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Literary Interpretations Seminar

**Mark Leyner**  
**Tooth Imprints on a Corndog**

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Ljubljana, May 2004

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## Introduction

In this seminar paper, I shall present a literary movement called Avant-Pop and Mark Leyner's *Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog*. The Avant-Pop generation is the generation of people, who were growing up in the seventies or early eighties and who were raised by the television. Their world is today's world dominated by the media, of (largely meaningless) information and consumerism for the sake of consumerism. Through writing, they are trying to resist the passive accumulation of information and help people fight off the mind control that the media is trying to enforce.

First, I shall briefly present Baudrillard's view of the contemporary society, which will be used as a basis to understand the Avant-Pop movement and its literature. The description of the movement is broken into two parts: the first one describes the origin of the word (the avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Pop-Art movement), while the second part describes the Avant-Pop manifesto. I shall then describe the preferred narrative technique of the Avant-Pop movement, hypertext. In the last part of the presentation, I shall present Mark Leyner's *Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog*.

## Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum and simulation

To be able to understand most of the Avant-Pop literature, it is necessary to be familiar with Baudrillard's views on our society. Hence, I shall briefly sketch out its main points and provide a few examples.

According to Baudrillard, our society is the society of signs and images he calls simulacra and simulations respectively. These signs have lost their real referent by ways of plethora of factors (the media and mass consumerism being the main two). Television and other media are constantly bombarding us with familiar images and symbols that are thought to carry meaning, but completely fail at their task, because they are being recontextualized at such a great speed that one is unable to make sense of them. Quite the opposite, as Baudrillard puts it "Information devours its own content."<sup>1</sup> However, loss of the referent and the meaning is gradual. Accordingly, Baudrillard devises three orders of simulacra: the first order of simulacra is comprised of signs that are an obvious replica of reality, with the second order the distinction between the real and the simulated is blurred, so that one cannot differ the two easily and the third order involves simulacra, which have completely superseded the reality - or rather, one of the possible versions of reality. Today's world is the world of third order simulacra or the world of hyperreality.

The hyperreal is present in almost all areas of our society, however, media is the best example. The MTV channel is a mass producer of stars. It presents them out of their historical context. Merely images on the screen, their looks and views are constantly changing and contradict each other. When rappers, such as Eminem talk about ghetto life on MTV, few viewers are aware of the context in which he tries to put himself (resistance against such a life). Thus his music essentially loses all meaning, yet teenagers still adore him, in spite of not having a clue what statement (if any) he is trying to make. He is just one in the endless string of artists on MTV, a meaningless entertainer. The same goes for Burroughs in a Nike ad (he has stooped down from the author of *Naked Lunch* to the man who wears Nike). These signs - (Burroughs's literature and a Nike ad etc.) may be incompatible with each other, yet they refer to the same person. Hence one of the signs has to be forgotten (replaced with the other one) so that the system of signs can remain stable. However, Burroughs in the Nike ad is no more real than Burroughs - the writer.

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<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. 1981. Trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Baudrillard's controversial views on our society being a simulation are closely related to the Avant-Pop movement. After all, both of them are products of the same (Pop) culture. The former is trying to understand it and explain it, while the latter is doing its best to save it from itself.

## Origins of the word Avant-pop

The compound Avant-pop was invented by a musician Lester Bowie, who used it as a title of his record<sup>2</sup>. He took some of the well-known pieces (for example Fats Domino's "Blueberry Hill"), played with them, and changed them into something much more experimental. His versions of the songs vary in rhythm and explore various techniques in order to reinvent the already experienced in a fresh and original way.

### Avant-garde

The first part of the compound, Avant, stands for Avant-garde (French word for fore guard or van guard), a movement, which started soon after World War I, as a counter-movement against the dominant trends of modernism and its notion of being a "high-art" and as a response to the tension that followed the war. The avant-gardists wanted to break away from everything that was considered art at the time, for the sake of social progress. They set out to destroy the existing modernist art, by way of non-conformism, courageous precursory exploration and belief that time will ultimately defeat traditionalist dogmas<sup>3</sup>. The intention of the Avant-garde artists is to shock, cause discomfort and to show to the spectator that a certain change in the way we think and act is required.

The avant-garde of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not one, but a set of movements, i.e. dadaism, futurism, cubism, lettrism and many others. Each of the movements tried to change the society and art in its own way: dadaism by taking away its meaning and usefulness, futurism by promoting technical advancement and war, cubism by breaking subjects into "a multiplicity of facets, so that several different aspects/faces of the subject can be seen simultaneously"<sup>4</sup>, and lettrism by replacing letters with sounds and images.

