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**AVANT-POP 101.** *Here's a list of works that helped to shape Avant-Pop ideology and aesthetics, along with books, albums, films, television shows, works of criticism, and other cultural artifacts by the Avant-Pop artists themselves, in roughly chronological order.*

**PRECURSORS:**

***The Odyssey (Homer, c. 700 B.C.).*** Homer's *The Odyssey* had it all: a memorable, larger-than-life super-hero (Ulysses); a war grand enough that its name alone (Trojan) is still used to sell condoms; descriptions of travels through exotic places; hideous bad-guys (like the Cyclops) and bad gals (Circe); an enduring love affair (Penelope); a happy ending. Commentators have long regarded *The Odyssey* as Western literature's first epic and masterpiece. What hasn't been noted until now, however, is that its central features – for instance, its blend of high seriousness with popular culture, a self-conscious narrator, magical realism, appropriation, plagiarism, casual blending of historical materials with purely invented ones, foregrounding of its own artifice, reflexivity, the use of montage and jump cuts – also made it the first postmodern, A-P masterpiece, as well.

***Choju giga (Bishop Toba, 12th century).*** *Choju giga* – or the "Animal Scrolls," as Toba's work is known – was a narrative picture scroll that portrayed, among other things, Walt Disney-style anthropomorphized animals engaged in a series of wild (and occasionally wildly erotic) antics that mocked Toba's own calling (the Buddhist clergy); in its surrealist blend of nightmare and revelry, Toba *Choju giga* can rightly be said to be the origins not only of cartoons but of an avant-pop aesthetics of cartoon forms that successfully serve "serious" purposes of satire, philosophical speculation and social commentary. The Narrative picture scroll was an art form originally introduced to Japan from China several centuries before Toba created his early masterpiece, which transformed the Chinese form by adding an underlying playfulness and tone of mockery. *Choju giga* unfolds (or, more exactly, "unscrolls) from right to left in a series of images that are related to one another both physically and narratively: hills fade into plains, roofs of houses dissolved to show the occupants inside; many of the visual conventions of contemporary cartoons are already in evidence here: thus changes in time, place, and mood were signified by mist, cherry blossoms, maple leaves, or other commonly understood symbols that are still used in contemporary Japanese cartoons. Just about anyone who's unfamiliar with this work – or dozens of others that were produced during this period in Japan – is almost certainly going to find the experience to be an "eye opener."

***The Inferno of Dante (Dante, 1308; new translation by Robert Pinsky; Farrar, Straus, 1995).*** If you've been intimidated by this grandest of all space opera's, let Robert Pinsky's new translation of Dante's Avant-Head-Trip give you an excuse to check this out. What most people don't realize about Dante's tour through Hell is just how surreal and violent this ultimate head trip could be – and great was Dante's ability to conjure up this nightmare excursion through hell in prose of such magnificent, Avant-Vulgarity and eloquence. Dante was several hundred years ahead of Coleridge/

Wordsworth's "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" in choosing to write his epic not in Latin but in ordinary language (Italian) in which he once observed "even little women communicate." Offended cultural elites read it in secret while illiterates croaked out the "Comedy" on the crossroads and sang it in taverns. (Boccaccio hired by city of Florence on behalf of tradesmen who wished to receive public explanation of the hard parts but gave up after Canto 19 when he came under attack by alarmed literati, who felt that great poems should not be opened up to the masses). Dante's *Comedy* is a poem of what Guy DeBord would later refer to as "Spectacle" — of wheeling shapes that enter and exit, form and reform, and disinform. It's also one in which an Entire Society speaks in endless regional, city, class and other pop cultural idioms and accents: warlords, Bolognese pimps, Roman popes, abducted nuns, oversexed Lombard noblewomen — each with highly personalized voices. Dante's people stutter, sob, moan, whine, whisper, cajole, screech, ramble and mumble. They talk baby talk, gibberish and Old Provençal. They also on occasion are capable of executing breathtaking rhetorical performances. The total effect is Avant-Symphonic.

***The Bible (King James Version, 17th Century; originally written by various authors, Old Testament, c. 500 B.C., New Testament, 100 A.D.)*** The King James Version of the Bible remains the greatest selling book in Western Literature. Although not usually thought of in terms of aesthetic innovation, the King James *Bible* pioneered many of the same formal features that are today associated with A-P aesthetics: collaboration, the casual introduction of actual historical figures into purely invented settings ("magical realism") as well as the creation of superheroes and super villains who are introduced into actual historical settings, surrealism and fabulism, reflexiveness and metafictional impulses ("In the beginning was the word . . ." etc.) as well as other means of foregrounding its status as artifice, mixed-genre effects (theater, poetry, history, philosophical), the mingling of high and low culture, the recycling of elements drawn from popular culture for "serious" purposes, appropriation, sampling, plagiarism,. Above all, it illustrates the remarkable potential that popular mythologies have for being re-contextualized by brilliant artists and writers — a process that would later become the cornerstone of A-P aesthetics..

