



Readers Write about Pop Culture

TOMORROW'S HISTORY

Pop culture today will be the folklore of tomorrow. I personally find pop culture interesting because some of the fashion, music, writings, and sayings will live on or find a new version in the future. We don't have to look too far behind us to see some recycling of fashion ideas: hip-hugger flared pants were once bell-bottoms made popular by singers such as Sonny & Cher; capris were once called pedal-pushers; mullets had a past as shags; and collarless mens' shirts seem inspired by the Nehru jacket.

It's no secret that songs get remade by rock groups or that movies find new versions as well. Currently, a trend exists in movie-making to recreate full-length versions of '60s and '70s television shows, many of which have been kept alive by stations such as TV Land and Nickelodeon. You just never know where the pop culture from one decade will end up in the future. Who would think that many of today's children or teens would find the television sitcoms of the '60s or '70s entertaining, but they do. Fantasy and humor seem to reach across time.

Although I may not always like all of popular culture, I do appreciate the fact that it often challenges us to experience life in a new way. It also offers an identity for a new generation. It can bridge gaps be-

tween cultures, and with technology pop culture from one country reaches another even quicker. In time, popular culture sometimes even becomes part of mainstream culture. I'll never forget the first time I heard a Beatles' song being played in a grocery store.

Pop culture can try our intellect, but it also captures a sense of time and place. It is a part of all our lives whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. It does become history.

—Linda Campillo, Portland

STRANGERS UNDER ONE ROOF

There are many things about the twenty-four-hour work day—never being out of communication, relying on computers, television, cell phones, PDAs, MP3 players, and X-box—that disturb me. Gone is family time, gone is the family vacation, gone is the family all sitting down to a meal together and actually talking and listening to each other. And for what? Gone is imagination and the ability to orally tell a story and preserve family history.

With the onslaught of e-mail as an easy way to communicate, and the prevalence of jokes making their way through the Internet, I came to realize that people don't "tell" jokes anymore and that the art of storytelling has gone by the wayside as televisions and computers have become the center of our entertainment lives. Sadly,

that translates into us becoming increasingly isolated in a very crowded environment. In a flood of noises and images, of sitcoms and "reality" shows, we have become alienated from our families and personal histories. We begin to forget who we are.

Before electricity, families gathered around the coal oil lamp or the fire to tell or read stories. Farm work was mainly assigned to daylight hours. Long winter nights were times for passing on the cherished values and beliefs from one generation to the next through stories.

When electricity extended our day, family story time went away. It was eventually replaced by the radio and television, but neither can replace the family solidarity that was shaped during the story hours.

In his book, *The Healing Art of Storytelling*, Richard Stone discusses this loss: "In today's world, it's not unusual for an entire family to subsist under one roof hardly knowing each other. A television in every bedroom now gives us the ultimate freedom to privately design and construct our own solitary world of entertainment. Community, if it exists, is relegated to sterile settings such as virtual reality and talk rooms on the Internet. Real intimacy has become scarce, surfacing in today's culture as sexualized fantasies and twisted notions of love and companionship."

He continues: “Teachers tell me that they have witnessed a steady decrease in elementary students’ verbal and artistic ability during the last fifteen years. When asked to write an original story, kids today are much more likely to regurgitate the plot from the latest movie thriller with a cast of pop characters from Saturday morning cartoons. Gone is the ability to make up a story out of nothing.” He laments the loss of “the most important ingredient of human sanity: imagination.”

I admit that I am tethered to my computer and cell phone, but in the evenings and on the weekends, they don’t exist. It’s increasingly hard to capture that one-on-one time with loved ones in this always “on-call” world, but I hate to contemplate the alternative—where human contact isn’t necessary.

—Peggy Long, *Gresham*

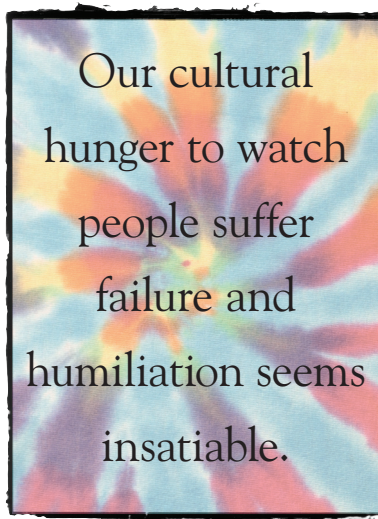
WATCHING OURSELVES AT OUR WORST

From Elvis to Eminem, each new wave of popular culture has been seen by established society as heralding the decline of civilization. One of the essential roles of art is to disturb—what Robert Hughes dubbed the “shock of the new.” As society absorbs each shock, a new generation is forced to expand the boundaries to achieve the same effect.

Having accepted the nature of this repetitive dance, I vowed never to be shocked by pop culture. Then, I watched *Survivor* for the first time and

proclaimed, “The end of civilization is at hand!” All I needed for confirmation was *American Idol*, *Joe Millionaire*, *Fear Factor*, *The Swan*, *The Apprentice*, and *Who’s Your Daddy?*—doses of contrived reality, each more grotesque than the last.

Andy Warhol, the pioneer of “reality television,” prophesied, “The day will come when everyone will be famous for fifteen



minutes.” This day is upon us. People don’t have to accomplish anything to be famous. For entertainment we need only an endless stream of freaks willing to gobble a gross amount of worms or be hacked up and recreated by plastic surgeons. Our cultural hunger to watch people suffer failure and humiliation seems insatiable. Perhaps we may yet reach the day where the number-one-rated show is *Death Factor*.

Warhol once said, “The acquisition of my tape recorder finished whatever emotional life I might have had, but I was glad to see it go. Nothing was ever a problem again, because a problem

just meant a good tape. The people telling you the problems couldn’t decide any more if they were really having the problems or if they were just performing. During the ’60s, I think, people forgot what emotions were supposed to be. And I don’t think they’ve ever remembered.”

The Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle states that an observed subject changes knowing it is observed. So, do reality shows tell us something meaningful about the essence of human nature? Or are they superficial environments where reality and performance come together to the degree that neither the viewer nor the viewed can tell the difference? In our identification with the protagonists and their struggle, do we confuse our own dramas with theirs and begin to lose touch with real emotion?

The anti-establishment rapper-poet Michael Franti called TV the “drug of the nation, feeding ignorance and bleeding radiation.” Television has already eroded something crucial from human intercourse. Now, reality television encourages us to watch ourselves at our worst. Yet we cannot get enough. As Warhol put it, “Most people love watching the same basic thing, as long as the details are different. But I’m just the opposite: if I’m going to sit and watch the same thing I saw the night before, I don’t want it to be essentially the same. I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.”



As we collectively empty ourselves into reality television, our growing tolerance demands that any new show be more grotesque and more outlandish to generate the shock that seems to be the only authentic feeling we have any more. *The Onion* once ran a headline, “Lowest Common Denominator Continues to Plummet.”

But is it really worse? Or is this just the same revulsion felt by every ascending generation as they mature? Is my disgust merely a desperate bid to separate myself from the masses in an act of ego-feeding, self-protective elitism? Or is our culture really messed up?

—Jason Openo, Salem

PROPS AND BACKGROUND SETS

When visiting an aboriginal cultural center at Uluru (Ayers Rock), Australia, I watched as Americans briefly stopped to observe aboriginal artists at work. I was entranced for more than an hour as hundreds of tiny colored dots from this 40,000-year-old oral tradition were transformed into stunning pieces of art, but others tired after just a few moments. Can we blame this short attention span on the widespread play of electronic games? Is it true that if it’s not moving faster than the Master Chief in a *Halo 2* Xbox game, it must be too boring to watch? Is pop culture teaching us that unless there is something to buy or consume, there is no value in experiencing the creation of the thing itself? This was not a one time event.

My recent travels in Paris and Amsterdam reaffirmed my belief that technology gadgets like camcorders and cell phones seriously affect our interaction with other countries’ forms of cultural expression and representation. At the Van Gogh Museum, people take pictures of themselves posing next to *The Potato Eaters*. At The Louvre, they capture *Mona Lisa* in their camcorders’ viewfinder. Are these people appreciating the arts or starring in their own home videos, using these cultural representations as props and background sets for their families’ entertainment? What do the humanities tell us about popular culture? What can we learn from advertisements for a prescription medicine that features Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* as the poster child for dry eyes? I think that our personal identity—what it means to be an American—is becoming diluted by these technology gadgets, electronic games, and various trinkets of our pop culture. What does this mean for the future of the humanities? Let us toss our Sponge Bob Square Pants watches into the air and cry, “Time out.”

