

# **Friend of a Friend**

**The Authenticity Paradox in Representations of Kurt Cobain**

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## **Abstract**

Kurt Cobain – ‘the voice of Generation X’ – has been a cultural icon since the early 1990s. This thesis aims to provide insight into how Cobain has been represented in media and what role notions of authenticity play in those representations. Theoretical research has been used to establish a theoretical framework regarding the function of cultural icons in contemporary society and the effects of their relationship with the general public on how they are represented and interpreted. This framework has subsequently been applied to recent representations of Kurt Cobain. The 2015 documentary *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck* and several fan-made YouTube videos have been analyzed in terms of overall narrative and conflicting elements of myth and reality. The results indicate a multitude of narratives across the chosen texts that all simultaneously demonstrate a high propensity for fantasy and myth and a profound desire for authenticity and revealing the true Kurt Cobain.

**Key Words:** *Cultural Icon, Authenticity, Myth, Nirvana, Kurt Cobain, Media Representation, Narrative, Celebrity Culture, Fan Culture, Celebrity Worship, Para-social Relationship.*

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## Introduction

*“What do you think of when you think of Kurt? ... You think of a rock star that killed himself, because of this guilt of being a rock star, [because] he was unhappy with his success. But he was a complicated person, and it's hard for anyone still to this day to completely understand. He may have seemed like this punk rock iconoclastic misfit, but he still fucking loved Abba, we danced to Abba a hundred times.”<sup>1</sup>*

– Dave Grohl

Kurt Cobain (1967-1994) entered the spotlight in the early 1990s as frontman and founding member of the American grunge band Nirvana, which has been credited for bringing grunge into the mainstream with their sophomore album *Nevermind*. His image became instantly recognizable to a mass audience after the music video for Nirvana's hit single “Smells Like Teen Spirit” was released on MTV in 1991. Cobain has been heralded as ‘the voice of Generation X’ because of how his music and persona resonated with the disaffected, anti-establishment attitude of youths in the 1980s and 1990s. As the popularity of Nirvana grew, so did the media frenzy surrounding it. What started as general inquiries into the band's music quickly turned into sensationalized stories about its singer. Cobain was the subject of countless articles – varying widely in their degree of truth – which primarily focused on his rumored drug use and his relationship with fellow musician Courtney Love.

In April of 1994, only two and a half years after the release of *Nevermind*, Kurt Cobain committed suicide at the age of twenty-seven – making him part of the legendary 27 Club. Although he died nearly thirty years ago, Cobain's relevance seems to be ongoing. Not only has Nirvana's music remained popular, but films about Cobain's life have been produced as recently as 2015. Moreover, despite typically being linked to Generation X, there is a plethora of social media pages dedicated to Kurt Cobain where teens, some of whom were not even born until a decade after his death, express adoration and grief as if they personally knew him – or at least experienced Nirvana's heyday firsthand.

The quote at the beginning of this introduction is an offhand remark that Dave Grohl – former drummer of Nirvana – made in a 2009 conversation with music writer Paul Brannigan.

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<sup>1</sup> Brannigan, Paul. *This Is a Call*. London, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2012. P.121.

Though seemingly inconsequential, the quote hints at two peculiar aspects of how the general public remembers Kurt Cobain. First of all, it shows that it is a very specific narrative of Cobain that has taken root in our collective memory. It is apparently self-evident that a person would think of him as a troubled rock star who committed suicide because he could not handle his success. What is more striking, perhaps, is that Grohl's remark suggests that this dominant narrative is not accurate, or at least that it does not tell the whole story.

### **Brief review of relevant academic literature**

Kurt Cobain has been featured in copious amounts of academic literature over the past thirty years. These works range from broad historical overviews of rock music, in which Cobain is just one of many names, to highly specific scholarly articles that aim to expose his inner workings. The former category often discusses Cobain as a representative of both grunge culture<sup>2</sup> and the self-destructive tendencies of rock and roll,<sup>3</sup> whereas the latter tends to focus on the interpretation of his journals, lyrics, and other works of art<sup>4</sup>. A small number of books combine both facets and explore their broader socio-cultural implications – for example, Jennifer Otter Bickerdike's *Fandom, Image and Authenticity* (2014). One of the most common topics throughout the literature on Kurt Cobain is the framing of his image and story<sup>5</sup>. It is worth noting that authors typically speak of a single, seemingly static image and rarely acknowledge how recent representations of Cobain might differ from those of the early 1990s. Besides, more often than not, scholarly inquiry into Cobain's fame and the myths that surround him is embedded in theories of marketing and consumerism.

### **Aims of this thesis**

There are several aspects of Kurt Cobain's status as a cultural icon that have not yet received adequate attention in previous works. As I have mentioned, existing literature about the

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., Friedlander, Paul, and Peter Miller. *Rock and Roll : A Social History*. Boulder, Westview Press, 2006.; Starr, Larry, and Christopher Waterman. *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Comfort, David. *The Rock and Roll Book of the Dead : The Fatal Journeys of Rock's Seven Immortals*. New York, Citadel Press, 2009.; Primi, Michele. *Tragedies and Mysteries of Rock'n'roll*. Novara, White Star Publishers, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Pantalei, Giulio Carlo. "The Grunge Inferno: Dante as Read by Kurt Cobain." *Dante e l'Arte*, vol. 6, 2019, pp. 93–104, <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/dea.119>.; Saint-Aubin, Arthur F. "'A Pool of Razor Blades and Sperm': A Phantasy of White, Heterosexual Masculinity in Kurt Cobain's Journals." *European Journal of American Culture*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2013, pp. 5–23, [https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.32.1.5\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ejac.32.1.5_1).; Wood, Jessica L. "Pained Expression: Metaphors of Sickness and Signs of 'Authenticity' in Kurt Cobain's Journals." *Popular Music*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2011, pp. 331–49, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0261143011000389>.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Cameron, Samuel, et al. "Artists' Suicides as a Public Good." *Archives of Suicide Research*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2005, pp. 389–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811110500182489>.; Cooper, B. Lee. "Tribute Discs, Career Development, and Death: Perfecting the Celebrity Product From Elvis Presley to Stevie Ray Vaughan." *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2005, pp. 229–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760500045360>.

representation of Kurt Cobain has tended to focus on the commercial rationale behind his public image, reducing representations of him to mere marketing ploys. These interpretations seem to imply that the sole function of the constructed image and narrative is to make Cobain more sellable. Such approaches, however, have failed to address the socio-cultural significance of cultural icons. Moreover, although much has been written about the image of Kurt Cobain, few works specifically address recent representations of him. In addition, my research will question the common characterization of fans as mere consumers of cultural products. While it would be foolish to argue that marketing and consumerism do not play a part in the framing of Kurt Cobain, it would be equally absurd to deny that fans, especially in the day of social media, are just as much active producers as they are consumers.