***The Tempest (Shakespeare,1611)***. Many of Shakespeare's greatest plays could be seen as proto-A-P works due to their reliance on the central feature of A-P composition methods — i.e., the appropriation of familiar storylines and characters drawn from popular cultural or historical accounts and then retrofitting these into new literary forms. The best example of Shakespeare's Avant-Populist impulses can probably be found in *The Tempest*, where Shakespeare combined elements of SF, metafiction, romance, and the fabulous journey motif to create a gripping drama about the nature of the creative process, the thin line between reality and illusion, and the kinship between art and the monstrous. It's no accident that this particular play has inspired so many later A-P-flavored works, including numerous SF works (e.g., the classic 1950s SF films, *Forbidden Planet* ) to "The Magic Poker" (the centerpiece of Coover's influential collection of A-P fictions, *Pricksongs and Descants*).

***Gulliver's Travels* (Jonathan Swift, 1726).** With *Gulliver's Travels* Swift took the vehicle of the travel book (which were much in vogue in England at that time due to the discovery of the Americas) and redesigned its creative engine so that it provided a lot more "combustion" (the key to the extra satiric power was Swift's savage indignation). The end result is that Swift created a new kind of literary vehicle—an Avant-Travelogue—which combined the qualities of a long-distance race car capable of taking its readers on longer and more daring fabulous voyages than any earlier travelogues; it also had the fire-power of a heavily armed tank capable of single-handedly *demolishing* an entire Army of self-impressed scientists, pretentious scholars, hypocritical politicians, absurd lawyers, and any other upholders of civilization's claim to beauty, rationality, and knowledge with an array of offensive, satiric weaponry. In short, Swift took the form of the travel book and parodied it, but enlarged the parody into an elaborate attack on a degenerate humanity generally—an attack that wasn't to be matched for sheer invective, scathing wit, comprehensiveness and effective use of scatological imagery until the mid-60s *Nova Trilogy* of A-P Godfather, William S. Burroughs. Swift's A-P treatment of the fabulous voyage motif has been rightly shown to have influenced the entire development of satiric SF novels. There are dozens of other stylistic features in *Gulliver* that had equally significant impact on the subsequent development of A-P (for example, his series of brilliant and zany lists—usually introduced to survey and convey wild *disorder*—prefigure those found in later A-P literary innovators such as Borges, Calvino, and Lem).

***The Collected Stories of Edgar Allen Poe* (Edgar Allen Poe, Vintage, 1990).** Poe is the most significant of all American precursors of A-P. Many readers continue to think of him as a crazed, drug-addled alcoholic who wrote gothic fiction about ghosts and other demons of the night; but what Poe was really doing in "Ligeia," "The Fall of the House of Usher" and his other classic "horror" stories was writing *meta*-gothic tales that parodied and otherwise employed the central conventions of gothic fiction in order to examine inner, psychological demons of guilt, sexual repression, and solipsism. Of course, Poe was also the inventor of one of the most popular and influential pop forms of them all—the detective story; of course, since this form (introduced in "Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter," and "The Gold Bug") was invented by a man who was fanatically obsessed with the utter *subjectivity* of perception—and who constantly seemed to delight in placing his central characters in a position where they were forced to confront the absolute *limits* of human perception and understanding—it's not surprising that even these very first detective stories seem more informed by A-P aesthetics as by the purer, more innocent sensibility of a "pure pop" sensibility. Certainly it is undeniable that Poe's work had a major impact on the subsequent development of such later A-P luminaries as Baudelaire, G.K. Chesterton, Poe, and Lem as they did on pop figures such Arthur Conan Doyle and Roger Corman (who created many of the best-known, schlocky film versions of Poe stories that starred Vincent Price).

***A Season in Hell* (Arthur Rimbaud, 1870?).** If William S. Burroughs is A-P's true Godfather figure, then Rimbaud is Avant-Pop's true Grandfather—this despite the fact that he quit writing poetry at

age 17. Certainly Rimbaud – who was almost completely unknown in his day – has had a profound and even decisive influence on a great amount of 20th Century art: dada, surrealism, punk, cyberpunk, for example, have all claimed Rimbaud as a major source of creative inspiration. Rimbaud prefigured the great Modernist movement's recognition that the massive, technologically-driven changes that had been sweeping across Europe ever since the French Revolution necessitated the abandonment of most of the conventions that Western art had relied on since the Renaissance. In poetry, this meant a complete overhaul of how poetry was conceived and written – including a willingness of new poets to strike off into new subject matters like advertising and science. The poet, Rimbaud once wrote, must be the "thief of fire," a "visionary" willing to pursue the muse of poetry wherever she wished to take him – even into the mind-altering depths of madness, drugs, and other forms of irrationality, for these regions produced.