However, as much as avant-garde is destructive, it is primarily self-destructive. Eventually it is sucked into the mainstream and that is the beginning of its end. Although Barthes acknowledged the death of the avant-garde already in the second half of the fifties, it took more than ten more years for it to be officially buried. As Leslie Fiedler puts it in his 1964 essay *Death of the Avant-Garde Literature*, "the avant-garde had gone from a shocking

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<sup>2</sup> Laurence, Alexander et al. Interview with Larry McCaffery. 1994 [Web Page] 11 April 2004  
<http://www.altx.com/int2/larry.mccaffery.html>

<sup>3</sup> Calinescu Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity*. 1987. Duke University Press p. 95

<sup>4</sup> Cubism, Wikipedia. [Web page] 2nd april 2004  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cubism>

anti-fashion to become – with the help of the mass-media – a wide-spread fashion"<sup>5</sup> In other words, the avant-garde had become subverted by the mob it had tried to stay away from. By becoming mainstream, there was no society left to change, because by changing society, the movement would be changing itself.

Avant-Pop is different from the standard avant-garde in the sense that it uses methods and techniques intended to shock the reader, but in parallel also develops new methods intended to appeal to him or her<sup>6</sup>. This is probably also the reason of Avant-Pop's survival in the mainstream.

## **Pop art**

The second part of the compound stands for pop art. Post World War II era saw the rise of mass-production and mass-consumerism. Consequently, the younger generation could no longer find itself in the outmoded abstract expressionism, a movement that tried to merge "the emotional intensity and self-expression of the German Expressionists with the anti-figurative aesthetic of the European abstract schools such as Futurism, the Bauhaus and Synthetic Cubism"<sup>7</sup>.

Rather than the past, the pop-artists concentrated on the present and on what they could see with their own eyes. In other words, they dealt with such trivialities as articles of mass consumption, schematic comic strips and with the stereotype idols of the film and music<sup>8</sup>. In face of mass-production, originality had begun to lose its meaning; in fact, it began to disappear. Andy Warhol, the icon of the movement, for example produced a series of paintings portraying Campbell's Soup tins, celebrities, such as Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Mao Tse Tung and even newspaper articles. He was not interested in producing beauty, but rather in pleasing the masses (his studio, which he called the Factory, produced tens of pictures a day). His quote "...but making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art"<sup>9</sup> summarizes the core of the pop-art ideology.

However, unlike the pop-artists, avant-popsters do not copy images of their everyday verbatim. They remake them into a version that "could-be", and make it believable by fusing

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<sup>5</sup> Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity*. 1987. Duke University Press p. 121

<sup>6</sup> Krevel, Mojca. *Ameriško literarno gibanje Avant-Pop: Avantgarda in postmoderna*, doktorska disertacija. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta. 2002. (155)

<sup>7</sup> Abstract Expressionism. Wikipedia. [Web page] 2nd april 2004  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract\\_expressionism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract_expressionism)

<sup>8</sup> Klaus Honneff. *Warhol*. Benedikt Taschen Verlag GmbH. 2000 (30)

<sup>9</sup> The same

everyday objects and subjects (products, celebrities) so that the reader perceives them as a mix of fiction and reality.

## **Formation of the movement and its manifesto**

The prologue to the Avant-pop movement took place in 1973, when several writers (Ronald Suckenic, Steve Katz and a few others), who were dissatisfied with the commercial presses and their notion of putting profit before quality, decided to found an author-run, non-for-profit publishing house called Fiction Collective. Although criticized by the mainstream and other publishing houses, it also received praise from many readers of the alternative fiction. In mid eighties (by that time Mark Leyner was a board member), the Collective's finances were substantially reduced by the government. For this reason and bad marketing, the publisher went bankrupt. After reorganization and putting together a better marketing strategy, a new publishing house was founded called Fiction Collective 2, which is still alive and well today. Among the authors published by FC2 is also Mark Amerika. In 1993 he started Alt-X online network and wrote a manifesto of the Avant-Pop movement subtitled *Thread Baring itself in ten quick posts* with which he draws an analogy to e-mail (as we shall see, Avant-Pop is at least partially dependent on new-age media, such as World Wide Web).

### **The Manifesto**

In his manifesto, Amerika asserts that postmodernism is dead and that it is being replaced by Avant-Pop. Although he does acknowledge that some properties of the avant-garde, Modernism and Postmodernism are still present, he maintains that the main difference between the past and the present-day generation is that the latter are “the Children of Mass Media”<sup>10</sup>. In his opinion this gap between the past and the present generation is also what killed Postmodernism. While the postmodernists took great pains to avoid the reality defined by media, the avant-popsters embrace it, as this is the only reality they are familiar with. On the other hand, the “mediagrene reality” of falseness and artificiality is just as dangerous to them as it was to their predecessors. Accordingly, they must cautiously “suck the bad blood between the mainstream and the margin” and by doing so, infiltrate into the mainstream and cure the Pop culture from "the information disease", a disease of swallowing any kind of information, no matter its content and quality. However, in order to draw the necessary attention and tear the readers of the Pop culture away from the TV and other media of passive