This thesis, building on the quote at the beginning of the introduction, aims to provide more insight into how representations of cultural icons in general, and Kurt Cobain in particular, are shaped by a tension between myth and reality, which I refer to as the authenticity paradox. The central research question, then, is as follows: “What is the authenticity paradox in the context of cultural icons, and how has it shaped recent representations of Kurt Cobain?”

This thesis aims to avoid the dichotomous interpretation of Kurt Cobain's image – and that of cultural icons in general – as either authentic or not. It also sheds light on the underrepresented socio-cultural dimension of icons and how they are represented. Lastly, it is hoped that including fan-made materials provides a more complete picture of recent representations of Kurt Cobain.

### **Synopsis of research design and methods**

In this thesis, I will combine theoretical research and a case study approach to answer my central research question. First, I will construct a theoretical framework from the literature regarding the role of cultural icons in contemporary society and how that role is affected by notions of authenticity. I will then use two case studies to determine how that framework relates to representations of Kurt Cobain from the past decade. For my case studies, I have selected the 2015 documentary *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck* which is representative of recent mainstream depictions of Cobain, as well as three fan-made YouTube videos posted between 2020 and 2021. I chose to include fan-made material because social media representations of Cobain often diverge from the dominant rock star narrative.

## Key Concepts

At this point, two key concepts that require further explanation are that of authenticity and cultural icons. Merriam-Webster defines authentic as “worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact,” “not false or imitation,” or “true to one's own personality, spirit, or character” (“authentic”). Considering these rather abstract definitions, it stands to reason that scholars would apply the notion of authenticity in a varied manner. For instance, Bickerdike approximates the latter description when she speaks of an authenticity in the context of Kurt Cobain that is “defined by the creation of a body of work, which illustrates frustration, isolation and deep-seated criticism” (8). Throughout this thesis, however, I will focus on the first definition. As such, authenticity refers to reality rather than myth, fact instead of fiction, and mundane instead of divine.

The general definition of an icon is “a person or thing widely admired especially for having great influence or significance in a particular sphere” (“icon”). In academic and non-academic writing alike, the 'icon' is often conflated with terms such as celebrity, star, or idol. At the same time, there are also authors who give distinct meanings to these different terms. I am deliberate in using the term 'cultural icon' when referring to Kurt Cobain, as this thesis is rooted in the notion that cultural icons are a specific subgroup of people whose role in society is inherently different from that of other celebrities. After all, there are many famous musicians, but not all of them become icons. In doing so, I draw upon the conceptualization of cultural icons given in works such as Scott and Tomaselli's *Cultural Icons* (2009) and Van Boven and Winkler's *The Construction and Dynamics of Cultural Icons* (2021). Three of the core characteristics of cultural icons that they have identified are: continuing relevance; a certain seductiveness – be that religious, social, or otherwise; and the accretion of multiple meanings that go beyond the original referent. It is important to note, however, that existing literature may use the term 'celebrity' even though the person in question meets all the criteria to be considered a cultural icon. Consequently, I will use the terms 'celebrity,' 'cultural icon,' and 'public figure' interchangeably, always referring to the profound figures described above unless stated otherwise.

## Structure

This thesis has been organized in the following way: the first section will examine the function of cultural icons within our society. It will address theories that focus on the extraordinary nature of icons (Chapter One), as well as those that stress the ordinariness of icons (Chapter

Two). It will then go on to analyze two case studies in terms of narrative and the paradox of authenticity.

The first text that I will analyze is Brett Morgen's 2015 documentary *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck* which functions as a representative of recent mainstream representations of Kurt Cobain. Overall, the film was well-received – it was nominated for seven Primetime Emmy Awards – and not as controversial as, for example, *Soaked in Bleach*<sup>6</sup> which was released in the same year.

For the second case study, I have selected three fan-made YouTube videos: (1) “Kurt Cobain's sense of humor was like...,” (2) “kurt cobain being the most adorable baby,” and (3) “kurt cobain being a feminist for 5 minutes straight (..or his whole life)”. All three of these texts have a clear overarching theme – unlike some fan videos that are just haphazard collections of footage.

I will analyze the texts by giving an overview of the narratives that each of them has constructed around Kurt Cobain and how these compare to the dominant rock star narrative. Next, I will discuss the elements of myth and reality that are present in the texts to see to what extent these narratives reflect the authenticity paradox.

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<sup>6</sup> *Soaked in Bleach*. Directed by Benjamin Statler, Montani Productions, 2015.

## **Chapter 1 – Extraordinary Icons**

Cultural icons and other public figures are an amalgam of an authentic private self and a staged public persona. This, I argue, produces a specific duality. Because of this duality, celebrity status is characterized by a perpetual tension between fact and fiction. The tension between fact and fiction is inextricably linked to the way in which we relate to cultural icons. In order to understand the role that the notion of authenticity plays in representations of Kurt Cobain, it is essential first to examine the relationship between cultural icons and the public and the way in which myth and reality factor into this dynamic.

In the field of celebrity culture and cultural icons, there are two general socio-cultural approaches regarding the relationship between icons and the general public: those that conceptualize icons as extraordinary beings whose celebrity is rooted in fantasy and those that view icons as ordinary people and emphasize the public's desire for reality. In the following pages, I will elaborate on the first approach by discussing the exemplary status attributed to cultural icons, the religious undertones of contemporary celebrity culture, and the influence of death on the process of iconization. A more detailed account of the second approach is given in the next chapter.

