The significance of American popular culture in *The Cowboy Dog*.

In the novel *The Cowboy Dog*, Nigel Cox uses a rich layering of language, imagery and music to bring to life the classic elements of a Western dropped right into the heart of New Zealand. A striking juxtaposition is created between the city and the lands, highlighting the continuing colonisation of New Zealand by American popular culture, and underlining the mistaken belief that New Zealand culture is as yet relatively untouched. Cox employs metaphor and potent imagery to convey the point that this colonisation via American popular culture is insidious, unstoppable and has already passed the point of no return.

The novel contains several examples of American popular culture, but the most obvious are its classic Western theme and setting. The epigraph introduces a place '[w]here the tumbleweeds roll / Beneath the sign of the cactus / And the stars shine down / On the desert road'. The story revolves around a boy, Chester Farlowe, who was brought up on the range, herding cattle with his cowboy Daddy, hunting game, and riding horses. When his Daddy is killed by 'the coward Stronson' (41), the orphaned Chester takes refuge in the city - Auckland - until he is grown up enough to take revenge by killing his father's murderer. The characters in 'the lands' (14) wear 'boots', 'chaps' and 'sharp spurs' (12), and their language is full of cowboy colloquialisms. Chester's 'Mama' is 'wondrously purty' (47) and on the subject of girls, his Daddy tells him that 'there's one there somewheres for evry boy' (58). The landscape is peopled by cacti and tumbleweeds, coyotes and turkeys, turtles and snakes. In short, the novel contains what Jane Tompkins refers to as all
'[t]he arch images of the [Western] genre'. In contrast to this, in the second setting of the novel, Cox exploits the fact that Chester has never seen anything resembling a city before. This is used as a tool to completely defamiliarise Auckland and leave the reader with the sense of only a very generic urban environment. This together with the vivid Western plot-line and imagery of the first setting combine to form the impression that if it were not for the occasional references to New Zealand place-names and Mr Stroud's use of the Maori word 'mimi' (23), it would be impossible to gather that the novel is set anywhere other than in America.

The Western elements of the novel serve not only as post-modernistic pastiche but also as a way of conveying a commentary on the role of American popular culture in New Zealand culture and identity. The fact that the protagonist is a cowboy and comes from a cowboy culture reflects the extent to which American culture has become entrenched in that of New Zealand. Chester constantly refers to the contrast between city life and that in the lands, emphasising the purity and freedom of the latter. In the city he wonders 'why the vehicles would not come after [him]' and concludes that as opposed to on 'the mountain, where everything went wherever it chose', in the city 'some vast arrangement was at work' (59). There, '[e]verywhere [Chester's] eye went there was something that arose in front of it' and he is oppressed by 'the knowledge that behind everything you [can] see there [is] more, and more, always going on' (59), whereas in the lands there are wide open spaces and 'the crying of high birds'. In the lands, 'you sweep up a handful of red dirt and let it trickle, your thoughts are filled with the passing of days, each one a speck' and these thoughts are 'comforting and easy to live with' (61). On the surface, it seems that the contrast between life in the lands and in the city is a metaphor for New Zealand culture, its purity of identity untouched due to isolation from the outside world; and American culture, represented by the sprawling, impersonal urban landscape where the populace seems engaged in the pursuit of driving cars, eating cheeseburgers and little else. However, the very fact that this so-called pure country living is

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embodied by perhaps the most iconic of American genres belies this assumption. This narrative strategy points to the idea that American culture has become so much an integral part of New Zealand culture that no one is even aware of it any more. What could be taken to be a relatively undiluted national identity under threat of colonisation through the media is in reality an identity which has already been successfully hybridised.

Cox employs further metaphors to underline how inexorable and insidious the effect of American popular culture is, and to show that New Zealand is a willing participant in its own colonisation, and foremost amongst these is the motif of the pylons and their connection to the city. Throughout the novel, Chester ponders the ominous significance of the pylons. On his repeated visits to them he feels that they are 'heavy with messages' (69) and that they cause his head to 'be filled with every speck of dust and every gust of wind that has ever been blown' (137). He knows that the pylons connect the city to the lands and comes to the conclusion that they are 'drinking from them' (137) and trying to 'take all that is [in the lands] … to wire it to the city' (203). The pylons give the impression of being not only 'huge ... mindless creatures on some kind of mission, marching, marching, and frying the brains of all who venture near' but also of a vampiric, almost cannibalistic creature feeding on the energy of the lands in order to grow fatter and fatter and eventually 'cover everything' (127). This is a particularly apt representation of American popular culture, which could easily be viewed as a mindless creature, marching across the landscape, consuming everything it encounters, and replicating itself as it goes along.