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<sup>10</sup> Amerika, Mark, Avant Pop Manifesto

information accumulation, new strategies need to be devised. Amerika proposes drawing from Avant-Pop predecessors, like Duchamp, Kathy, Acker, Ronald Suckenic, William Burroughs, William Gibson and others and movements like Lettrism, Situationism, Neo-hoodooism and Fluxus and remoulding their legacy "by adding dark, sexy, surreal, and subtly ironic" aspects to it and thus producing material that the Popular Culture should find pleasing. The movement goes even further, according to Amerika, they shall take anything from those individuals and movements they can find any use in, and proclaim it for its own.

Amerika, as Baudrillard, is aware of the fact that the Pop culture is constantly changing and is producing bits of (anti-)data at an incredibly high rate. If Avant-Pop is to win, it has find faster channels through which its artists would publish their work and thus outpace the Popular culture. Amerika mentions the existing zine scene and other communities, which will, after they are consolidated with the Internet, be able to exchange their work faster (by means of online readings, multimedia hypertext etc.), which will eventually abolish the old concept of a single, elitist writer sitting at his keyboard. Consequently the old formula of distribution "(Author - Agent - Publisher - Printer - Distributor - Retailer – Consumer) is reduced and simplified to Author (Sender) - Interactive Participant (Receiver)"<sup>11</sup>. In other words, literature is supposedly being transferred from books to the Internet. On the other hand, almost all famous members of the Avant-Pop movement (Leyner, Sukenick and even Amerika himself) are still publishing their work through the old, "outmoded" channels, however, hyper textual literature (which he has in mind when he mentions "non-linear narrative surfing"<sup>12</sup>) is definitely gaining on recognition. With the new media, new possibilities of producing literature are arising. While literature of the past was usually a result of work of a single author, the literature of the future is going to be a product of a collective mind, thousands of participants are going to be simultaneously writing and reading literature – as pointed out by Kregel the roles of the author and the reader are in constant flux<sup>13</sup>. Consequently, our way of reading literature is bound to change as well. As Amerika puts it, the Postmodernist principle " I, whoever that is, will put together these bits of data and form a Text while you, whoever that is, will produce your own meaning based off what you bring to the Text." is gradually being replaced by the Avant-Pop version "I, whoever that is, am always interacting with data created by the Collective You, whoever that is, and by interacting

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<sup>11</sup> The same

<sup>12</sup> The same

<sup>13</sup> Kregel, Mojca. Ameriško literarno gibanje Avant-Pop: Avantgarda in postmoderna, doktorska disertacija.

with and supplementing the Collective You, will find meaning"<sup>14</sup>. Although the two might seem identical, Krevel establishes that the relationship between the postmodernist author and his or her reader are linear and static (i.e. the text has a finite number of meanings and interpretations). On the other hand, the relationship between the avant-pop author and his or her reader is much more dynamic and is being restructured by the mere act of communication, with little relevance as to what meaning do the bits of information convey. Amerika's stating that in our time of Information Age originality is dead and that organizing raw bits of data is getting more important than the storyline itself, corroborate with her findings. Amerika finishes by listing a few of the most visible writers that in his believe represent the Avant-Pop movement. Some of them are pure avant-posters (such as Leyner, McCaffery and Olsen), while others are pure cyberpunks (William Gibson and Bruce Sterling). Such inconsistencies are hard to overlook, but might be explained with the already mentioned sixth paragraph of the manifesto, which says that Avant-Pop shall assimilate every quality of its predecessor movements that it finds useful. According to this statement, every feature of the past, present and future movement that is suitable to Avant-Pop, automatically becomes part of it. Amerika also neglects to mention some of the writers that he himself deemed Avant-Popsters in various other articles published by the Alt-X online network (the first hypertextual novelist Michael Joyce, Kathy Acker, Don DeLillo, Steve Katz and others).

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<sup>14</sup> Amerika, Mark, Avant Pop Manifesto

## Hypertext

As already mentioned, hypertext plays a key role in the Avant-Pop literature. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines hypertext as "text stored in a computer system that contains links that allow the user to move from one piece of text or document to another"<sup>15</sup>. However, hypertextual organization and interconnectedness of pieces of data (e.g. text) does not apply only to the media such as World Wide Web and databases, it is also present in books (such as dictionaries, encyclopaedias and textbooks and even literature). Probably one of the more famous examples of hypertext literature in paper form for the younger generation is the "Time Machine" series. These books are not intended to be read linearly from-cover-to-cover – when read in such a way they actually make little or no sense. They are composed of fragments of text and at the end of each fragment, the reader has to decide, based on his or her opinion and the text he or she has just read, how the story is going to continue. The pointers at the end of each fragment are of course analogous to hyperlinks (words or phrases that connect two fragments of hypertext). The most well known example of hypertext literature in digital form on the other hand, is the much more complex Michael Joyce's *Afternoon – The Story*. To illustrate: the (children's) books from the Time Machine series usually do not contain more than fifty fragments and each fragment contains two to three references, whereas Joyce's novel consists of 539 fragments that are interconnected with numerous links.