### **1.1 – Exemplary Figures**

Cultural historian Willem Frijhoff postulated in his 1998 speech on saints, idols, and icons that all these figures are exemplary forms of life (1). Indeed, the one thing that icons such as Mother Teresa, George Washington, and Elvis Presley have in common is that all of them are believed to be irreproachable or extraordinarily gifted. They represent values and embody characteristics that are deemed important by a particular (sub)culture – be it humanitarianism, democracy, or raw musical talent. Because of their perceived perfection, cultural icons inspire us to emulate them. Various other scholars, such as Van Boven and Winkler, Rojek, and Cashmore, have called attention to a growing need for such role models from the mid-twentieth century onward and believe this development to be a result of the individualization and secularization of our society (13-4; 72; 86-7). Cultural icons make for particularly inspiring role models, says Rojek, because of the honorific status ascribed to celebrity in modern society (15). Key to understanding our relationship with cultural icons, however, is that these figures do not necessarily need to be as great as we make them out to be. As Cashmore points out, the

influence exerted by celebrities stems from how they are perceived by audiences rather than from some innate quality within them. Moreover, the audience's interpretation of a celebrity does not need to be factual in order to be valid (83-4). In actuality, the aura of cultural icons, and our devotion to them, are contingent upon both projections of the public and the idealized images and narratives that are constructed and dispersed through mass media (Herwitz 59-60).

A core characteristic of cultural icons, as I have mentioned in the introduction, is their ability to take on multiple meanings beyond their original referent. This ability allows different people to project onto icons their fantasies and desires and to transform these figures into something greater than the real person behind the icon. Maria Brock demonstrates in her discussion of Vladimir Lenin as a cultural icon, for instance, that projection can be highly politicized and used as a tool in re-negotiating history (45-50). In the context of artists, however, icons are typically used to articulate more abstract, subconscious desires (Rojek 109-10). Mediatization is an equally important part of the iconization process since media representations are the primary means of communication between a public figure and its audience. Jessica Evans uses the term 'mediated persona' to emphasize icons' complete dependence on the media to "create and disseminate a persona" (19). Mass media may add to the inauthenticity of cultural icons because it facilitates the manipulation of images and the construction and circulation of fictitious narratives. The very reason that celebrities appear to be "magical or superhuman," according to Rojek, is that "their presence in the public eye is comprehensively staged" (13).

In short, cultural icons are regarded by the public as exemplary figures and role models, and they are intentionally constructed through media representations as idealized, superhuman beings.

## **1.2 – Celebrity Worship**

There are many parallels between religion and contemporary cultural icons. Frijhoff's *Saints, Idols, Icons* offers a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the two and shows, for instance, that the process of iconization bears a striking resemblance to the canonization of saints. Two of Frijhoff's findings are particularly interesting. First, he argues that the motivations behind canonization and the ideals a saint ought to represent are not universal but shaped by the social and historical context. The same is true of cultural icons; there is no universal quality that makes a person iconic. Whether a person can become iconic or not

depends significantly on the context. Second, Frijhoff mentions that prospective saints oftentimes had to smooth out their rough edges to fit into such social norms and become canonized. Again, there is a comparable effort on the part of celebrities to sanitize their image to appeal to the audience (4-11).

It is not uncommon for the adulation of public figures to reach religious proportions. This kind of cult worship is emblematic of what Rojek refers to as 'post-God' celebrity. In modern times, according to Rojek, cultural icons become alternative objects of worship in the absence of traditional religion (58; 95). Many scholars hold similar views regarding the borderline religious function of icons. Bob Hicks, for instance, has applied this line of thought to the iconization of Jimi Hendrix, stating that the audience *made* him into a god because they needed one (Whiteley 332). Modern society's need for a God-like figure dovetails with the need for role models mentioned in the previous section. It should be noted that, much like the more mundane glorification of cultural icons, mediatization is instrumental in deifying celebrities. As suggested by Adrienne Lai, in the construction of their image, a celebrity – or perhaps their management – invariably aims to attain mythical status (218).

Some scholars, such as Gabler and Cashmore, argue that celebrity worship and traditional religions have a functional and moral equivalence. Cultural icons may affect us in a manner that is not unlike a religious experience. Besides, fans can be highly zealous in their dedication to icons (Gabler; Cashmore 252-3). These religious undertones are especially prominent in relation to musical icons, which tend to be worshipped more intensely than other celebrities (Cashmore 89). Famous musicians – especially rock stars – are frequently endowed by fans with a God-like eminence (Cashmore 78; Whiteley 331). In the context of musicians, Rojek points specifically to the supposed “twinning of the shaman with certain types of charismatic musical personality” that became commonplace following the emergence of rock music in the 1960s. Much like a shaman, rock musicians are capable of inducing a state of collective effervescence – or shared ecstasy – which is also the primary source of their cultural power (68-9).

Despite their apparent similarities, however, it may go too far to see the worship of gods and celebrity worship as fully equal. True religion requires one to unconditionally believe in something, whereas our belief in icons is very much conditional. Also, the collective effervescence that rock stars induce is not real since it is ultimately produced by a contrived persona (Rojek 90). Frijhoff acknowledges the limitations of comparing religion to the secular phenomenon of celebrity culture and proposes that a broader interpretation of the term

'holiness' should be used in relation to cultural icons. As an analytical concept, holiness refers to anything that a specific community recognizes as being holy; it is not a fixed set of moral values but is constituted through the collective appropriation of exemplary figures by the public (5-7). One can conclude, then, that what makes a person holy – or iconic – is essentially a matter of perception rather than an objective truth.

### **1.3 – Death**

As it has become clear at this point, the seemingly superhuman nature of cultural icons is primarily a product of constructed narratives. In this section, I want to pay special attention to death as a recurring element in such narratives.

