

Popcultured: Thinking Christianly About Style, Media and Entertainment

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Engineering Thrills in Culture Today

Although there have always been forms of popular culture, diversions and amusements for the masses, the technological developments that have taken place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have meant an increased capability for maximizing sensation. In just over one hundred years we have gone from saucy Mutascope machines to hardcore online pornography in HD, from silent black-and-white films to 3D color movies and computer-generated imagery, from kaleidoscopes to video games. The roller coaster, carousel and Ferris wheel have given way to amusement park rides that push human fear to an extreme. Brendan Walker, the world's first "thrill engineer," believes that the future of these rides exists in psychological stimulation: "The human body is a limiting factor," he admits. "There are only so many Gs it can take before it blacks out. So, to make rides scarier, we're having to move towards mental stimulation, playing on real human fears."

When I first saw a rock band, the musicians had two small speakers and no stage lighting. One of the last times I saw a band play, the stage set was 167 foot tall, contained 200 tons of equipment, including a cylindrical video screen of 411,000 pixels onto which film of the band was projected. The show was streamed live on YouTube. Sound levels at rock concerts regularly peak at around 115 decibels, higher than the recommended level to avoid hearing loss and only ten decibels below the pain threshold. When The Who recorded their album *Quadrophenia* the playback sound went up to 160 decibels, the equivalent of the noise made by Concorde on takeoff. Guitarist Pete Townshend subsequently suffered hearing loss and now has to wear aids in both ears.

Rather than a straightforward listening and viewing experience, rock concerts have become sensory assaults where you are dazzled visually, aurally and physically. You can often feel your body vibrate with the impact of the bass guitar, and the volume can leave your ears ringing for days after. It's difficult to see how much more could be loaded on the senses of a concert audience.

In every area of popular culture the search is on to outdo whatever it was that came immediately before. Audiences become satiated with familiar forms, and when that happens the experience that once alleviated boredom itself becomes boring. Producers are then forced to find things that are louder, longer, faster, higher and, always, more sensational. The mantra of the true adrenaline junkie is "Too much is not enough."

When reality TV ceased to entertain just through the novelty of unscripted drama, participants had to be manipulated into extreme behavior through injecting stress factors designed by people with psychological training. TV shows such as *Jackass*, *Dirty Sanchez*, *Toyko Shock Boys* and Brazil's *N. O. I. A.*, which featured people performing dangerous,

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BOOK EXCERPT

crude, ridiculous and self-injuring stunts, had to constantly push the boundaries not only of human endurance but also of public taste to maintain their “edgy” reputations. It underlines the truth that the writer of Ecclesiastes learned: “The eye never has enough of seeing, / nor the ear its fill of hearing” (Ecclesiastes 1:8).

There are still movies that gently stir the deepest emotions and songs that encourage reflection, but there is a constant temptation to stir up the most readily accessible feelings and to do it within as short a time as possible. When we use phrases like *knocked out*, *pumped up*, *doubled up*, *nail biter* or *white knuckle*, we’re describing an immediate physical response to a concert, a movie or a comedy show. When *Travel and Leisure* magazine reviewed new theme park rides in 2008, they recommended, “The kind with G forces that will knock you silly and massive free-fall drops that will have you involuntarily laughing and praying for your life.”

– From Chapter 8, “Ever-Greater Thrills”



Steve Turner is a writer and poet living in London, England, where he regularly contributes to newspapers such as *The Mail on Sunday* and *The Times*. His many books include *Conversations with Eric Clapton*, *U2: Rattle and Hum*, *Van Morrison: Too Late to Stop Now* and *A Hard Day's Write: The Stories Behind Every Beatles Song*.

A Journey to *Popcultured*: Steve Turner answers questions about his latest book

What initially made you interested in the study between religion and culture?

It's the story of my life. My parents, who were both from nonreligious families, became Christians around the time I was born, so I grew up in a strong and enthusiastic Christian home. At the same time I was hearing these other voices coming from pop culture, especially in my teenage years, and it became important for me to understand each source of information in the light of the other. I needed to know how the values and views found in pop culture could be tested against the Bible and Christian theology and how ideas from the Bible and Christian theology could stick up for themselves in popular culture. I'm still doing this!

How has your career as a journalist shaped the way you view arts and culture?

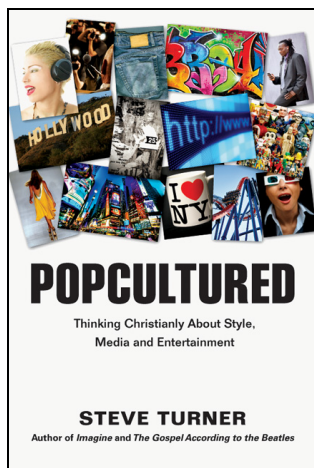
All my writing – as a journalist, author and poet – has helped me understand the creative process. It has helped me identify with creative people. At the same time it has enabled me to have a front row seat at many important cultural events and given me access to the people who make the culture. I count it as a great privilege to have been able to sit down with many culture makers and ask them how and why they do what they do. This has not only taught me a lot about the creative process as people have explained to me where they get their ideas but it has also allowed me to hold people to account for the views embodied in their work.

How has working with cultural celebrities changed the way you, as a Christian, view the arts?