As pointed out by Strehovec, hypertext takes the control over the text away from the author, and hands it down to the reader, who thus becomes an author in his or her own right.<sup>16</sup> While the author is still the creator of "raw bits of data", the reader has more control over the flow of the text than ever. By choosing between the various links and thus combining different fragments of text together, he or she can construct a whole host of unique stories. As it is not probable that the reader is going to select the same links in the second reading that he or she had selected in the first one, no two readings can produce the same story (of course, this improbability - and thus the readers freedom - is much higher with the complex novels such as Joyce's, whereas with the simple ones, the reader is still quite limited).

With that in mind, Krevel points out that with the control over the flow of the plot, the reader also becomes the one who has to make sense of the text by combining bits of data (Baudrillard's signs) that seem useful and discarding the ones that are not, according to his or

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<sup>15</sup> Hornby, A.S. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary

<sup>16</sup> Strehovec, Janez. Tehnokultura -kultura tehna

her own liking<sup>17</sup>. Literary characters are built based on the same principle. In accordance with Baudrillard theory no single character characteristic is more real in comparison to another, which means that the reader can combine them freely, without limitations. If the narrator is first-person, which adds a biographical element (this is the case with Mark Leyner's "Tooth Imprints on a Corndog"), the reader basically constructs the author of the text.

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<sup>17</sup> Krevel, Mojca. Ameriško literarno gibanje Avant-Pop: Avantgarda in postmoderna, doktorska disertacija.

## Mark Leyner

Contrary to most of the contemporary authors, very few facts on Mark Leyner's life are available on the Internet. I was only able to find a few interviews (but in none of them Leyner tells much about his own life) and a fan page containing only broken links (links to web pages no longer available). The only biography available is the one he wrote himself for his book *My Cousin, my Gastroenterologist*<sup>18</sup>. Like most of his writing, Leyner's biography is littered with trivialities ("One day we moved to West Orange, where I saw a squirrel for the first time"), short descriptions of his careless living when he was a teenager, and brief mentions of his girlfriends. What follows is a short summary of the most important facts.

Mark Leyner was born on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1956. Not much is known about his early days. It seems that a screen of the drive-in cinema, the Beatles (he decided to become an artist when he saw them on TV), Keith Richards and travelling were very important experiences that had a great influence on his later work. He started writing poetry in junior high school. While attending the high school of Columbia, he started writing a column in which he was describing the parties he and his friends attended. After graduation, he went to Brandeis University, where he graduated in 1977 and at the same time received the Dorothy Moyer Award for his writing. In 1979, he received an M.A. at the University of Colorado in Boulder and moved to Hoboken, where he worked as an ad writer for Panasonic. In 1983, Fiction Collective published his first book, *I Smell Ester Williams*. After that, he received wide acclaim and his work was published in various magazines. Three years later, he received a scholarship from the state of New Jersey. While writing *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist*, he was making a living with writing advertisements, the most important being the one for biologically decomposable diapers for the incontinent and an ad for artificial saliva. As he puts it, "No one knows what the future holds for me."

Mark Leyner wrote six books so far: *I Smell Esther Williams* (1983), *My Cousin, My Gastroenterologist* (1990), *Et Tu, Babe* (1993) *Tooth Imprints on a Corndog* (1995) and *The Tetherballs of Bougainville* (1998)

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<sup>18</sup> My summary is based on Slovene translation by Mojca Kregel, published in *Literatura* 145/146 (156, 157)

## Tooth Imprints on a Corndog

The first chapter in the book promises to be a dedication to Mark's wife Merci, but it actually tells us more about him than her. The beginning describes the birth of their daughter Gaby and introduces Leyner's obsession with medicine: "Now, putting me into a surgical garb is like putting a drag queen in a Saint Yves Laurent evening gown – I just light up. (Often I feel like a surgeon trapped in a writer's body)"<sup>19</sup>. When his wife is wheeled into the operating room and is anesthetized, he decides to have a look at what the doctors are doing. They warn him that he will have to leave the room if he does not keep still, but his wife calms them down by pointing out that Mark is more than adequate to watch the surgery, since he "watches a lot of medical programming on Cable TV on Sundays".<sup>20</sup> Oddly enough, the doctors seem to be satisfied with her argument; however, when one thinks of all the sitcoms portraying surgeries as a trivial and relaxing activity, rather than a complex procedure that it is, their submission seems justified.

