'Inserting myself into the story: Artistic explorations of popular culture… and identity'

By Tom Cho, writer and community artist

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About six years ago, I began to notice that something was missing from most of the literary fiction that I was reading.

What was missing from these works were the kinds of popular cultural texts that I regularly engage with. In fact, these books generally seemed to present fictional worlds that were largely stripped of TV shows, films, music, celebrities and other kinds of popular cultural texts, phenomena and icons. Despite their status as fictional worlds, I felt that there was something unsatisfyingly abstract about this omission – for the most part, a vast body of texts seemed so strikingly absent from another.

This observation largely prompted my own artistic explorations of popular culture in the fiction that I write. More specifically, I began writing a collection of short fiction that examined my engagement with popular culture. Yet my rationale for exploring popular culture has morphed significantly over the years. In fact, these days, rather than being 'the theme' or 'a theme' for me to examine, popular culture has become a kind of lens to explore the terrain of my own identity. In examining popular culture, I have ultimately been able to explore questions that are wider in scope and yet also deeply personal to me. Such questions include: "How do I see myself?", "How might others see me?", "What kinds of desires and fantasies do I have?" and "How have I been changing?"

There is insufficient space in this article to explore another question that inevitably is prompted by discussions of popular culture: "What do we mean by 'popular culture'?" Just as the connotations attached to each of the words in the term 'community cultural development' are complex, so it is with 'popular culture'. What makes a cultural text 'popular'? Who are the (assumed) audiences at any given time for texts that are claimed to examples of popular culture – whose 'culture' is supposedly being explored? And what of the position of the person who explores popular culture – what is their role? The fact that popular culture is so contingent upon these and many other issues means that the notion of 'popular culture' is replete with connotation, assumption and questions of value.

At any rate, our sense of popular culture is usually quite selective. This is certainly the case for my own art. In particular, my collection of short fiction is filled with popular cultural texts, archetypes and figures of which I am a fan – Star Wars, Elvis Presley, various 80s TV shows, stoic heroes, etc. But then, popular culture is inevitably about taste – and our tastes tell us a lot about ourselves.

Over the past six years, I have developed a greater understanding of just how rich and powerful popular culture can be as an area of artistic exploration. One reason for this concerns the range of emotional responses we can have to popular culture. Popular culture can evoke strong emotions such as reverence and disgust. Significantly, it can also evoke feelings of deep ambivalence (e.g. the person who describes their viewing of reality television shows as a "guilty pleasure"). These more complex emotional spaces of ambivalence especially fascinate me. They can take us beyond simplistic fears that artistic explorations of popular culture will necessarily be trivial or superficial, or that these explorations will idealise popular culture. They can also take us beyond the impulse to demonise popular culture.

As a writer, the economy of popular cultural references also interests me. Popular cultural references can swiftly evoke connotations in so few words (e.g. "Gomer Pyle". "Dracula". "Sonny and Cher". There – see what I mean?) At the same time, exploring popular culture can accomplish a great deal beyond the 'mereness' of referencing specific texts. Like a kind of modern mythology, popular culture is filled with powerful archetypes – questing heroes, freaks and outsiders, bad/good boys, etc. – that artists can draw from. Popular culture also creates its own language (e.g. "Frankly, my dear. I don't give a damn."). Beyond this, popular culture creates whole 'universes' – settings, characters and back-stories – that can be adopted and co-opted and played with. This can be seen in the proliferation of fan fiction – fan-written stories about or set within popular cultural universes (e.g. at present, there are over 34,000 stories at http://www.harrypotterfanfiction.com/). In fact, fans of popular culture demonstrate how popular culture creates communities – communities of consumers/producers. For example, over the last few years, Sing-a-long-a Sound of Music shows have been staged around the world. These shows involve mass screenings of the film The Sound of Music in which attendees dress up in costumes inspired by the film and sing along with its songs.

Actually, my own love of The Sound of Music came from my father. He loved this film. He owned a copy of it on video and he used to watch it over and over again. As a child, I would watch it with him. Years later, I wrote a piece for my short fiction collection called The Sound of Music. For reasons beyond my love of this film, it is not surprising that I wrote this piece. After all, to explore popular culture in art is to 'situate' oneself (and thus one's work): how you grew up, what fascinates you, who influences you, etc.

This short story demonstrates some of the points I made above about the richness of popular culture as an area of artistic exploration. The story begins:

> At first, all you can see are clouds, then an aerial view of mountains, then a green valley, and a lake, and suddenly an open grassy area, and then there's me, spinning around with my arms outstretched and I'm singing. It's interesting, really, because I remember how my Auntie Ling used to do exactly the same thing. Like me, Auntie Ling loved music, and she loved being out in the hills, singing. In China, Auntie Ling was a riverboat gambler who loved to sing but could not find any singing work. She migrated to Australia in search of a better life, and now she is an officer in the Danish Imperial Navy who lives in a beautiful mansion in France. At any rate, I soon realise that I do not have time to think about Auntie Ling. This is because the bells of the abbey have started ringing. I am going to be late for chapel so I run to the abbey. Unfortunately, I return to the abbey to find that Mother Superior has made arrangements for me to look after the children of a Captain von Trapp.
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> So, a few days later, I pack my bags and go to Captain von Trapp's house. It turns out that Captain von Trapp is very cold to me, and I find myself being worried about whether he likes me or not. Yet, through a process of winning the hearts of the von Trapp children and disobeying the Captain's orders and talking with the Captain about 80s television shows and pop songs, Captain von Trapp and I eventually end up becoming much closer. In fact, it is not long before Captain von Trapp and I are having sex and falling in love.
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> Once we have gotten together, I find myself incredibly drawn to Captain von Trapp, and he to me. We start spending a great deal of time with each other; we want to be together all the time. As a result, by the end of the month, we are already finishing each other's sentences and laughing at exactly the same time and in exactly the same way. We start dressing alike. We start walking alike. We even start having the same desires and ambitions. At times, I find myself wondering if so much commonality between two people is a good thing. How do you solve a problem like co-dependency?
> (Cho, 2006)

In the case of this piece, I literally inserted myself into the story. In a sense, this reflects my own journey in exploring popular culture in my art. I began writing a collection of short fiction that was initially focused on popular culture itself. However, as it turns out, I have really been writing a collection of short fiction about my own identity.

Beyond the benefits of exploring popular culture in art – its wide appeal, its ability to evoke swift recognition and connection from audiences, etc. – popular culture tells us a great deal about who we are. This is ultimately what makes popular culture such a powerful area of exploration in art – and thus community cultural development.

Tom Cho writes short fiction, edits text, produces arts projects, performs his words onstage, and makes zines. His short stories have been published widely in journals and anthologies in Australia and overseas. He has worked for various arts organisations over the years and he currently works at Footscray Community Arts Centre. He is also completing a PhD in Professional Writing at Deakin University. Visit him at www.tomcho.com

References

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