It is important to understand that deceased cultural icons are often still widely regarded as a living cultural presence (Rojek 64). Indeed, the death of a cultural icon rarely marks the end of their iconic status. More than that, passing away at the 'right' moment may even reinforce a celebrity's iconic status. To begin with, passing away in their prime allows an untainted image of the icon to enter into the collective memory and ensures that the icon will not do anything in the future to tarnish its reputation (Frijhoff 2). An early death also preserves an icon's youthful vitality and – particularly in the case of women – beauty. In other words, it “releases one from the shameful march towards eventual demise” either in terms of talent, aesthetics, or plain relevance (Bickerdike 10). In addition, death advances the process of iconization by separating the icon further from reality, opening it up to a broader range of projection and manipulation. The absence of the real person behind the icon after death renders them unable to rebut how the public represents or interprets them. One might even say that, after death, the ultimate source of authenticity has vanished. Tomaselli and Shepperson have used the case of Nelson Mandela as an absent signifier to demonstrate this process. They argue that it was Mandela's absence – due to imprisonment rather than death – that enabled the public to construct him as either a demon or a hero (25-7). Perfect opposites, yet equally phantasmic.

Death also allows a cultural icon to be made into a martyr. The 'martyr' is a recurring trope that couples the extraordinary nature of icons with their untimely passing. The martyr is inextricably linked to notions of holiness, both in the traditional religious sense and in the broader interpretation put forward by Frijhoff. As such, martyrdom can have somewhat of a sanitizing effect on the legacy of cultural icons. Upon entering into a society's collective memory, such figures are transformed from troubled celebrities into pure souls destined to

sacrifice themselves for the greater artistic good (Bickerdike 3). In general, the idea of death encouraging the mythologizing of earthly figures holds especially true within the context of rock music. As Sheila Whiteley puts it: “[t]he association of death with the heroic remains a powerful signifier within rock culture” (330). When rock stars die at a young age, they essentially come to personify the motto ‘live fast, die young.’ The 27 Club – a group of famous artists who all died at the age of twenty-seven – is perhaps the most salient example of the mythologization of early death in popular culture. Members of the club, such as Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and, of course, Kurt Cobain, are shrouded in an aura of mystique. According to Bickerdike, club members and the ideas associated with them become “more viral, powerful and potent after death” (3). This post-mortem amplification explains the iconic status of many members since cultural icons distinguish themselves from other famous people in terms of enduring relevance and complex meanings.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has offered a brief summary of the literature relating to the inauthentic aspects of cultural icons. It has shown that both the media and the public play a part in constructing cultural icons as exemplary or even God-like figures and that death further advances processes of iconization and mythologization. Hence, it suggests that authenticity is unimportant or even undesirable when it comes to representations of cultural icons.

The dominant narrative around Kurt Cobain – that of the rock star – is situated within this type of discourse. For example, in spite of the more troubling aspects of his life, he is regarded as an exemplary figure in terms of his artistic genius and anti-establishment attitude. He has also been presented as the voice of his generation, affording him a superhuman status. Moreover, his death has separated the icon that is Kurt Cobain further from reality. Finally, his age and the manner in which he died have also contributed to the mythologizing of Cobain.

## **Chapter 2 – Ordinary Icons**

As indicated previously, there is a second approach regarding the relationship between cultural icons and the general public, emphasizing the public's desire for authenticity. Although the previous chapter suggests that cultural icons are ostensibly rooted in artifice and idealization, one can see public interest shift from the extraordinary to the ordinary starting in the mid-twentieth century. A shift that is inextricably linked to the rise of the paparazzi. The broader socio-historical developments that gave rise to this transformation go beyond the scope of my thesis. Audiences became engrossed in the private lives of celebrities, and celebrities were increasingly a part of daily life. The shift in focus from extraordinary to ordinary also changed what the public needed cultural icons to be. Audiences wanted to be able to identify with public figures rather than worship them. To accommodate this need, icons had to be brought down to earth again. In other words, icons needed to be humanized rather than mythologized. The following chapter will address the humanization of icons and the role of media; the changing relationship between audience and icon due to the humanizing effort; and the impression of direct access to public figures.

### **2.1 – Exposing the 'Real' Self**

The proliferation of celebrity images since the mid-twentieth century, combined with a greater overall media literacy, brought about an audience that was increasingly aware of the artificial nature of the public personae that were presented to them (Rojek 17; Lai 215). At the same time, they also recognized that behind these constructed personae were real, authentic people (Boorstin 42-67). Media not only exposes the split between a public persona and private self but also offers a means through which audiences can dissect celebrity images to find traces of this 'real' self. Gamson's 1994 work *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* posits that the aspiration of going beyond the iconic façade is one of the dominant discourses in the field of contemporary fame. Likewise, Dyer's *Stars* (1998) shows that he sees the search for an authentic person behind the mask of fame as a constant in the relationship between fans and celebrities. Holmes and Redmond add to this that the trend has become increasingly important throughout recent decades (4). One point of contention is the specific details of how this mission to expose the 'real' manifests itself. For example, Gamson has suggested that there is an element of mocking the artificial nature of the public persona, whereas Dyer notes that

audiences derive a certain pleasure from the act of searching the celebrity image for a glimpse of the real.

Regardless, the trend has had an effect on how public figures are represented. Most notably, this shift in interest from the public persona to the private person blurred the line between the two. In response to the desire of both popular media and fans to expose the ‘real’ self, the personal life of an icon has become more and more a part of their public persona. More concretely, modern media simultaneously presents audiences with stylized images and the messy reality of celebrity (Harper 312). Visual representations are framed by producers and interpreted by consumers as unmediated close-ups of actual life, giving the overall impression of unlimited access to all parts of the icon, including the interior self (Redmond 35). The newly uncovered self must complement the icon's public persona in order for them to be successful (Cashmore 60-4; Holmes 60). A (near) equivalence between the private person and public persona gives a satisfying sense of transparency (Vincendeau 66). Conversely, when audiences catch a glimpse of the ‘real’ self that does not match with the person's public image, this results in what Rojek calls “cognitive dissonance” – a critical condemnation of the icon's façade (19).