Next, Leyner describes the main difference between him and his wife, her being complex and him extremely superficial. While he points out that he detests authors describing their wives in the style of great writers, which puts them in the inferior position and portrays them as "simpering imbeciles", he manages to do just that. He is flabbergasted when he finds out that his wife never believed the completely superficial "fun facts" he made up, although she initially feigned credulity.

He continues by portraying writer's work as manly by combining writing and a soldier's life. He tells us that he had enrolled into a paramilitary writers' colony, which required him to march for 50 kilometres in full gear and compose a poem, an essay or a short story, and a novel outline along the way. As unreal as this event seems, Leyner is quite persuasive. He shows us a poem he wrote; complete, with the note from his stereotypical commanding officer, "a sadistic taskmaster, who considers anything under four or five stanzas a personal insult"<sup>21</sup>. In the last part, we find out that Leyner is actually writing his dedication in under-water habitat somewhere in Mariana Trench in 1995. He moves there order to "get away from the whole New York scene" and to have enough peace and quiet to finish the Corndog and ponder on his new book titled *The Tetherballs of Bougainville*. This assertion is

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<sup>19</sup> Leyner Mark, *Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog*

<sup>20</sup> The same

<sup>21</sup> Such officers are of course present in just about any war film, Kubrick's *"Full Metal Jacket"* being one of the most clear-cut examples.

corroborated with a persuasive description of the submarine he uses when he has to go shopping: "a brand-new 1996 ceramic hull one-man submersible with a silver-zinc fuel cell, joystick navigation, voice- and video-transmitting fiber-optic microcable taupe leather interior, roof rack, 5-disc carousel CD-player, 150-watt Bose speakers."<sup>22</sup> The discrepancy between the year of the make of the submarine and the fact that the story was written in 1995 is irrelevant compared to the flood of other information Leyner serves us with.

Although the first chapter seems to be composed of bits of unconnected text, it draws a faithful portrayal of what kind of a man Mark Leyner is: self-absorbed, very intelligent, yet packed with macho rhetoric. All his characteristics are constant throughout the book although their manifestation is realized in contexts that have nothing in common with each other.

For example, in the chapter that describes the male view of proper upbringing of his child, he manages to merge machismo, his role as a fledgling father and his eruditeness. In the opening lines he points out that the role of the father has changed dramatically since the inception of human race. While the father was a virile figure in the prehistoric days, who was burning up his extra energy with swaggering, proportional caretaking and quality time have made him soft, a mere feminine shadow of his old self. Of course this statement is not an unfounded claim, Mark refers to research findings claiming that the testosterone levels of the nurturing fathers have plummeted down to "about three nanograms per deciliter".<sup>23</sup> The consequences of these hormone changes are serious, manifesting themselves in a disorder called hyposwaggering. A new-age dad has nothing to swagger about anymore, which results in extra energy building up inside of him, bursting out uncontrolled at the most inappropriate moments. An example of such ill misconduct is offered: a surgeon and an anaesthesiologist start fighting, while their patient lies anaesthetized. Although the author admits that the event might be explained with the influence of violent rap videos, which use "doctors", e.g. Dr. Dre, as protagonists, he is still confident that the real problem is in the role of the father being diminished from the head of the family, to a parent equal to his spouse, who has to regularly change and burp his child. Solution to the problem, which might eventually become the cause of havoc and anarchy, is simple, although it requires some time and devotion on the parent's side: a father has to determine how to make his child function as a "stylistic complement to his self-image". If that goal achieved, the author points out, a dad is again able to "strut

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<sup>22</sup> The same

<sup>23</sup> The same

through a paediatric waiting room and still feel like a reckless savage – the heavy drinking, womanizing, expense-account cheat that he is."<sup>24</sup>

The rest of the chapter is comprised of examples on how a dad can spend quality time with his child and keep his ego intact. For example, buying toys, toiletries and medical supplies for his child is likely to have a damaging effect on the father's ego and psyche – the main reason for that being "cute product names, each ending on y or ies " and the fact that the wrappings are covered with the characters and animals children adore so much. To put insult to injury, every shopping must invariably end with walking along the procession of giggling drinking friends. The modest proposal Leyner puts forward is buying products that may be substantially pricier, but their packaging is much less embarrassing (a rectal thermometer of the shape and size of a Meisterstück fountain is used to illustrate his point). The reasoning of spending more money in order to preserve one's "wild side" is of course legitimate. After all, a male's ego is more often than not much thinner than his wallet.

