirvana who were known for controversial lyrics, artwork and behaviour, who were sporting these items. As their music was rising in popularity, grunge would frequently be seen on the top 40 charts. As a result of this, grunge fashion also reached the mainstream and became the latest trend: everybody was wearing grunge. However, this stood against everything the grunge movement was about: rejecting societal standards.
Grunge fashion featured a lot of different aspects but had a particular focus on baggy dresses, ripped jeans, and baggy shirts. However, the style was messy and dirty looking on purpose, being specifically styled to look this way. The fashion choices of the movement further connoted the ambition of the subculture to reject societal standards. People express themselves through the clothes they wear, and this is exactly what Generation X were doing.

![Fig. 3](image)

This ‘grunge’ aesthetic in fashion was so widely followed that in 1992, Marc Jacobs released a collection featuring the iconic elements of the style. The collection was met with mixed reviews, with many speculating that it was just a marketing ploy to make money, with Entertainment Weekly claiming it was “the biggest kind of exploitation of a subculture since the media discovered hippies in the ‘60s” (Kobel, 1993). The collection took the iconic elements of grunge fashion and combined them with elements that were a bit more sophisticated. The image in Fig. 3 denotes plaid dresses, Doc Martin boots, scruffy hats and monotone shirts. This connotes the desire of the subculture to be void of any kind of identity, however, ideology in itself became an identity. It connotes non-conformity and became a way for members of Generation X to voice their anti-rules, ‘screw society’ attitude.

Elements of the grunge fashion scene are still being used in today’s society, particularly plaid shirts and Doc Martens, although they are used in a slightly looser context than they were in the ‘90s, as they are less about rebellion and more about comfort and looking put together. This is ironic as the style was considered disjointed and messy at the time.
Today’s society has also seen an influence of the grunge movement in the ‘90s in the music scene, with many musicians taking inspiration from the movement. The grunge movement quickly died out with the death of Kurt Cobain in 1994 which shows just how influential they were, however, there are many musicians keeping the genre alive today although they are mostly undiscovered. One example of this is Wolf Alice and whilst they do not describe themselves specifically as a grunge band, they borrow “aspects of folk, grunge, indie and pop”. They argue that they “aren’t trying to sound like the bands we may just happen to sound like” (Trendell, 2014), but do acknowledge that most people will associate them with the grunge genre.

This album artwork by Wolf Alice denotes ripped, stained and folded paper, stereotypical to the grunge genre. This is combined with a modern hand-rendered typography style and watercolour images. This connotes a contrast between modern and traditional, which summarises what Wolf Alice are aiming to achieve: combining a modern approach to their music but maintaining references to the traditional grunge and folk music genre.

The grunge movement has come full circle from rising to popularity in the ‘90s to frequently appearing in pop culture today. It is hard to speculate how long the movement will last this time, as the reasons for its initial emergence in the ‘90s are less prevalent in today’s society. Despite this, it is hard to argue that the movement was just a fad at the time or the result of angsty Generation X teenagers expressing their anger, and whilst people may argue that society today does not have any references to the grunge movement; we “probably won’t see anything like it again” (Stetson, 2014), it is clear to see that despite how short-lived the movement was, it has had a lasting effect on today’s society. Many artists and individuals incorporate grunge without necessarily even realising it. Grunge will always be influential as
there will always be a young generation who look to their music to guide them through their troubles, and to fashion as a method of self-expression and self-healing.
Bibliography