Audiences desire an ever-greater quantity of images as well as access to all facets of a celebrity's life (Cashmore 43). There is not just a demand for visuals, however. McCutcheon et al. suggest that, in addition to images, audiences also obsess over intimate details about icons (67). On account of this, scholars have referred to the private lives of contemporary celebrities as “a new site of knowledge and truth” (deCordova 26) and “a site of perpetual public excavation” (Rojek 19). The rationale behind this insatiable desire for increasingly personal bits of information seems to be that it permits fans a sense of getting to know a celebrity or that they are uncovering some profound truth about them that is otherwise obscured by mainstream representations. Cashmore has been somewhat critical about the notion of finding out public figures. He argues that audiences can never truly know an icon since available information is either mediated or sourced from gossip. The relevance of factuality here is debatable, however. Cashmore goes on to explain that fans use fragments of information – factual or otherwise – to construct the icon in a way that feels real to them (80-1).

## **2.2 – Illusion of Intimacy**

Evans' *Celebrity, Media and History* (2005) suggests that the fading line between private and public has resulted in a new kind of relationship between audiences and celebrities. Cashmore

further elaborates on this, citing a “new resolution in fans' pursuit of celebrities, intensity in the way they observed them, and strength in the attachments they forged with them” (95). Likewise, Rojek maintains that “relationships between fans and celebrities frequently involve unusually high levels of non-reciprocal emotional dependence, in which fans project intensely positive feelings onto the celebrity” (51). This new relationship can be described as para-social. The concept of para-social phenomena was initially coined by anthropologist Donald Horton and sociologist R. Richard Wohl in their 1956 paper *Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance* and gained a foothold in academia in the mid-1990s. Although the specific meaning of the term may vary depending on the context, para-social relationships are essentially characterized by “a one-sided mediated form of social interaction between the audience and media characters” (Liebers and Schramm 5). Having a para-social relationship with a cultural icon is distinct from celebrity worship in that the relationship is decidedly more personal.

Concepts of access and intimacy are important in the discourse around contemporary celebrity and fame (Holmes 54; Redmond 36). Intimacy – or the illusion thereof – is a fundamental part of the para-social relationships we build with cultural icons. We become familiar with cultural icons as a result of the overabundance of images and information that is available to us. This familiarity, in turn, leads to a sense of intimacy. Once again, the role that media plays here cannot be overstated. Photography is vital in allowing intimacy between icons and audiences as photos can show celebrities' personal lives in a way that combines a feeling of closeness with the illusion of unmitigated experience (Lai 223-4). The same holds true for moving images. The rise of television, to this extent, has had a significant impact on the relationship between audiences and public figures. David Giles already pointed out in 2000 that television had created a new kind of celebrity by “bringing famous faces and sounds into our homes” (32). Cashmore elaborated on this in 2006, explaining that television brought intimacy but also the ability to replay such images time and again (38). Since then, new technologies have only bolstered this. Laptops, tablets, and smartphones allow us to access celebrity images whenever we want, as often as we want, and in the intimate setting of our home.

As mentioned before, para-social relationships differ from celebrity worship in that they are more personal. These relationships are rooted in identification rather than adulation. It follows that, in order to establish a para-social relationship with a cultural icon, a fan should understand the icon as deeply human despite their fame. Just as with idealizing them, media

representations play a significant part in humanizing cultural icons. As Rojek puts it, the media can make celebrities seem "both larger than life and intimate confrères" (16-7). In a similar vein, Cashmore notes a connection between the trend of searching for the 'real' self of public figures and the collective desire to identify with them. In addition to providing a certain voyeuristic pleasure, uncovering a celebrity's private life also reinforces their ordinariness (59). Lai is even more specific about prerequisites for para-social relationships between fans and icons. Individuals, she argues, "must be able to believe that the celebrities are not so distant from those in their social circles." In other words, cultural icons must not just be humanized; they must also be brought into the realm of everyday life (227).

### **2.3 – Experiencing the Icon**

As previously indicated, relationships between fans and cultural icons are para-social or one-sided. The manner in which audiences experience or interact with cultural icons is also fundamentally different from typical interpersonal relationships. An icon is always separated from the audience in one way or another – be that by a screen, stage, or any other medium. As such, relationships between fans and icons are established via media representations.

Because of the inherent distance between cultural icons and the public, some scholars have questioned the validity of relationships between the two. Rojek, for instance, ultimately believes such relationships to be imaginary. He argues that "audience relationships carry a high propensity of fantasy and desire" due to the "physical and cultural remoteness of the object from the spectator" (26). Bickerdike takes a similar stance when describing fans' relationships with Ian Curtis and Kurt Cobain. The distance between an icon and the public, according to Bickerdike, allows every fan to produce a unique fantasy around the icon and their relationship with it (10). In this way, theories of para-social relationships are not necessarily a departure from those about myth.

Others argue that simply labeling them as false is a gross oversimplification of para-social relationships and that the connection that we have – or believe to have – with icons undeniably affects us. Redmond goes so far as to state that the connection between a fan and a cultural icon is "as 'real' as anything can be in a cultural universe made out of simulacra" (38). Similarly, Cashmore asserts that fans experience these relationships as genuine and that their unilaterality does not necessarily lessen their impact on audiences (39, 80). Moreover, they both reject the supposed dichotomy between 'real' in-person interactions and 'fake' interactions

through media. For instance, Cashmore uses the example of Princess Diana to show that media representations of cultural icons can have a tangible quality to them (28-9). In a similar vein, Redmond argues that "the star or celebrity's image is, in many instances, already *seeing in the flesh*." The reason for this, he explains, is the "intense one-to-one correspondence with the viewer/reader" on which media representations of icons are built (37-8). This intensity, combined with the tangible quality of media representations, results in such a high degree of (perceived) intimacy that the spectator is hardly aware of the screen that separates them from the icon.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that the concept of authenticity is central to the relationship between fans and cultural icons. Audiences are aware of the duality of icons. They desire to expose the 'real' self that lies behind the manufactured public persona and to familiarize themselves with this person. This process humanizes the icon, transforming them from a role model or God-like figure to a personal friend. Moreover, fans build para-social relationships with cultural icons in which they experience a genuine connection to the icon.

The aforementioned processes can also be identified in the context of Kurt Cobain. The excavation of his private life started with invasive articles and photographs that were published when he was still alive and culminated in the 2002 publication of *Journals* – a collection of excerpts from Cobain's actual journals. That fans may develop a para-social relationship with Kurt Cobain is evident in the plethora of social media pages dedicated to Cobain, where (primarily) teens, some of whom were not even born until a decade after his death, express adoration and grief as if they personally knew him.