Also worth mentioning is Leyner's use of toys in a more adult and lucrative way. As an example, he offers his agent's party, attended by many celebrities. Wanting to gamble, but unable get a hold a deck of cards, Mark and New York Giants linebacker, finally find a children's board game in their host's daughter's room. Shocking other members of the celebrity world, they bet large sums of money and turn a quiet party into a loud and obscene money-making business.

While the beginnings of this chapter seem believable, its last part completely detaches from reality. The author proposes putting together male's need to take part in high-risk, adrenaline sports and his need as a parent to spend quality time with his offspring. Thus, he recommends taking a child along for a free-style mountain climbing without any kind of protection or oxygen tanks, casually mentioning the famous climber Reinhold Messner, who according to Mark, just climbed a peak on the border between India and Nepal together with his son Helmut. Another sport the author seems to be enraptured with, is drag racing. Although the sport might seem extremely dangerous and therefore unfit for a small child, we are told that the rocking motion of the G-forces is not unlike the motion that the child is experiencing in his mother's womb. This fact and a plethora of readily available drag car racing baby seats and the Juvenile Drag-Racing Products Manufacturers Association logo on the suitable products try to persuade us that such a sport actually does exist.

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<sup>24</sup> The same

Regarding the last sport proposed, infant is its key element. It is a martial art, devised on a Japanese island, whose inhabitants were prohibited to use any kind of weapon. To survive, the people started to use their children as a kind of deluxe nunchaku (the elderly proved to be too brittle for the task). The martial art involves gripping a baby by the ankles, swinging it and thus making irreparable damage to the opponents face with the child's razor-sharp nails. The possibility of the existence of such a sport is increased with the author's recommendation to use only the schools that employ certified instructors. In other words, the difference between this and other martial arts is greatly reduced if not completely diminished.

In the chapter titled "The Making of the Tooth Imprints of the Corndog", Leyner does not discuss (as one would anticipate) creation of the book the reader is holding in his or her hands. According to the author, he has been commissioned by a magazine called Gummiknüttel ("the German equivalent of Martha Stewart Living but with more nudity and grisly crime"<sup>25</sup>) to write a 1000-line poem in free verse in less than 35 hours. While the reader does get some insight in the author's creation process and catches a few glimpses of the poem in making, most of the chapter reveals his working habits. It is written in a form of a diary and most of the entries talk about the content of the TV programme he is watching and his inner thoughts. In one of the entries, he describes his past life: he was born as one of the five infants joined with each other at their necks, he being the only one who survived the surgery that separated them. His father was a tyrant, supposedly responsible for his mother committing suicide. To compensate for the loss of Mark's mother, his father hires a Soviet telepathic governess, who would flay him with a heavy Cyrillic ruler if he has but one negative thought. After leaving home, he works on odd jobs here and there. For example, he would sort other people's money in their wallets for a certain fee, kill the pets that people got tired of, but do not have the courage to dispose of them themselves and so on.

The television is turned on throughout the chapter. Although he is allegedly very busy with the poem, he has the time to write down a complete narrative of a Home Shopping Network programme, which sells old Russian weaponry that the country has sold to pay off its national debt. We witness a woman, who is ecstatic at the low prices: she was able to buy three nuclear submarines, which used to be worth ten thousand times as they are now, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the reality invented by Mark Leyner, nuclear weapons are equalized with the products bought every day by thousands of armchair shoppers – from kitchen appliances to tools and other trivialities.

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<sup>25</sup> The same

Of course, the reader constantly struggles to make some sense of all the pieces of data that he is served with at such a high speed. The chapter does not seem to make any more sense than any other chapter in the book. The 1000 line poem called Tooth Imprints on a Corndog is also just a diversion designed to puzzle the reader. He or she expects some sort of an insight into the book, before it was created, but is left even more confused than before reading it. Additionally, the place of creation mentioned in the first chapter is an underwater habitat, while in this chapter the poem is being written in Chateau Marmont in California. The whole chapter is a simulacrum that has demolished all the expectations about the book that the reader may have created for himself or herself in the first chapter.

While the chapter dealt with in the previous paragraph is a simulacrum of the whole book (i.e. Tooth Imprints is not a book being written in Mariana Trench, but a thousand verse poem), there are at least two more stories that function in a similar way. The first one is a simulacrum of the Menendez brothers' case, the other is a simulacrum of Hawthorne's short story Goodman Brown.

The Menendez brothers' case was a real case of two brothers who killed their own parents, which was heavily publicized by the media in the early nineties. While the brothers initially claimed that their parents were killed by strangers who broke into their house, the killers later proved to be themselves. At that point, they changed their story and claimed that the reason for killing their parents was their abusive and violent behaviour. With the Zeichner twins, Leyner turns the Menendez brothers' case upside down.