At the same time, the pylons exercise a type of seduction on those who come near them. On his first visit to the pylons as a young boy, Chester '[feels] all the flesh of [him] begin to tingle as though some promising feather was being drawn near [his] skin' (69). On his next visit as a young man, he is seduced by the electricity into drawing his father's guns and impotently '[loosing] bullets about into the air until the chambers all were empty' (141) and finally '[flings] them from [him]'  

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The point being made is that American popular culture is so irresistibly accessible and at the same time so beguiling in its associations of glamour that it seduces other cultures into disarming themselves and succumbing to its siren song. It is also so inoffensively mainstream and apparently harmless that the 'crude system' (204) is viewed with a complacency that inevitably leads to a culture's subsumation. Chester himself sums this up quite succinctly when he remarks that '[his] holsters hung empty by [his] sides and though [he] knew there was something wrong with this [he] could not have told you what it was' (157).

One of the most subtle devices employed in the novel is that of the music, which serves not only as padding to the cowboy theme but also ties together all the elements of the commentary concerning American pop culture in New Zealand. Cox makes reference to a variety of artists in the book but comes back again and again to Roy Orbison and Johnny Cash, two of the most iconic examples of American pop music. He does this not only overtly by including titles and lyrics, but also incorporates and paraphrases lyrics into Chester's narrations and thoughts. While it could be perceived that the music is only there to provide an added touch of ambience to the existing Western plot and imagery, upon closer inspection it is clear that there is a recurring theme to the songs Cox returns to, in particular 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' (34,65), 'Ring of Fire' (79,120,125) and 'Leah' (48,140-142). 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' tells the story of a cowboy who dreams that he will be doomed to join a pack of damned cowboys if he doesn't change his ways. 'Ring of Fire' tells of being seduced into a bottomless fiery pit, from which there is no escape, and 'Leah' is the story of a man who dives under the sea in search of a pearl and gains it only to find that he is trapped and will drown there with the shiny bauble in his hand. Although 'Ghost Riders in the Sky' suggests that there is still time to change the course of events, the majority of the songs in the novel adhere to the idea that it is too late and share the theme of fire, destruction and ominous warnings that the end is nigh. While this shouldn't be taken as an indication that New Zealand culture will be completely obliterated by that of America, it does seem to be a quiet comment that it is too late to stem the tide.
The final metaphor, and the one I find most evocative, is the twist at the novel's conclusion, in which Chester kills Stronson only for it to transpire that Stronson is his father. The question that plagues him now is 'if Stronson was [his] father, who was [his ] Daddy' (195)? Mr Stroud tells him that 'that knowledge has sunk into the dirt of [the lands] and can never be dug up' (200). It could be argued that Chester's Daddy and Stronson are in fact figuratively speaking one and the same: the former representing what is commonly believed to be true New Zealand identity, and the latter, the new incarnation that has arisen through New Zealand's willing self-immersion – or drowning, if you will – in American culture. Alternatively, it could suggest that heritage has been erased and history has been re-written. Perhaps we are to understand that the colonisation process is so far gone that even if New Zealand were to search for a return to its cultural roots, those roots are now so deeply buried that there is no recovering them and that New Zealand is now a bastard child of American popular culture.

Cox himself wrote that '[w]hen fiction goes inside the play of the world, then we turn to the embodiment of ideas in images'. The Cowboy Dog is a potent example of using imagery in fiction both for aesthetic reasons and as a vehicle to convey a keen social commentary together with food for thought. Which leaves us with the question, does New Zealand still have time and, rather importantly, the inclination to halt or reverse its colonisation by American popular culture? Or, as The Cowboy Dog suggests, is resistance futile?

Works cited:


