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Reference to Popular Music in the Novel: The Author's Perspective

7.1. Introduction

Music has played an important role in the fictional novel for centuries. The sheer number of novels using music as a central feature is evident in a recent bibliography of musical crime fiction that lists more than 600 such novels (<http://www.lib.washington.edu/music/mystery.html>). Music has varying degrees of influence in the novel. It can be the centre of a novel, as is the case in Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, where Beethoven's violin sonata works "subliminally on Tolstoy's protagonist, its melody, amplitude, and rhythms unleash repressed instincts, opening the floodgates of the irrational sphere and leading him to the shadow world" (Knapp, 1988, p. 10). Music can also influence the structure of a novel. Specific examples of this include James Joyce's use of the musical fugue in the Sirens episode of *Ulysses* (Hiatt, 2001), and Toni Morrison's use of jazz in her novel of the same name, where "the words of the book are a compilation of sounds and the unnamed narrator acts as a soloist within the music of other voices" (Lesoinne, 1997, p. 151).

Music does not always have such an all-encompassing role in the novel. Music - particularly popular music - can play smaller, albeit important, roles. Music can comment on the mood of a period in time, as is the case with reference to popular music of the late 1950s in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, where the musical references suggest "that note of brash young consumerism of the late 1950s" (Bodmer, 1988, p. 113). Reference to a particular song, album or performer can also act as commentary on a character's emotional life, as is frequently the case in Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, where Rob, the protagonist, refers to popular music in order to mirror how he feels about various relationships he has had with women. A character's preference for a particular type of popular music may not only tell the reader something about a character's emotional life, but may also reflect the age or generation a character is from. For example, in David Lodge's *Nice Work*, "Vic's middle-age

vulnerability" is mirrored in his preference for middle-of-the-road ballads performed by female vocalists (Martin, 1998, p. 9).

The use of popular music in my novel *The Games* is similar to that in the novels by Updike, Hornby and Lodge. A phenomenological approach to examining the way I used popular music in the novel was used in this present study. Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9), in this case the lived experience of writing a novel that contained references to popular music. It aims for a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of experience (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9), in this case the experience of writing a novel, specifically the use of popular music references in the novel. The approach to this research consisted of keeping a journal as I re-read the novel, making reflective notes about how I used popular music. From this description the overall thematic quality of the description was extracted (Van Manen, 1990, p. 57). Phenomenologists do not use coding, but assume that through continued readings of the source material (in this case the novel and the reflective journal) the "essence" of an account will be revealed. This essence can be expressed in terms of broad themes.

The two themes that emerged were: 1) *References to popular music made specific contributions to the novel*, including situating the novel in a particular period of time, serving to comment on characters' moods and emotions, serving as a stimulus for characters to recall past events, and identifying the generation a character is from; and 2) *Referring to popular music in the medium of the novel posed a number of challenges*, specifically regarding the way contemporary popular music dates, the difficulty in determining how much popular music knowledge readers might have, and copyright problems in the quoting of song lyrics.

7.2. References to Popular Music Made Specific Contributions to the Novel

Whereas Updike referred to popular music to comment on the mood of the late 1950s, reference to popular music situates *The Games* in the year 2000. The novel is set throughout a two week period in Sydney when the Olympic Games were being held there. The Olympic Games, however, only serve as a backdrop to the lives of a number of desperate individuals whose futures will irrevocably be changed throughout these two weeks. Reference to popular music that was contemporary in 2000 occurs in two ways - music either heard on the radio or played on a stereo. Both music that was commercially successful that year (Madonna's "Music", The Red Hot Chilli Peppers' "Californication", Powderfinger's "My Happiness", Moby's album *Play*) and less commercially successfully, but critically acclaimed (Air's soundtrack to the movie *The Virgin Suicides*, Gomez's album *Liquid Skin*) is heard by various characters in the novel. However, the most explicit use of popular music to situate the novel in a

period of time occurs in the novel's prologue, set on New Year's Eve 1999. The protagonist of the novel, Richard, and his ex-girlfriend Jane, are listening to Prince's "1999." Although originally recorded and released in 1982, radio stations were playing the song on the eve of the new century. In *The Games*, the song is not only referred to, but discussed by Richard and Jane. They debate whether the song is about the end of the world or simply a song about partying, albeit decadently (pp. 13-14). In discussing the lyrics, greater focus is given to the song, thus it has a more dominant role than it would have had by only being mentioned in the text without discussion.

Reference to popular music in *The Games* also serves to comment on the emotional lives of its characters. In some cases music used to situate the novel in 2000 also serves to comment on the emotional life of a character. For example, Richard sings along to Powderfinger's "My Happiness" in the company of Helen as it plays on the car radio. At this point it could be Richard's own song, the lyrics expressing the singer's joy at being reunited with his love, just as Richard is overjoyed to be back with Helen after many years of separation. It is not only specific songs that reflect the mood of a character in *The Games*. Reference to a particular performer or group can reinforce a character's mood. For example, Richard listens to Stephen Cummings and Everything But the Girl when morose. Both have a back catalogue of moody, reflective songs.

Reference to a particular popular song is a device also used for a character to recall a past event. When the Hoodoo Gurus' "Death Defying" plays in a café it triggers memories of when Richard and Helen were first dating. Richard reminds Helen that she gave him the album *Mars Needs Guitars*, from which the song was taken, for his eighteenth birthday. They both agree that those were "good times." This recall of past happiness paves the way for a future between the couple.

Finally, a character's musical preferences are used to indicate what generation they are from. The majority of characters in the novel are in their twenties or early thirties and listen to contemporary popular music. However, two characters in their forties, Simon and David, prefer music from their youth - music from the 1970s. When together they listen and talk about hard rock of this era - Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, AC/DC. David also admits to recently modifying his musical preferences: "Loud music just doesn't do it for me any more." He now prefers the softer rock of The Carpenters, ELO, and ABBA (p. 100). Again, this is music from their youth, but as David says, "If I'd liked this stuff back when we were seventeen or eighteen we wouldn't have been friends" (p. 99). Back then they were very macho and related to the "maleness" of hard rock.

Reference to popular music thus makes specific contributions to the novel. However, music is never the driving force of the narrative. In fact, if the

reader came to the novel with no knowledge of the popular music references s/he would be at no great disadvantage in “understanding” the narrative and the characters inhabiting the novel. I could have given popular music a more substantial and important role. However, I made the decision not to, specifically because of a number of problems - or challenges - I faced when referring to popular music in the novel.

7.3. Referring to Popular Music in the Medium of the Novel Posed a Number of Challenges

I wrote *The Games* without a publishing contract. Being aware that first novels by unpublished writers would not even be read by major publishing houses, I knew that my chance of placing the manuscript with a publisher meant targeting a small, independent publishing house. As the novel was set in Sydney I decided on a relatively new publisher, Zaresky Press, who specialised in publishing fiction by new writers. Being a Sydney-based publisher, I thought the local content of the novel would be appealing. More importantly, Zaresky Press had a relatively quick turnaround between the time of accepting a manuscript and publishing it - between one and two years, whereas the wait with a number of publishing houses was much longer. This was important, as I realised the novel was liable to date quickly; it needed to be on bookshelves while people still had fresh memories of the Sydney Olympic Games, and while people still had recall of the popular music of that year. As Martin (1998) writes, “while referring to particular music, as in the mentioning of a title or the quoting of lyrics, can help the writer evoke a concrete historical and social setting, it entails the risk of sounding dated or obscure” (p. 21). This was my primary concern in using popular music references in the novel - particularly contemporary popular music, the majority of which was bound to be forgotten within years of its release.

In having targeted an Australian publisher, I also made the decision to refer to a number of Australian bands (Powderfinger, Hoodoo Gurus, The Whitlams for example), not only because the novel was set in Sydney, but because my intended audience would be Australian, and thus appreciate local musical references as well as more global references. Here I was taking the reader’s perspective, something I attempted to do throughout the writing of the novel. I made assumptions about what my intended readership would bring to the novel, such as a basic knowledge of the Olympic Games, and with regards to music, a basic knowledge of popular music, both past and present. I made the latter assumption because of my own knowledge of popular music, and because contemporary Australian authors of my age (Andrew McGahan, Venero Armano, Nick Earls) made similar assumptions. That is, popular music is referred to with little explanation. There is an assumption that the reader will know, or at least know about, music that is named, or a band that is named. In *The Games*, for

example, Dylan, a street kid, walks into a convenience store with a stolen credit card. "The kid at the register barely looked at the card. He was too busy humming along to the radio - The Red Hot Chilli Peppers' "Californication"" (p. 150). Here, as in many cases in the novel, the song title and performer is named, but there is no additional information. There was no need for further elaboration, as the song mentioned was simply a popular one that received frequent airplay during the Olympic period on Australian commercial radio. However, There are other examples where the reader needs to have more knowledge about popular music to appreciate a reference. For example, Richard writes songs, which are described as "a cross between Bacharach and Leonard Cohen and Tom Waits and Nick Cave" (p. 124). If the songwriting of these artists is unknown to the reader, the impact of the reference is lost. These songwriters are established songwriters in the popular music idiom. As Martin (1998) suggests, their work has a more permanent status than the work of newer contemporary popular musicians and songwriters. I assumed that these established artists would be more widely known, as their back catalogue is part of what is often termed as "classic" rock. Thus there was no need for further explanation about their work, as was also the case with reference to Pink Floyd's "classic" album, *Dark Side of the Moon*, Michael's favourite album - "this one album was perfect and close to his heart" (p. 72). There was an assumption that the reader would know something about the album's dark lyrical content, which mirrored Michael's dark and troubled soul.

Was I making too many assumptions about the popular music literacy of my audience? This was a constant concern, and one that led me to experiment with the use of popular music references, notably the inclusion of song lyrics. There were times when I wanted to quote song lyrics, thus making the link between song lyrics and a character's predicament more transparent. For example, Michael hums The Whitlams' "Love this City" as he spies on his step-brother and step-sister, who are having an incestuous affair. Michael is in love with his step-sister, but knows he can never have her and will always be alone. The lyrics of the song reflect his predicament - the unemployed singer wanders the streets of Sydney alone, melancholic because "his girlfriend had a boyfriend." He "walks along the foreshore, he's got a bottle and he's breathing with his city", when "it dawns on him - the horror - we got the Olympic Games." Despite the significance of the lyrics, I did not quote them - or the lyrics of any other songs - because of copyright problems. Permission to reprint lyrics quoted in the novel, and I knew that permission often would probably not be granted.

In the first draft of the novel I decided to overcome this problem by summarising the lyrics for the reader. However, the results were very contrived. As a result I decided to eliminate all lyric summaries and simply refer to the song, thus making the reader work to see the link between song and character. Of course the reader would have to not only recall the song, but

specifically the lyrics, to see these links. But did it really matter if the reader did not? The narrative did not rely solely on reference to song lyrics. In all cases the song lyrics reinforced information already available in the text of the novel. Thus popular music reference in the novel was akin to the icing on a cake; that is, a tasty treat for the reader "in the know." And it is fun to be "in the know" and "get" the popular music references that are not explained. As a reader I have always enjoyed interpreting such references, never more so than in Nick Earls's *Bachelor Kisses* (1998). The protagonist of the novel listens to the Go-Betweens' song "Bachelor Kisses" a number of times throughout the novel, yet Earls never quotes the lyrics or describes the lyrical content in any detail. Rather, it takes an informed reader - that is one who knows the song, as I did when I came to read the book - to realise that the protagonist's romantic predicaments mirror the song's lyrics. If you came to the book without knowing the song it would not matter - you would still read the text and learn of what happens to the protagonist. However, in knowing the song and making the connection, it is akin to having a special relationship with the author, one where you are "in the know", one where you and the author share that particular knowledge of popular music.

Reference to popular music is thus not pivotal, but it can be fun - for the reader and the author. I enjoyed reading about the music I referred to in *The Games*. Much of this music - particularly the contemporary music - was what I was listening to at the time of writing the novel. Thus in documenting this music in the context of the novel I was, in a way, constructing a compilation tape of music for my readers. Perhaps if they did not know a song or album referred to it might get them to seek it out and listen to it. Certainly this goes beyond the impact popular music has in the novel, but it is an enjoyable possible by-product of the popular music references, at least from this author's perspective.

7.4. Conclusions

In conclusion, popular music references in *The Games* serve specific purposes. However, these references do not solely carry the narrative or characterisation, as they might have done. This was a decision made by me as a writer because of the problematic nature of referring to popular *music* in the novel, a *written* text. However, despite its problematic nature, popular music has established what Martin (1998) describes as "points of personal reference and self-definition" (p. 21), not only for the characters in *The Games*, but for me as author of the novel.

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Author's Perspective Task Cards Author's Perspective is the feelings or opinions an author has about a topic. you get: 12 task cards with story 6 bonus cards author's perspective poster student answer sheet answer key with sample answers **Updated Nov 2014- font changes for clarity :) * Authors Point Of View Informational Text Common Core Reading Authors Viewpoint Point Of View Authors Purpose Writing Sight Words Perspective Lessons Elementary Ela.Â 6 worksheets that focus on analyzing the author's perspective when reading. 100 Black novelists and fiction writers you should read, from Abi DarÃ© to Zora Neale Hurston. Fiction humanizes the Black experience and enlightens readers by helping them see the world through a Black author's perspective. Second, popular music increasingly serves as a focal point in general debates about art and aesthetic value. A growing number of philosophers regard popular music as a vital and aesthetically rich field that has been marginalized by traditional aesthetics.Â As a result, popular music competes with and replaces local and regional folk traditions (In the wake of the industrial revolution, genuine folk art is no longer possible.). In a commercial world where one popular song sounds much like any other, popular music cannot function as a medium of genuine communication.Â Bringing a more balanced perspective to the philosophical debate, these essays demonstrate that popular music is philosophically more interesting than modernism suggests. Music. Halfway through the novel the reader of. RayHmp. witnesses a sudden and considÂ erable shift In emphasis as a new character appears, allowing the author to exÂ plore some further Important Issues: the question of race and the importance of popular culture in the formation of the modern U.S. society.Â What appears, from today's perspective, as the dominant sound of the era, was Initially restricted to the urÂ ban cultural centers and its racially-mixed audience formed a minority among the consumers of popular music, just like Younger Brother (a white man!) was the only one in the family who had heard the musical style before.Â Generally the theoreticians looked for ragtime's roots In the rural area and its music - the plantation