## **Chapter 3 – Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck**

Having examined existing literature concerning the notion of authenticity in relation to cultural icons in general, I will now move on to discuss two case studies to find out how the authenticity paradox has shaped representations of Kurt Cobain.

*Montage of Heck* was the first documentary ever to be made in collaboration with Kurt Cobain's family. The film features interviews with seven members of Cobain's inner circle: Wendy O'Connor (mother), Kim Cobain (sister), Don Cobain (father), Jenny Cobain (step-mother), Courtney Love (widow), Tracy Marander (previous long-term girlfriend), and Krist Novoselic (former Nirvana bass player). Because of the cooperation from Cobain's family, Morgen also had access to unique source materials, including home videos, personal artifacts, and audio recordings. Consequently, *Montage of Heck* presumes access to the interior of Kurt Cobain that is unlike any prior Nirvana/Cobain documentary. Rolling Stone writer David Fear even referred to the film as "the unfiltered Kurt experience." What makes this documentary particularly interesting for this thesis, then, is that *Montage of Heck* has been presented and received as being extraordinarily authentic.

### **3.1 – Narrative**

*Montage of Heck* gives a chronological overview of Kurt Cobain's personal life from the moments leading up to his birth to his death twenty-seven years later. In this section, I will describe the narrative the film constructs around Cobain. I will do so by focusing on four recurring themes: artistic genius, mental health and addiction, innocence, and the detrimental effects of fame.

#### **Artistic Genius**

The documentary wastes no time asserting that this is a story about an extraordinary person. The first person to speak is Cobain's sister, who says: "Kurt's brain was just constantly going. ... It was awe-inspiring, but it was like, 'Oh, well, I guess I'm not... You know, I guess I'm not all that special'" (00:01:02-00:01:22). By the eight-minute mark, it has become clear to the viewer that what made Cobain so special was his artistic genius which had been evident from a young age. We are shown drawings he made as a child, as well as home videos of a young Cobain playing with a toy guitar and drum set.

As the story progresses – and Cobain's life gets more complicated – the emphasis on art becomes stronger. Tracy Marander reveals, for instance, that she had to support Cobain financially during the years prior to his music career taking off as he had difficulties holding down a job. Yet, she is quick to point out that while she was working, Cobain would constantly be producing music, paintings, or other forms of art. Krist Novoselic adds to this that “he'd always have to do some kind of art ... It just came out of him. He had to express himself” (00:28:21-00:28:32).

It is also suggested throughout the film that Cobain was predestined for (artistic) greatness. Most emphatically, perhaps, by his mother. While discussing how she used to doubt her marriage to Cobain's father, O'Connor says she realized that: “everything really did happen for a reason. Kurt had to be born. It was... it was a must” (00:06:04-00:06:19).

### **Mental Health and Addiction**

Much like Kurt Cobain's artistic genius, his struggles with mental health and addiction are core components of the film's narrative. The first couple of minutes show Cobain as a happy child whom everyone around him adores. Before long, however, his behavior is shown to become more unruly, dovetailing with an increasingly problematic home life due to the separation of his parents and the strained relationship with his father. His problems only got more severe during adolescence, which was also when he began to experiment with alcohol and drugs. Additionally, suicidal ideation is a recurring theme in Cobain's voice recordings from this period.

Several interviews featured in the documentary attest to Cobain's emotional volatility. Krist Novoselic, for instance, talks about how Cobain would become enraged if he thought he was humiliated. Tracy Marander also mentions that he would regularly have extremely violent dreams about people trying to kill him (00:47:15-00:48:41). It is shown that his struggles with mental illness and addiction only became more severe throughout Nirvana's run. The film uses audio and visuals to convey Cobain's deteriorating mental state. The artworks of Cobain that are shown become increasingly violent, and the excerpts from his journals frequently focus on death and despair. Heavily distorted pieces of music accompany these scenes as opposed to the regular Nirvana songs that were used earlier.

### **Innocence**

*Montage of Heck* by no means sanitizes the image of Kurt Cobain. On the contrary, it confronts the viewer with several unsettling scenes, such as the recording of a threatening phone call that Cobain made to writer Victoria Clarke or a home video that shows him with his infant daughter while clearly being inebriated. At the same time, however, the film continuously seeks to reassure the viewer of Cobain's ultimate innocence. For example, Cobain's father and step-mother explain in one interview that Cobain had severe behavioral issues after his parents' divorce, to the point where he “started just doing really mean things” to their other children. Jenny Cobain then extenuates the story by arguing that Cobain acted out of hurt over feeling rejected by his family and that “Kurt just really wanted to be with his mom” (00:14:45-00:14:53). Even near the documentary's ending, which primarily focuses on Cobain's deteriorating mental state, a similar kind of vulnerability is evident when Cobain asks his friends to sit in the front row during Nirvana's *MTV Unplugged* session so that he can look at the people he knows.

### **Detrimental Effects of Fame**

Although the film shows that mental health issues were a constant in Cobain's life, it also strongly implies that it was Nirvana's sudden fame that pushed him over the edge. Early on in the film – around the time that Nirvana released their first album – we see an excellent piece of foreshadowing in which the band tells an interviewer that they are “prepared for the rock 'n' roll lifestyle.” An optimistic Cobain adds that success does not frighten them (00:43:55-00:44:35). Not long after this, an interview with Cobain's mother signals Nirvana's transition to mainstream success. Upon hearing the *Nevermind* album for the first time, O'Connor claims to have told her son: “you better buckle up, 'cause you are not ready for this” (00:56:03-00:56:10).

The remainder of the film shows how Cobain's mental state quickly started to deteriorate under the pressure of fame following the album's release. The detrimental effects of Nirvana's sudden fame are underscored by an interview with Krist Novoselic, who stresses that “it was kind of traumatic” and that he too was unable to cope in a healthy manner. He remarks apropos of their different trajectories: “I had beer and wine, you know? Kurt had heroin” (01:08:23-01:08:47). This once again reiterates to the viewers that Cobain's struggles were not the result of a flawed character.