Joshua and Aaron had ideal parents and an ideal youth. Their parents would sacrifice anything in order to see them prosper. Their father, for example, underwent a surgery to be able to practice baseball with Aaron and spent months sculpturing a topographical map of the Waterloo battle made of marzipan for Joshua, while their mother prepared no less than 1920 different sandwiches for the boys to take to school and even wore headphones around her belly during her pregnancy, so they could listen to Pindar's odes read in Ancient Greek months before they were born. They supported even the most bizarre whims of their children, such as Joshua's brief interest in transvestism and Aaron's experimenting with Satanism.

However, their parents' permissive upbringing was exactly what drove the twins to think that their parents will eventually kill them. They find out on television that their parents' behaviour substantially differs from that of other parents. After their friend tells them that turning down the dinner their mother was slaving over for a whole day would cost him a severe physical punishment, but their parents show nothing but understanding and compassion, their fear for their lives is in their opinion justified. When their parents offer to

write an essay for them, the twins feel that this is the final manifestation of their passive-aggressive approach towards them, which is essentially bound to result in a very hostile counter reaction. Consequently, they decide to react first. They demolish their house with assorted heavy artillery: a grenade launcher, 9-mm machine gun and so forth. All these weapons are of course readily available through the already mentioned Home Shopping Network. When the Zeichner's run out of ammunition, they borrow some money from their barely alive mother to purchase more of it at the local store. When they return, she is found spending her last moments of life struggling to finish the essay. To make the story even more genuine, Leyner is presented as a journalist, covering the Zeichner case for the already mentioned German *Der Gummiknüppel*.

Almost everything in this story has its source in TV. The Menendez case was being televised in the early nineties and all the information about it is still available on the Court TV website. Over permissive parents is a constant theme of various talk shows that are broadcasted on regular basis. As it is for violent behaviour of teenagers, films such as *Bowling for Columbine* are a constant reminder of such irrational and monstrous acts. Leyner therefore does not create an altogether original piece of writing, but simply puts the already mentioned random pieces of data together. By doing so, he creates a simulacrum, a version of the Menendez case, which is much closer to the reader, because the elements constituting it are put together in a new and original way. On the other hand, the original case has all the properties of a cliché (repressed children rebel against their oppressive parents). Leyner's reinterpretation is thus more convincing than the dull reality radiating from the TV screen.

The last story I am going to deal with in this paper is Leyner's remake of Hawthorne's *Goodman Brown*. The play *Young Bergdorf Goodman Brown* takes place in the up-scale department store, Bergdorf Goodman, where Mark has come to purchase a handbag for his daughter's Haute Barbie. The doll has been nominated for an Academy Award for her performance in a neighbourhood video. The judges are all friends of his daughter. The doll is treated as a celebrity, just as a child would treat it in make-believe – it is presented as a real person. The sales clerk thinks that Mark's "daughter and her Barbie will be very pleased with one of these [bags]"<sup>26</sup>. All the bags are made by the top designers and are therefore well worth their price. A Barbie Armani bag costs much more than the original one, after all, one has to consider that it is "proportioned down to about a 1/70 scale with all the detailing and craftsmanship that makes Armani an Armani."<sup>27</sup> To further justify high prices of the bags, the

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<sup>26</sup> The same

<sup>27</sup> The same

clerk tells Mark about robotic, medical micro Barbies, designed to enter the human body and perform surgical procedures. Whereas Gaby's doll is treated as a unique celebrity, the nano robots are treated as toys that can be bought in every supermarket: there is an Angioplasty Barbie that can unclog arteries, a Transutheral Barbie that performs prostatectomies in the ureatha and so forth. Of course, the price of the accessories for these miniature dolls is astronomical.

Already at the beginning, there is a sense of a conspiracy theory. The purse is not where it should be, however the sales clerk locates it and sends Mark to the next, lower level. On each level, Mark meets at least one associate who appears to know some old acquaintance of his. It is always a case of mistaken identity - or at least appears to be. Mark also samples the goods in each department he passes. In the Men's Apparel apartment he tries on Lockheed's double-breasted wool suit and Martin Marietta's<sup>28</sup> half cotton half Stealthon boxer shorts, undetectable by radars, while listening to the sound of "Cindy Crawford's legs being waxed, but slowed may down, so you get this very peaceful *whoosh*."<sup>29</sup>

He continues his quest to sub-basement 39 (Toys) at which point he finally gets the Armani bag and makes a startling discovery: in the wallet inside the bag, he finds pictures of himself in various chapters of the book. There is a picture of him while writing Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog poem, a picture of his covering the Zeichner twins case, a picture of his visit to the Empire State Building sperm bank and others. Mark is then escorted off stage by two agents of Mossad and LAKAM respectively (both Israeli intelligence agencies), dying a cruel, yet pythonesque death, because he had stumbled on the Jewish plot to convert deadbeat credit-card holders into action figures.