*A Season in Hell*, written near the end of Rimbaud's brief, incandescent career, was his greatest single accomplishment. Written as series of prose poems, *A Season in Hell* was a kind of spiritual autobiography, in which Rimbaud pushed language's ability to conjure up the mysteries and irrationalities of the psyche farther than anyone ever had up until that point. Part aesthetic manifesto, part farewell to a reading audience who had not yet even discovered his work, *A Season in Hell* continues to astonish and delight today because of its extremity, formal inventiveness and honesty. As Patti Smith (punk poetry's greatest writer) says in the middle of punk's greatest single song, "Horses": "Go Rimbaud, go Rimbaud." Rimbaud didn't "go" for very long, but during his short literary ride he wound up going farther – and deeper – than just about any poet ever had. No one can claim to be a TRUE fan of A-P who hasn't read Rimbaud.

#### FILM:

***Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927).** No, those amazing sets that made Madonna's "Express Yourself" video such a mind-blower didn't originate with Madonna (what did?) but with Fritz Lang, the brilliant German expressionist filmmaker who was creating A-P movie treatments of genre materials long before people like Stanley Kubrick and Francis Ford Coppola were around (cf. his other A-P treatments of murder mystery – *M*). *Metropolis* was a landmark in the history of SF film – its gleaming towers, menacing technocrats and disgruntled ordinary citizens seeking a way out of the nightmare of machinery and bureaucracies run amok all became standards of later SF films right up through George Lucas's *THX1138* and beyond. But what makes *Metropolis* an equally important landmark in A-P cinema was the way Lang recast what was essentially a stereotyped genre material into haunting vision that burned its way into the retinas of the audience's memory long after the predictable features of plot and character had long since been forgotten. Giorgio Moroder's 1984 version of the restored print that was released in 1984 – featuring a pop soundtrack written by Moroder and performed by Moroder, [Pat Benatar](#), [Bonnie Tyler](#), [Jon Anderson](#), [Adam Ant](#), Cycle V, [Loverboy](#), [Billy Squier](#), and [Freddie Mercury](#) – won't appeal to purists but is a kick nonetheless.

***Duck Soup (The Marx Brothers; dir. by Leo McCarey; 1933)***. The Marx Brothers shared with Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton a background of poverty and a childhood on the vaudeville stage. But while the great films of Chaplin (*City Lights*, *The Gold Rush*, *Modern Times*) and Keaton (e.g., *The General*) transformed their creators into deeply tragic, sublime, and even mystical figures beneath their comic masks, the Marx Brothers chosen a very different route to their own undeniable greatness – the route of Avant-Slapstick. That is, the Marx Brothers were cheap, adolescent, vulgar, scatological, reckless, excessive, lunatic, and assassin – qualities all associated with "bad taste" which the Marx Brothers exaggerated and elevated (or "de-elevated") to such extremes that their work became a brilliant and hilarious meta-comedic commentary about the very notion of "good taste" which most of Western "high art" had always relied upon. Thus, like the crazed and deliberately "dumb" art which had been appearing throughout the 1920s, the Marx Brothers; greatest films made art out of vulgarity and outrageousness which self-consciously mocked the pretentiousness and claims for "rationality" of serious art.

*Duck Soup*, the funniest of all Marx Brothers' films, has been praised by intellectuals for its surrealism and by Marxist critics for its alleged commentary about the lunacy of Western politics generally (and fascism in particular) and war. In *Duck Soup* Groucho plays Rufus T. Firefly, newly elected President of Fredonia, a country threatened by the "evil empire" of Sylvania. Harpo and Chico are double agents – spies of Ambassador Trentino (of Sylvania) and cronies of President Firefly – who roam around, with Groucho spewing for a delicious babble of verbal non-sequiturs while Harpo takes care of the sight gags (using a welder's torch as a cigar lighter, cutting off the ties and coattails of opponents, etc.). In the end, no film has ever wrecked such total physical, verbal and psychological damage on he world of politics. But in the end, what makes *Duck Soup* such a great innovative film really has little to do with its political or social vision and a great deal more with its sheer outrageousness and silliness. They thus helped brave the trail traveled by such later Avant-Vulgarians as Jerry Lewis, Steve Martin and (the most innovative of all contemporary American Avant-Comedians) Andy Kauffman.

***Sunset Boulevard (Billy Wilder, 1950)***. In its reflexive, meta-cinematic treatment of film history and clichés, Wilder's corrosive, gothic masterpiece anticipates the blossoming in the 60s of more blatant A-P approaches to Hollywood – and Hollywood's status as cultural artifact – created by Goddard and Fellini, and in many later films (Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*). A fading Hollywood movie queen (Gloria Swanson), her director/butler (brilliant played by Erich von Stroheim), and the hack screenwriter she harbors (William Holden), constitute one of the screen's most bizarre and funny triads. This film appropriated the already-clichéd notion of the fading moving queen – played here by an actual faded movie queen, Gloria Swanson (whose long-standing affair with JFK's dad, Joe, was not yet the stuff of legend) – and worked up a fascinating, poignant examination of a life lived as an ongoing media event.