### **3.2 – Tension Myth/Reality**

Despite being presented and received as the authentic story of Kurt Cobain, a palpable tension between myth and reality is still present in *Montage of Heck*.

To start with, the film goes to great lengths to enforce the illusion of intimacy between the spectator and Cobain. It seemingly exposes Cobain's 'real' self by displaying all facets of his life; from his early childhood to his private adult life and even his innermost thoughts. This sense of unmitigated access is driven home further by using voice recordings and pages of his writing. *Montage of Heck*, in this way, allows Cobain to tell his own story. Nevertheless, the limited access to Cobain's interior becomes glaringly obvious as the film nears its conclusion. The months leading up to his committing suicide are solely addressed through secondary sources, such as an interview with his widow Courtney Love. As such, a real insight into Cobain's mental state near the end of his life is conspicuously absent.

Moreover, *Montage of Heck* creates a false impression of authenticity by ascribing too much credibility to its source material and overstating the objectiveness of the story it tells. Despite having access to Kurt Cobain's personal artifacts, recordings, and journals, no person can be certain of the meanings he intended these texts to have. The involvement of Cobain's family does not necessarily guarantee authenticity either. The narratives they construct will – to some extent – reflect personal agendas or lack of objectivity due to their emotional attachment. In addition to that, the manner in which these testimonies and primary sources are presented to the viewer is ultimately still shaped by Morgen's interpretation and subsequent mediation. Wendy O'Connor and Frances Bean Cobain have both voiced dissatisfaction with the final product. Virginia Hanlon Grohl – Dave Grohl's mother – has stated in her book *From Cradle to Stage* (2017) that O'Connor was “devastated” by the film and “felt betrayed by her portrayal as an uncaring, distant mother” (38). Likewise, Cobain's daughter has come out to say that “[*Montage of Heck*] ended up being not what I wanted it to be” and that she “was not capable of having authentic input” (Egan).

On a narrative level, *Montage of Heck* is a prime example of a mental illness narrative. Such narratives, as Stephen Harper argues in his 2006 paper *Madly famous: Narratives of mental illness in celebrity culture*, facilitate the exposure of a celebrity's private vulnerability without undermining their public greatness. Mental illness makes an icon unique but also emphasizes their humanity (314-6). Moreover, mental health struggles are often associated

with artistic genius. Helen Davies adds to this that it is especially the case for male rock stars that mental instability seems to reinforce their credibility (172-3). Narratives of mental illness and addiction are utilized in the documentary to simultaneously humanize and mythologize Kurt Cobain.

Overall, *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck* seemingly set out to represent Cobain in an authentic manner. At the same time, however, the film still has the tendency to exalt and sensationalize Kurt Cobain.

## **Chapter 4 – Fan-made Materials**

As I have pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, fan-made materials are frequently neglected in academic studies regarding representation of Kurt Cobain because fans are regarded as consumers, not producers. However, an overview of contemporary representations would be incomplete without addressing these materials.

What makes fan-made materials especially interesting for this paper is that, unlike *Montage of Heck*, this kind of material is typically considered to be anything but authentic. This sentiment is palpable in Bickerdike's description of fandom in the context of Kurt Cobain and Ian Curtis. The celebrities that fans think they know, she argues, are merely “hollow icons” and “empty vessels” imbued with any meanings that make them more sellable (170-4). Consequently, fan-made materials are little more than reproductions of the mediated image of a person whose authentic self they cannot possibly know.

What lies at the basis of such views is that traditional theories of address (e.g., interpellation, encoding/decoding, and the gaze) conceptualize producers and consumers as distinct categories and emphasize producers' intentions as the source of meaning – granted, the extent of this emphasis varies depending on the specific theory and application. Following recent re-examinations of these theories, however, scholars such as Sturken and Cartwright posit that producer and consumer categories overlap, and viewers play a more significant part in meaning-making than previously assumed. Moreover, the advent of the internet in general, and social media in particular, has made fans more visible as producers. The complexity of fandom and the way fans interact with images and narratives have been acknowledged by leading works in the field of fan culture, such as Henry Jenkins' *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (2006) and *Textual Poachers* (2012).

### **4.1 – Narrative**

All three texts are compilation videos that consist of fragments from live footage, interviews, and other media appearances. Because these videos have a running time of less than five minutes each, they cannot develop the kind of robust narrative that one would find in a feature film. To compare, *Montage of Heck* has a running time of 132 minutes. Nonetheless, through editing and the selection of footage, the producers still present Cobain in a distinct and

deliberate manner. In this section, I will describe how the videos represent Kurt Cobain and how they compare to the dominant rock star narrative.

### **Kurt Cobain's sense of humor was like...**

The intent of this video, as the title suggests, is to showcase Kurt Cobain's sense of humor. The opening clip features Cobain during an interview explaining that this is a part of both him and the band that is generally overlooked. He states: “no one sees the funny side of us, hardly ... I've noticed this image of us as being a serious, angry, pissed off band” (0:00:00-0:00:08). What follows are fifteen more fragments from interviews and two pieces of backstage footage in which Cobain can be seen smiling, laughing, and making jokes. The penultimate fragment reiterates the core message of Kurt Cobain not being an angry person. When an interviewer expresses that she is genuinely surprised by his affability, Cobain responds by saying, “I've always been a nice guy ... it just depends on what mood I'm in” (0:03:47-0:04:31).

### **Kurt Cobain being the most adorable baby**

This video is a compilation of thirteen pieces of footage that, based on the title, depict Cobain in a manner that the producer of the text finds to be endearing. The source of this sentiment can be both textual and visual in nature, depending on the clip. For example, in some fragments, Cobain is joking around or speaking about love; in others, he is simply smiling or twirling his hair. One noteworthy element in this video is the cut screen that plays in between clips. This cut screen, which features SMPTE color bars accompanied by a short beep, is a common trope within the broader category of fan videos and is used to convey a sense of humor or gaiety.