—Sara Behrman, Portland

A PART OF THE MIDDLE WORLD

Mulling over popular culture, my brain serves up a sensual line from the aging *Valley of the Dolls*, then fast forwards to the swirling magic of Harry Potter. I think, finally, “I’ll just analyze the emotional impact of Elton John’s

redo of ‘Candle in the Wind’ at Princess Di’s funeral.” No. That would quell the joy of making distinctions among a world of popular works.

Video store films, a prime example of today’s culture, trigger impulses in me to attach Post-It notes targeting age groups, gender appeal, and probable level of quality. True, categories blur and our own tastes affect our judgments, but in comparing two films with quick-change heroes, *The Hulk* and *Spiderman II*, we might conclude that production quality is underdeveloped in the first but sharp in the second. This insight would create a shallow movie review, but might serve as a discussion starter.

I have fun matching age appeal with “popular environments”: Chuck E. Cheese’s game/pizza hangout=Children; Dinner Mystery Theater=Young Adults to the Mid-Gray Group; Branson=Golden-Age Pack.

Any of these groups can be unpredictable. Some members of the Golden-Pack may prefer a Gershwin Cabaret Night or an afternoon tea dance to Welkian music in Mississippi. Sometimes age groups are brought together by the freshness and simplicity of works that appeal to children at heart everywhere. How many of us, little hands in ours, have not cavorted around the room to the rhythms of the Wiggles, the Australian song-and-dance friends on the Disney Channel?

A teenage sampling, apart from representing a huge consumer group, can run the gamut



of art forms: novels by Judy Blume; street poetry; comic book art and fantasy illustrations; underdog films (*Friday Night Lights*) to date movies to science fiction; hip-hop; diverse fashion designs, not excluding jewelry for pierced body parts; architecture and malls; electronic design and video games; rock (hard and Christian), country, jazz, gospel, and movie themes. A qualitative standard here may emerge from opinions of popular people within the group itself rather than from society at large.

In choosing works that we consider comforting, we may select from a category we already know. A Danielle Steel novel on a grocery rack may, without our being conscious of words, flash a total impression: “modern romance; enviable main characters; youth-to-golden-age-female appeal; writing style a notch above the language and plots of the old Harlequin romances.” We don’t need to chant this before we read the book, but our awareness provides a context for considering who we are as readers, how society may be changing, and how credible the characters will be in displaying the wealth and glamour that we ourselves may lack.

Whether we forcibly analyze the posters in the travel window or the neighborhood band in the garage, we sense that popular culture offers a change of attention and a rearrangement of our feelings. A collection of photographs diverts our thoughts to a childhood river and the rhythm of its rippling. An old ballad on the car radio lifts our spirits to singing.

Popular works also link us to worlds beyond our own, to sharks and spaceships, to a vicarious involvement with thought and action, or perhaps to a bountiful escape. At its most exultant, popular culture encourages us to contribute something of ourselves: a poem, a watercolor, a carving, a quilt. We can do far worse in today’s middle world than to become a part of it.

—Joanna Klick, *Boring*

DEFENDING SCI-FI

Theoretical physicists—who have a hard time actually observing what they’re talking about—are great fans of “thought experiments.” These are logical extensions and illustrations of theoretical propositions, like the dilemma of Schrödinger’s poor boxed cat.

Social scientists have similar constraints. We can experiment with small questions—for example, do people walk more in neighborhoods with sidewalks? If we want to experiment with the fundamental structure of society, however, we soon find ourselves approaching the troubled territory of Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, Francisco Franco, or Augusto Pinochet.

But there’s a way around the problem: We can read and (even) write science fiction.

Good science fiction stories are thought experiments about the future, and science fiction as a genre is a variety of historical narrative. It is imagined and undocumented, to be sure, except in the words of the fiction itself, but

it operates within the essential constraints of historical writing. It makes its characters and events believable by placing them in larger social settings. It speculates about the chain of changes that lead from any present to any future. It explores the effects of specific innovations in technology or alterations of culture on the ways in which people might think, understand, and behave. “In every science fiction narrative,” says writer Kim Stanley Robinson, “there is an explicit or implicit fictional history that connects the period depicted to our present moment.”