I don't think it has changed my views as much as it has deepened them. It has meant that I've been able to see films being made, albums being recorded, songs being written, publicity campaigns being planned, etc., and so I have greater knowledge of and appreciation for the process.

How has your experience as a critic and creator of culture impacted the writing of *Popcultured* and other books?

I've been able to write books that have enabled me to dig deeper into aspects of culture that have intrigued me. I've written biographies of people who ask the big questions – people like Van Morrison, Jack Kerouac, Johnny Cash, Marvin Gaye – and those are the sort of people who interest me. I feel I should encourage that sort of questioning. I've also been able to explore the relationship between religion and music in *Hungry For Heaven* and faith and art in *Imagine*. Besides supplying information for readers, these books have allowed me to



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sort my own thinking out.

Why did you want to write the book *Popcultured*?

The reason for writing *Imagine* was because I was having so many conversations with Christians who were unsure how to reconcile their faith with their art. Was art something inferior that was best left behind, was it something that should be used as an “evangelistic tool” or was there a way of integrating faith with art that expressed the total person rather than only one aspect? *Popcultured* goes beyond the arts to examine the wider world of pop culture. As I have said, books are not only a way of sharing information but are also a way of finding out things I don’t already know. I’d often found myself speaking about pop culture but had never examined the history and theory of it. This book gave me a great opportunity to learn new things and to try to pull together all the various thoughts I’ve had over the years. I enjoy being a commentator, but I think I’m most effective if I concentrate on the area of the world that I know best. Of course, as soon as you talk about culture you’re talking about humans and the way they organize their lives, and that means you’re commentating on life in general.

You write that the word *culture* means to play a part in “cultivating” people. How do you hope *Popcultured* will cultivate people?

I hope that *Popcultured* will add to the discussion going on amongst Christians about how we should understand, enjoy and contribute to our cultures. The situation today is far better than it was when I was young in that universities, colleges and schools with a Christian foundation now gladly run courses on popular culture. I’ve met many of the people who have designed these courses and have benefited from conversations with them. My book is not an academic book. It’s a practicing writer’s view. I don’t get bogged down in theories. I hope that it will be helpful for those who consume culture (all of us), those who teach or review it, and those who make it. Above all, I hope it will help people achieve integrated lives in which they don’t feel the need to switch off the pop-cultural side of themselves when they’re in church or switch off the church side of themselves when they’re in the cinema, club or concert hall.

You write that “popular culture constantly veers between authentic personal expression and commercial exploitation.” How do you find the balance? And what combination of those two makes popular culture meaningful?

I don’t think it’s a case of finding a balance. There’s nothing wrong with a toe-tapping tune and there’s nothing wrong with a deeply confessional poem. Each has its place. Ecclesiastes 3:4 says that there’s a time to dance, and a time to mourn. If someone is exclusively in to one or the other you might suggest that they try something new, but generally it’s good to find pop culture that helps us relax and good to find pop culture that helps us think. I think it’s a





great achievement when pop culture manages to be both greatly entertaining and profoundly thoughtful at the same time. This happens with some of George Carlin's comedy, a musical like *Les Miserables*, a film like *Amadeus* and the songs of the Beatles.

What is your favorite cultural medium? Why?

As a creator I've spent time writing poetry, biographies and journalism. I also love photography and now supply images for all the travel stories I write. I've just returned from India where I took 2,500 pictures. Performing my poetry gave me a great empathy for actors, dramatists and stand-up comics. I've always loved contemporary dance and find it quite inspirational. The subject of a lot of my writing has been music, and that's certainly the art form I'm most associated with. But fashion, performance, spectacle, lighting and graphics all play a part in music, so I've come to appreciate all of these. I couldn't possibly tell you my favorite!

Who has been your favorite creator of popular culture that you've worked with personally? Why?

I suppose John Lennon and Paul McCartney. I interviewed John when I was quite young, and it was a significant because he had loomed so large in my teenage imagination. I liked his way with words, the risks he took with his work and the fact that he constantly challenged received opinion. I've also interviewed Paul, but because I was the ghostwriter on Linda McCartney's book of sixties photos I got to know him much better. I had breakfast with him at his home in Sussex and he would sometimes sit in on my interviews with Linda and throw in some of his own memories. When I was about nineteen I wrote out Psalm 37:4 (in the version I had it read, "Delight thyself also in the Lord and he shall give thee the desires of thy heart") and beneath the verse I listed my desires. One of them was "meet the Beatles." The best thing about it is not meeting people who are famous but meeting people who've created such memorable work. I've written two books about the Beatles — one about their songs (*A Hard Day's Write*) and one about their beliefs (*The Gospel According to the Beatles*).

What is the number-one idea you want readers to take away from *Popcultured*?

That it's possible to understand pop culture using a biblically informed mind and that this doesn't lessen the appreciation but increases it. I used to think that if you started to think about culture Christianly it would either adversely affect your faith or adversely affect your enjoyment of culture. Now I see that it can make your faith more robust and useful and can also deepen your love of culture. We make culture because we are made by God, and however defiant and atheistic people are they cannot shake off the divine image. I would like the book to lead Christians in confidently contributing to the ongoing discussions about culture and within culture.

"Steve Turner has proved himself one of the most accessible writers on the interaction of faith and culture. *Popcultured* is a welcome and lively exploration of what is fast becoming a crucial field."

—Jeremy Begbie, Duke University, author of *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music*