### **Kurt Cobain being a feminist for 5 minutes straight (..or his whole life)**

This video features three segments from interviews and three pieces of audio and footage from live performances that aim to demonstrate Kurt Cobain's beliefs concerning misogyny and sexual violence against women. In the first four clips, Cobain speaks out against sexism and the mistreatment of women in Aberdeen, WA, and the United States in general. He explains that he tries to utilize Nirvana's platform to promote social justice; by writing songs such as “Polly” or “Rape Me,” but also by playing benefits. The two concluding clips show Cobain putting words into action by breaking off a Nirvana set on two separate occasions to stop an audience member from sexually assaulting a girl.

Although these texts all construct slightly different narratives, none of them adheres to the dominant rock star narrative. In fact, these videos – especially the first two – barely acknowledge that Cobain is a musician.

## **4.2 – Tension Myth/Reality**

On the one hand, there is an argument to be made that these videos indeed do not represent Kurt Cobain in an authentic manner. After all, it would be inconceivable to provide a balanced overview of a person's life in less than five minutes.

While these texts do not deify Cobain, he is still idealized inasmuch as the producers cherry-picked clips that showcase the most favorable aspects of his character. The fans who created these videos project their personal values and beliefs onto Cobain through the narratives they put forward. Consequently, his struggles with addiction, emotional volatility, and anything else that would defy these narratives have been omitted. Besides, the fact that a compilation video displaying ordinary behaviors is interesting implicitly reinforces the extraordinary nature of its object.

On the other hand, authenticity does seem to be a significant motivator in creating these videos. They are part of the mission to expose the 'real' self as they emphasize the private person behind the public persona. There is also a heightened sense of familiarity and intimacy in their approach to Kurt Cobain because the producers and intended consumers are all part of the same fandom. As such, they presumably all feel a similar connection to him. This sense of familiarity and intimacy is evident in the titles of the videos, which suggest that they present some absolute truth. This is especially the case for the last one. Not only does this video place a politicized label on Cobain (feminist), but phrases such as “being” and “his whole life” imply that it is an inherent part of him.

There is also a certain authenticity in the content of these videos that is largely absent from mainstream representations. We do not see the tortured genius, the voice of a generation, or the sensitive soul for whom suicide was the only escape from the corrupting power of fame. Instead, we see a humanized Kurt Cobain with beliefs, emotions, and a sense of humor like any other person. To speak in terms of the opening quote by Dave Grohl, these videos aim to depict the guy who danced to ABBA rather than the punk rock iconoclastic misfit.

Moreover, while the producers' personal values undoubtedly shaped these texts, their overall themes are by no means arbitrary; they stand in direct opposition to dominant narratives.

The first two videos accentuate a light-hearted side of Cobain that is otherwise obscured by his image as an angry or intense person. The third video demonstrates that he held well-formulated sociopolitical beliefs on which he could act in a constructive manner rather than him merely being an iconoclast capitalizing on teenage angst. As such, these texts indicate that fans are capable of recognizing dominant narratives and producing intentionally subversive counter-narratives.

## Conclusion

*“When I think of Kurt, I think of the way he giggled, or Abba ... He was a human being. And maybe it's selective memory, but I don't want to think of him as some brooding, suicidal genius. He was a fucking nice guy. But I understand. That's how legends are made.”<sup>7</sup>*

– Dave Grohl

I started this thesis with a quote by Dave Grohl, who suggested that the public has adopted a specific narrative concerning Kurt Cobain. Grohl also strongly implied a distinction between this inauthentic narrative and the real person he knew. The quote above is the continuation of that same conversation with Paul Brannigan. This time, however, the dichotomy between fact and fiction is less apparent. Grohl's words reveal that – whether consciously or not – he too has manipulated Cobain's image in accordance with how he wants to think of him. It becomes apparent, then, that even those in Cobain's inner circle have constructed narratives that are not necessarily authentic. As such, Grohl's statements exemplify an oscillation between myth and reality that takes place on a larger scale.

The aim of this thesis was to understand the authenticity paradox in the context of cultural icons and how it has shaped recent representations of Kurt Cobain. The first two chapters have shown that two major trends characterize the relationship between cultural icons and the public. On the one hand, audiences have the tendency to exalt and mythologize icons, making them into superhuman beings. The mutability of cultural icons – particularly when the signifier is absent – allows different people to project onto icons their fantasies and desires and transform them into something greater than the real person behind the icon. On the other hand, cultural icons are humanized so audiences can identify with them. Fans also develop intimate personal – albeit one-sided – relationships with icons in which knowing the real person behind the mediated façade is a priority. Authenticity in the context of cultural icons is paradoxical because these trends are not mutually exclusive. More often than not, they coincide.

The case studies in the third and fourth chapters demonstrate that the authenticity paradox is present in recent representations of Kurt Cobain as well. While they put forward

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<sup>7</sup> Brannigan, Paul. *This Is a Call*. London, HarperCollinsPublishers, 2012. P. 121.

different narratives, all texts display both the strong desire for authenticity and the habit of mythologizing. Brett Morgen's documentary *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck* set out to represent the 'real' Cobain, yet ended up propagating the mythical notion of him as tortured genius. Conversely, while such materials are typically dismissed as frivolous products of celebrity worship, the fan-made videos actually question the legitimacy of the dominant rock star narrative. In regard to authenticity, then, these texts are two sides of the same coin. Their dissimilitude is superficial and merely results from a different combination of included or omitted elements. Neither is inherently more authentic than the other.

This thesis contributes to the understanding of cultural icons in several ways: it has highlighted the importance of approaching representations of Kurt Cobain – and cultural icons in general – as a plurality of narratives rather than a singular one; it has shown a multitude of complex rationales behind the appropriation and manipulation of icons through representations that cannot be analyzed in terms of commodification; and it has demonstrated the potential merit of fan-made materials in academic research. However, the most significant conclusion to be drawn from this thesis is that there is no clear-cut distinction between reality and myth in the context of cultural icons. One could even go so far as to question the possibility of absolute authenticity in general. Nevertheless, I would argue that, in this context, the intent of being authentic is what imbues the concept with meaning. Regardless of factuality, the quest for authenticity in representing icons is significant in and of itself.

Moving forward, I suggest that research on Kurt Cobain, and cultural icons in general, employs a less dichotomous view of reality versus myth, producer versus consumer, and mainstream versus fan materials to replenish the academic conversation.

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