Now for a quick caveat. Some books that travel as science fiction are the entirely different genre of heroic fantasy (the Star Wars movies most famously). And as with every popular genre, some science fiction is junk. Not every historical novelist is Leo Tolstoy. Not every movie is *Citizen Kane*. Not every science fiction writer is as thoughtful as Ursula Le Guin, Octavia Butler, or Stan Robinson.

So many of the books on the science fiction shelf in the library are thought experiments about the societal ramifications of change. Let one thing alter, be it technology or custom, and other things start to change as well, and trickles of difference merge into a cascade of history.

Perhaps by happenstance, or perhaps because society still seems more fluid here, a number of West Coast writers have offered encouraging views of public life and the possibilities of



political change. They contrast with the earlier writers of science fiction's "Golden Age" in the 1940s and '50s, who treated politics as manipulation and whose heroes tended to be engineers.

Some writers turn the tables on the Golden Age by privileging political actors over scientists. In his award-winning trilogy about the settlement of Mars (*Red Mars*, *Green Mars*, *Blue Mars*), Californian Kim Stanley Robinson pivots his sweeping narrative on the careful crafting of constitutional compromises, and the pioneers who turn into reluctant political leaders are the true creators of the new community. Seattlite Greg Bear similarly centers *Moving Mars* on a young woman who decides, of all things, to go into politics rather than the technical professions her family prefers.

Others focus attention on the necessity of building community through continual dialogue among all of its members. Robinson's *Pacific Edge* projects a twenty-first-century California in which a revival of town meeting democracy helps to maintain an increasingly sustainable economy. *In the Dazzle of Day*, Portlander Molly Gloss depicts a society which has successfully adopted the Quaker process of consensus decision-making and manages to discuss its way through a crisis. In "The Trouble with the Cotton People," one section of her complex novel *Always Coming Home*, Le Guin imagines a far future California diplomacy—in the form of talk, talk, and more talk—that averts warfare.

None of these examples are predictions—that's not what science fiction is good for. They're thought experiments in which the author tries to think through some of the options and conditions that might lead to a more open or just or harmonious society. They're fun to read, they're thought-provoking, and they reach audiences that would never dig through the theory of Jurgen Habermas or John Rawls.

—Carl Abbott, Portland

POP CULTURE STORM

I write as a California reader, from a state awash in popular culture. In fact, would-be creators come to us as others came for gold. Here the next wave of cultural artisans either strike it rich or die trying.

Living in the Central Valley, I watch the industry with mixed emotions. Popular culture appears to have a limited impact on our physical environment, but a positive impact on our economy. It is a "clean" industry and puts money into circulation.

On the other hand, I fear that the media by which these messages are carried are driving out more than old thoughts and ideas. They may indeed be driving out the very way we have structured our exploration of the world, at least in the humanities.

Specifically, I worry that popular culture is no longer narrative. It has abandoned time and place. Much of what I hear and see is color and noise without story

line. Possibly I exaggerate, but I sense a return in today's images to a reflection on ideal types, but without argumentation. There is no specificity, but a mixture of archetypes cut loose of their contexts. D. H. Lawrence once said that poems could be seen as holes cut in the umbrellas of civilization to let the chaos in. I am not sure of poems in general, but today's popular culture seems to rain chaos and to imply the storm is forever.

—Bob Benedetti, Stockton, CA

Next Theme: Belief

For the next issue of Oregon Humanities, we invite you to write down your thoughts on the theme of belief. We are looking for essays and articles that use the humanities to address particular issues—such as the changing shape of religious belief, the argument between science and religion, and the role of religious belief in modern politics—as well as more general topics, such as the nature of belief as a human activity. Our goals are to shed light on the place of belief in our society and to offer readers ways of exploring the significance of belief in our lives. Send your submissions by July 31, 2005, to Posts, Oregon Council for the Humanities, 812 SW Washington Street, Suite 225, Portland, OR 97205, or posts@oregonhum.org. Submissions may be edited for space and clarity.