**LITERATURE (Fiction, Theater, Poetry, Comic Books).**

***End Game* (Samuel Beckett, 1950).** Throughout his long career as a fiction writer and playwright, Beckett's frequent borrowings of materials from mass culture – most notably slapstick comedy routines (Buster Keaton was a particular favorite) – provided an A-P flavor even to his most radical works. In *End Game*, he appropriates a the conventions of the dominant SF form of the 50s – the post-holocaust story – as a means of developing a darkly comic allegory about isolation, human memory, and coping with a meaningless universe.

***Mad Magazine* (William F. Gaines, publisher, 1952).** Except for Elvis Presley's shaking hips, it was *Mad Magazine's* new style of off-the-wall zaniness that had the greatest impact during the 50s on young would-be hipsters Americans – kids who were looking for an angry fix but had no outlet for their the rebellious energy. *Mad* was an EC comic published by William Gaines, who had already made EC synonymous by pioneering earlier comic titles that dealt explicitly with controversial topics, violence, sex, even anti-war sentiments. With *Mad* Gaines employed his most talented EC artists – notably Jack Davis, Wally Wood and Bill Elder – and set them to work creating a brand of outlandish, darkly humorous satire of other comics (early titles included "Superduperman" and "Bat Man and Rubin"), the media, and eventually politics. The results have been described as being something akin to the Marx Brothers in terms of its freshness and irreverence, and its remarkable success (by its sixth issue it was selling 500,000 copies) helped lay the ground work by the great 60s underground comix scene of Robert Crumb and others.

***The Bronc People* (William Eastlake, Harcourt Brace, 1958; University of New Mexico Press, 1975 [pbk.]).** Back in the 1950s, William Eastlake published a series of A-P novels and stories about the American Southwest that had a decisive impact on changing the ways that subsequent writers from Larry McMurtry up through Thomas McGuane would treat the Western genre. Eastlake's Hemingway-on-acid – or Beckett-meets-Zane Grey – approach to the Western formulas is best seen in one of his early coming-of-age novel, *The Bronc People*, which presents a highly ironic, bitterly satiric view of the white man and what he has perpetrated in America's Southwest – a region which becomes, by extension, emblematic of all of America. Eastlake's fictional world is a flat, two-dimensional landscape, full of caricatures, hilarious but improbably dialogue and events, sinister, bumbling villains, stoic Indians with names like President Taft and More Turquoise than Hope, and terrains that are alternately unearthly in their beauty (the Indian Country) and exaggerated, surreal visions of the modern urban nightmare. Also recommended: *Go In Beauty* (1955), *Portrait of the Artist with Twenty-Six Horses* (1963) and *Dancers in the Scalp House* (1975).

***Snow White* (Donald Barthelme, Farrar, Straus, 1966).** Back in the 60s, when Avant-Pop was still struggling to assert its significance in the face of the far more popular but less interesting phenomenon of Pop Art, the near-weekly appearances of Donald Barthelme's richly comic and wonderfully textured fiction in *The New Yorker* fueled the ambitions of – and served as an important source of inspiration for – other A-P wannabe's who previously could only hope to find tiny audiences. Barthelme's first novel, *Snow White*, was a perfect example of the A-P aesthetic –

introducing all the plot elements, characters, and central metaphors (drawn mostly from the Disney film version rather than the original Grimm's Brother's fairy tale), Barthelme updated and otherwise recontextualized these familiar materials (i.e., Snow White is now a thoroughly modernized feminist living in Manhattan commune, where she has group sex in the shower with seven "dwarfs" on a daily basis and awaits the arrival of a suitable Prince Charming who can take her away from a life of boredom and drudgery. Alas, the confused gender assumptions of our postmodern world have mitigated against the whole notion of heroism and "Princeliness"; no matter — Barthelme shows the difficulties of achieving any kind of satisfactory fairy-tale endings today with one of the richest and wittiest A-P prose styles of any contemporary author. Heigh-Ho!

**Zap (Robert Crumb, 1967).** Robert Crumb was the Johnny Rotten of the underground comic book scene, and his legendary *Zap* was its *Never Mind the Bullocks*. Crumb's *Zap* — originally self-published by Crumb with his friend, Don Donohue out of America's hippie capital, San Francisco, during the same year (1967) as the Summer of Love — became the catalyst for a do-it-yourself publishing revolution that, like punk, had been just waiting to happen. *Zap's* hallmarks were an attractive "Disneyesque" drawing style, contrasted with topics involving revolutionary politics, explicit sex, and drugs (including one ground-breaking, wordless strip depicting an LSD trip). The success of *Zap* made Crumb transformed Crumb into "the pope of the underground," and soon he was pushing *Zap* into ever-more challenging and controversial areas, blasting through just about every cultural taboo known to pop culture and laying the ground work for later comic artists such a Monty Python's Terry Gilliam (an American, by the way) and filmmaker Ralph Bashi.