Although not particularly noticeable, Bergdorf Brown does contain some references to the Hawthorne's Goodman Brown. Just to illustrate a some of them, the forest symbolizing the descending of Goodman Brown's soul to hell, is replaced with a much more superficial image of Mark descending to lower floors of the shopping centre, Faith's pink ribbons are replaced by Mark's wife's candy wrapper, and last but not least, both works begin with a promise. Goodman Brown promises that after one last separation from his wife, he is going to spend the rest of his life by her side, while Mark promises to purchase a handbag for his daughter's Haute Barbie.

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<sup>28</sup> Lockheed Martin is, of course, a manufacturer of missiles, while Martin Marietta is a leading producer of construction aggregates.

<sup>29</sup> Leyner Mark, Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog

## Leyner's style of data manipulation

Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog is not is not a novel with a story one could read from cover to cover. Quite the opposite, it is comprised of nineteen "chapters" - short stories, essays and one play, all written in the form of first person narrator – Mark Leyner himself. The pace of the stories unrolling before the reader is extremely fast, akin to switching between channels while watching television or watching a fast-paced channel like MTV. Even the index of the book resembles a Saturday night's TV guide. Just like the television, his writing is based on unconnected powerful images that have no effect on the plot as a whole, when, of course, there is one at all. Accordingly, the role of the reader is not only that of a passive receiver; he or she must also be an active participant. With accordance to Baudrillard's theory, no one piece of information is more real than the other, which means that the reader is the one who has to make a selection and link them into a whole that makes sense, according to his or her own preference. Because the plots are largely meaningless, the only thing left to construct is Mark Leyner (the difference between Leyner the character and Leyner the author is at most blurred if not completely indistinct, which means they are both constructed at the same time). However, this task is not at all easy, because the character is ever changing and extremely unstable.

Since the chapters bear no relation to each other, they can be read in any given order. Consequently, an infinite number of identities can be constructed, based on which bits are incorporated into a system of signs that constitute Mark Leyner. The reader might therefore decide that his visit to the sperm bank is real, but his writing of the poem called Tooth Imprints on a Corn Dog is not. His or her choice of incorporating certain information and discarding others is also heavily dependent on the order in which the stories are read. To illustrate my point: if one reads Bergdorf Brown before all the other stories, the photos Mark finds in his wallet will have no more meaning for the reader than all the images presented in subsequent chapters. On the other hand, if the play is read last in order, everything that has been previously deemed as real, proves to be fiction. Just like television, everything about him becomes unreal and false.

## Main themes

Though every chapter in the book has its own theme, only two themes are common to all the chapters: obsession with medicine and mass consumerism.

### **Obsession with medicine**

As Mark admits in the first few opening lines of the book, he often feels like a "surgeon trapped in a writer's body". While the past portrayed surgeons and doctors as demigods with power over life and death, television has trivialized their work to such an extent that just about anyone feels that he or she is able to perform the more simple surgeries. Mark is thus able to reverse his friend's vasectomy while the latter is in drunken stupor, simply by referring to a leaflet and is happy to report that his friend's secretary is expecting a baby soon. Also, nano-robots – Barbies are just as effective with treating the patients as the surgeons. There are also many references to various diseases throughout the book, most of them not real: vitiligo a skin disease, which causes loss of pigmentation, purulent eriquema serpens, which makes your skin look like Roquefort cheese and canine acral lick dermatitis, which left Mark licking, biting and scratching his own flanks for days.

### **Mass consumerism**

It is hard to deny that our society is able to sell anything if the advertisements are persuasive enough. Armchair shopping that has become so popular in the last few years offers products no one would imagine buying a decade or two ago. It is no longer important whether one really needs the product advertised – the possibility of purchasing it is more than enough to make one switch to a shopping frenzy mode.

Leyner takes this idea a step further. Anything can be bought, be it a Barbie doll, heavy artillery weapons or sperm at the local sperm bank, regardless of the product its purchase is as trivial as making a phone call. Additionally, sorting money in one's wallet and killing unwanted pets is just as lucrative a job as the job of a surgeon. As Mark puts it "with the present market conditions I choose to lease my feelings, with an option to buy".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The same

## Conclusion

Without doubt, Leyner is one of the more prominent authors of the last decade. His style and treatise of contemporary society and its characteristics offer new and fresh ways of understanding the Pop Culture and what keeps it going. On the other hand, it is not easy to decide whether a collection of personal opinions and extremely humorous fiction can make an author timeless. Although far from masterpiece, Leyner's literature is a hilarious read that does not require much attention, one just has to bite one's way through it. This is of course not meant in a pejorative sense. After all, this is our preferred way of handling any kind of media these days, be it a book or television or the Internet.

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