***Creamy and Delicious* (Steve Katz, Random House, 1970).** Of all the major new artists contributing to the evolution of A-P aesthetics back in the first wave of 60s postmodernism, Steve Katz may well have been the most radical — and the figure whose achievements have been most unduly neglected. There's a connection, here, of course: Katz's aesthetic radicalism derives in part from his immersion in the burgeoning NYC art scene of the 60s — a scene which included not only Pop Art (a major influence on Katz's sensibility) but jazz, Op Art and Happenings, and minimalism (Katz has been a long time friend, for example, of minimalist composer Philip Glass). Katz's fantastic, surreal, and early books, then, — *The Exaggerations* [sic] *Peter Prince* (1968), *Creamy and Delicious*, and *Saw* (1972) — applied features of non-literary forms like television, painting, and films to fiction-writing in ways that made them resistant enough to paraphrase that most critics simply ignored them. Consider the implications of Katz's A-P treatment of pop cultural materials in his collection *Creamy and Delicious*, which was definitely one of the early masterpieces of A-P. Like other A-P-flavored works of that period — Barthelme's *Snow White*, say, or Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* — Katz aims at demonstrating the transformational possibilities of pop materials and displays a central tension between the mythic framework's tendency to organize and rigidify its elements into teleological wholes versus the ambiguous, fragmented nature of contemporary experience, which refuses to yield to formulas and patterns. But the greater radicalism of Katz's approach is evident in various ways:

for one thing, Katz added a rarely used formal element to his creations in *Creamy*—that of time. All the mythology sections were created in a self-imposed time limit of one hour—a restriction that obviously influenced the composition in various ways (for one thing, it made it impossible to do much revision). But rather than examining the prior myths and attempting to discover hidden patterns or features in the materials that would have new relevance for contemporary audiences (essentially the approach of Coover and Barthelme), Katz is more interesting in using these material—including its "content"—almost *purely as found materials that can be used as a springboard for his later improvisational treatments*. Introducing the names in this manner thus establishes a content of meaning and story-structure which Katz can then actively disrupt; this creates a kind of dialogue with the earlier text which still being free to create his own narrative line. Thus in each of his "Mythologies" sections," Katz begins by selecting a name which will be certain to evoke a rich series of associations from his audience—some of these are familiar mythic names (Faust, Achilles, Hermes, Apollo) but in keeping with the age of Warhol, others are mythic names drawn from pop culture—mostly prominently, from comic books (Wonder Woman, Plastic Man, Nancy and Sluggo). But once the stories begin, Katz defiantly divorces the names from their traditional associations—Nancy and Sluggo, for example, are show to be a gay cowboy and a "terrible gulch-riding bandit"—and then proceeds to develop a purely invented narrative. The end result of a hilarious and wild ride that suggests that since ALL received versions of the past have been fundamentally falsified to some degree in their transmission, contemporary artists should feel free to invent whatever versions they choose.

*The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (Robert Coover, Random House, 1968). It's been said that anyone who doesn't understand baseball can't possibly understand American culture. Maybe so. What is certain is that in *The Universal Baseball Association* Coover used baseball as an elaborate framing device that allows him to explore American culture, history, and politics from various fascinating angles; along the way, he also develops an elaborate and brilliantly conceived metaphor of the relationship of man to God and the fictional systems man has created (myth, literature, philosophy, religion) to make sense of the world. Coover's novel is about a lonely, middle-age man (the "J. Henry Waugh" of the book's title—note the pun on "Yahweh," the name of the Old Testament's God) who has invented an elaborate table-top baseball game which he plays every evening with an elaborate series of dice and charts to generate the "action." While he's playing the game, Waugh recreates all the action on the playing field—as well as the pre and post-game events—so vividly in his imagination that they seem every bit as real as what is occurring in his "real life." Largely dismissed when it was first published because of its reliance on a mass cultural form, Coover's book today is recognized as being not merely the greatest sports novel America has yet produced but as laying the ground work for later A-P investigations of sports as one of the defining metaphors of our A-P Age. Also recommended: *Pricksongs and Descants* (1970), *The Public Burning* (1977), *A Night at the Movies* (1983).



*Easy Travel to Other Planets* (Ted Mooney, Random House, 1981). With the possible exceptions of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, Ted Mooney's *Easy Travels to Other Planets* is the book which was most successful of any books of the 80s in capturing a palpable sense of what life feels like today in a culture running on the logic of hyperconsumer capitalism. This sense principally involves life's strangeness, its sense of dislocation, its ability to over stimulate us, the fears and anxieties it instills within us (often without our even being aware of it), its frightening power to separate us from each other, its distortions of our erotic impulses. Although *Easy Travel* retains many of the surface features of traditional realism, there's also a way in which the book is almost a work of science fiction since, for all its familiarity, Mooney's world is not quite our own world – at least not literally. Rather, it's a world in which people suffer from a disease called "information sickness," whose effects can be warded off temporarily by assuming the "memory elimination posture." It is a world in which ice cubes fall to the ground, in which a new emotion is emerging, in which telepathy is becoming a reality, in which the wealthy nations are about to go to war over Antarctica. Mooney conveys all this by disrupting the linear flow of events, using rapid, montage-like cuts between scenes (and within individual paragraphs) which often contain wildly disparate elements presented in a simultaneous, collage-like fashion. The overall effect of this presentation is to recreate the sense, increasingly common to all of us, of being bombarded with many different sorts of stimulation and information at once, of having our physical sensations being constantly strained to the breaking point. I should add that the novel also presents one of the most unusual love affairs in contemporary fiction – a shocking and highly erotically charged relationship between Melissa (a young scientist specializing in dolphin research) and a dolphin named Peter. What's more, Mooney develops this affair not as some sort of freak show but as a sensitive and utterly convincing part of a larger context of people shown to be lost and alone, and who are trying to cope with a world which seems to be spinning out of their control.

*Still Life with Woodpecker* (Tom Robbins, Bantam, 1980). Despite being largely ignored by "serious" critics and commentators, Tom Robbins' first two novels, *Another Roadside Attraction* (1974) and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1975) established him as a cult A-P novelist whose readers embraced his books with a devotion and fervor that writing today rarely elicits. The source of this adoration comes mainly from the Avant-Philosophy that permeates his fiction, philosophy that celebrates the power of human consciousness to find laughter, transcendence, and something of interest in everything we come in contact with, from God to Camel Cigarette packages. It was the latter – an ordinary, mass produced object which has evolved a rich and resonant set of myths and folklore around it – that provided the central unifying motif for the novel that expressed A-P aesthetics most perfectly, *Life with Woodpecker* (1980). *Still Life* is a book about red-headed women, pyramid power, and one of A-P grandest themes: the boundless mystery, beauty, and potential for narrative permutations that is inherent in all pop cultural icons, once we are willing to examine them from the proper perspective.

***Bellefleur* (Joyce Carol Oates, Dutton, 1980).** Joyce Carol Oates has written so many books (and so many different *kinds* of books) so quickly that reviewers and critics – finding themselves unable to keep up with (or even keep count of) the onrush – nearly always begin their discussion of her works with a defensive "Oh, Oates writes too quickly for her own good." Well, maybe so – or maybe Oates will someday be regarded less as an overproducer and more akin to the American Dickens of the latter half of the 20th century. Certainly what's often been lost in the evaluation of Oates' prodigious output is the extremity of her imagination, the remarkable diversity of forms she's worked in, and the intelligence she brings to just about everything she's written. Over the years a number of her best works have been produced from the classic A-P methodology: the willingness to enter pop genre formulas (SF, gothic, vampire, sports, and detective genres are only a few that she's worked in); then, once inside this territory, exploring its archetypes, exploding the assumptions usually associated with them, opening up new passageways that genre writers didn't recognize or were too timid to mine has also allowed her to produce a major body of A-P fiction. Perhaps her most ambitious A-P novel today is *Bellefleur*, a baroque, haunting book full of magic, greed, red red passions, darker than dark obsessions, and memorable characters whose eccentricities bring to life in the manner of Dickens. What we have here might be described as "Avant-Noire" (significantly the wealthy and notorious Bellfleurs clan whose lives Oates chronicles over six generations live in an enormous mansion on the shores of "Lake Noir"). This is, however, family chronicle by way of Marquez, Nabokov, Poe, Ann Rice whose members include millionaires, mass murderers,, boy-scientists, vampires, and a heroine who is born with the lower half of her male twin protruding from her abdomen. Firmly anchored in actual historical events (the War of 1812, John Brown's abolitionist activities, the building of the Erie Canal), the narrator moves forward with a kind of crazed, ferocious recklessness that captures something essential about the narrative of America itself. Full of lyricism, magic, and genuinely savagery, *Bellefleur* is a work of brooding power, historical acumen, and stylistic flourishes.

***Great Expectations* (Kathy Acker, Grove, 1986).** Part street-wise gutter snipe, part radical feminist critic, part punk-artist and part vulnerable woman always on the verge of being torn apart by an insensitive and rapacious phallic society, part cynic and part visionary idealist, Kathy Acker has also produced a major body of experimental, shocking, and highly disturbing "prose assemblages" (to refer to them as "novels" misses the point) which have produced perhaps the most devastating and (a point missed by too many readers) *wickedly funny* critique of life-under-late-capitalism since William Burroughs's great mid-'60s works. During the somnolent, repressive 1980s decade of Reagan/Bush/Helms/Bennett, Kathy Acker established herself as one of postmodernism's boldest and most original fiction innovators – and one of its most controversial, as well. Her major works during this period included *Great Expectations*, the first of Acker's "re-writes" of famous Western novels. Acker has referred to *Great Expectations* as her equivalent of Avant-Photographer Sherrie Levine's famous series of photographs of other famous photographs. As with much of what Acker has said about her own work, these remarks are useful but also a bit misleading. True, in *Great Expectations* Acker is, like

Levine, "recreating" a version of a well-known earlier work (in this case, Charles Dickens famous coming-of-age Victorian classic), but her novel is hardly an exact duplicate of something else. Instead, Acker uses the basic framework of Dickens' novel—its central characters and plot elements—as a kind of framing device to create an outrageous, punk-flavored examination of her own life and the life of hyperconsumer capitalism.

**\**Madonna and Other Spectacles* (Harold Jaffe, City Lights, 1988).** Judging from his last books, Harold Jaffe is horny as Warren Beatty, melancholy as Hamlet, and furious as an Old Testament prophet. Jaffe's *Madonna and Other Spectacles* also displays the ways A-P artists have increasingly been influenced by recent critical theorists who have examined the interrelationship between pop cultural, economics, power, and social control (notably that Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and Guy DeBord, whose pioneering postmodernist study, *Society of the Spectacle*, figures in the collection's title). Here Jaffe uses the names of various well-known pop figures (e.g., Madonna, The Three Stooges, Lightnin' Hopkins, Boy George, Tonto, Hurricane Carter) as the basis for improvisational forays into the sources of racism, the denaturing of the body, and the substitution of real desire and appetite by media images. The highly unusual formal features of Jaffe's fiction are unified by his desire to find ways of bringing together planes of cultural discourse that would normally be separated, in the hope that their intersection will reveal deeper patterns of prejudice, ignorance and repression. Together with his recent *Eros Anti-Eros* (1990), Jaffe has created a body of what he has termed "guerrilla writing" which, like Kathy Acker's work, defamiliarizes familiar narrative materials as a means of relentlessly interrogating our society's underlying assumptions and obsessions. Jaffe is of course keenly aware of the current resignation and impotence among artists who have forfeited their imaginings in the manipulated hyperspace of contemporary America. Nonetheless, Jaffe's stubborn, though carefully analyzed insistence is that art still has the capacity not only to defamiliarize but to destabilize institutionalized oppressions. Hence Jaffe's poetic dictum both in his manifesto-essay "Guerrilla Writing" and in *Eros Anti-Eros*: "find a seam / plant a mine / slip away."

***Girl with Curious Hair* (David Foster Wallace, 1988).** When it comes to sheer, flat-out maximum-drug-strength overkill of verbal *flash* the only recent American authors to rival David Foster Wallace are William Gibson and Mark Leyner. Until the wildly improbable success of his recent *Infinite Jest* established him as one of the 90s leading authors, Wallace—who is still only in his mid-30s—had already had the misfortune of having his work grossly mislabeled *twice*—the first as "The New Pynchon (when his enormous, unwieldy but very promising first novel, *The Broom of the System*, appeared in 1986 when Wallace was only 24) and then as one of the "Brat Pack," when his finely crafted stories began appearing in most of the big name literary magazines a bit later. These stories were eventually collected in *The Girl with Curious Hair*, a collection whose display of stylistic pyrotechnics capable of illuminating actual human conditions, and its ability to serve as "exemplary fictions" which examine the status of contemporary literary innovation generally make it comparable to Robert Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* twenty years earlier. But as with Coover's highly

influential collection of Avant-fictions, there is certainly a great deal more to Wallace work than mere "flash." In *Girl with Curious Hair* he ambitiously explores themes encompassing politics, philosophy (along with math, one of his double majors in college), gender roles, and personal identity. These themes are presented through a range of unusual and poetic voices and narrative structures designed to help us focus on the A-P aspects of these large issues, as well as provide readers with the sometimes painful reminder that the process of meaning-production is often a difficult (though ultimately rewarding experience). Likewise his use of innovative formal devices – in particular, his use of flash cuts and other non-linear forms of presentation, his casual intermingling of real figures (often figures like Ronald Reagan or David Letterman, who are drawn from politics or the media) and purely invented ones, and his blurring of the mythic and the ordinary, horror and humor – can be seen devised used to represent the A-P nature of reality more accurately, and as a more subtle modeling of the difficulties involved in distinguishing pop-cultural appearance from reality or establishing meaningful connections between media-generated images and their referents.

***Assassination Rhapsody* (Derek Pell, Autonomedia, 1989).** Functioning like an absurdist/minimalist version of Don DeLillo's maximal treatment of perhaps the most significant media event ever – the fateful intersection of Lee Harvey Oswald and JFK – Pell's *Rhapsody* is a collection of different sorts of texts and collages based on the Warren Commission Report. A listing of a few examples suggests the remarkable range of formal methods and discourses introduced, played with, mocked, and otherwise employed by Pell: lipograms ("The Magic Bullet"); illustrations ("A Bullet-Theory Poem"); a "Biography of Lee Harvey Oswald" composed of a sequence of brief snatches of (irrelevant and banal) autobiographical information ("Oswald appears to have taken with him a Spanish-English dictionary"); linked to seemingly unrelated and equally banal drawings<sup>1</sup> (e.g., a winter snowman holding a branch), and an Appendix of "Commission Exhibits" (these visuals include a composite of ears, mysterious maps and photographs, and a page entitled "Oswald's Underworld Ties" that displays bow ties, silk ties, etc.). But the greatest triumphs of *Rhapsody* are Pell's deconstructive versions of actual textual materials drawn from the *Commission Report*. Here, in texts such as "The Revolver," "The Nature of the Shots," and "The Long and Bulky Package of Dreams," Pell subjects materials from the original *Report* to various mechanical methods of transformation associated with artists like Raymond Roussel and the OULIPO Group (both greatly admired by Pell). The result is a series of wondrously crazed new texts which brilliantly and hilariously display the labyrinthine meandering, pseudo-logic, misplaced specificity, and rhetorical posturing that ultimately make *The Warren Commission Report* useless in terms of solving the mystery of JFK's death. What Pell's small volume demonstrates better than any other recent book, however, is that precisely the qualities that rendered the *Commission Report* useless from any practical standpoint. Pell is another writer like Steve Katz whose work is so radical and deeply subversive of

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<sup>1</sup>Most readers are able to "find" connections between the illustrations and the text, but in fact these accompanying images were originally done by [check name], who is best known for illustrating the works of Raymond Roussel.

conventional thinking about fiction that it has thus far eluded critical discussion. His time, however, will come. Also recommended: Pell's recent collection of Avant-Porn, *X-Texts* (Autonomedia, 1994). ***Tours of the Black Clock* (Steve Erickson; Simon and Schuster, 1989)**. The author of two earlier novels (*Days Between Stations* and *Rubicon Beach*) that captured a sense of Los Angeles's dizzying ability to wreak havoc on time and space, Steve Erickson reached his full creative powers in *Tours of a Black Clock*; this book combined Garcia Marquez's ability to magically exaggerated aspects of the familiar until they can be seen clearly once again with Faulkner's mesmerizing rhetoric's visionary power to explode time and space. The result is haunting and grotesque evocation of the shattered nature of 20th century life and its ongoing love affair with fascism and violence. Its central character, Bernard Jainlight, is a fascinating, murderous monster who transforms his personal obsession with death, guilty, and sexual passion into Avant-porn fantasies that help revive Hitler's lost dream of total power – and total submission. Erickson is one of those rare authors who is able to instantly access the deepest aspects of his own private torments and then use these as features of fictional narratives that move outward to comment on the tormented nature of larger political and social issues.

***American Psycho* (Bret Easton Ellis, Vintage, 1988)**. Brett Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* was probably the most notorious and widely denounced American novel of the 80s. It was also a brilliant A-P novel – perhaps the first undeniable classic works of fiction to be written by one of the leading writers of the first generation of American artists who never *didn't* know what it was like to live in a mediascape composed of 57 channels, each accessible by a mere flick of the remote control, each making equal demands on our attention (and, of course, our pocket book). Ellis's Patrick Bateman is a Wall Street businessman, who wears all the right clothes, watches soap operas and talk shows, rents dozens of videos each week, knows who to get the best tables for dinner and front-row concert seats. He's also possibly a crazed serial killer who seems to get off on having sex with prostitutes, then killing and eating them (like everything else in this life of full-blown hyper consumption, his life is something he purchases and consumes). Ellis brings all this to life via a series of startling A-P experimental formal methods that succeed in depicting Bateman's curious, flat, depthless personality in such a way as to produce the shock of recognition on our part of how close we all are to Bateman. *American Psycho* is a quintessential work of AP in that massive amounts of pop cultural images, info and details drawn from Bateman's daily life are recreated for us with a mechanical perfection, but they are placed within an aesthetic context that permits these free-floating signifiers to point to something beyond mere banality. That is, Ellis introduces such "trivia" as a means of displaying what is going on in Bate-mind – a mind which is literally "constructed" by the consumer items Bateman's consciousness encounter. These encounters are recreated for readers with the same flat, depthless, coolly neutral manner that they are presented on television, but this is hardly the way readers should receive this description. Rather these details function in much the same way they did in Robbe Grillet's A-P murder mystery, *The*

*Voyeur*: with mounting horror, disgust, and (perhaps the final indignity for our politically correct age) most certainly with laughter. In the end, then, *American Psycho*'s monumental excess becomes a devastating critique of the combination of horror and banality of precisely this excess. We thus should exit *American Psycho* with the same sense of momentary recognition expressed by Kurtz in *Babel* so eloquent that only Beckett and DeLillo have come close to it ("The horror, the horror") – a recognition that hopefully also supplies a clue about how to break through this horror.

***Dark City* (Charles Bernstein, Sun & Moon, 1992).** Bernstein is one of the leading poets and theorists associated with Language Poetry; he possesses the kind of mind that can use an image as a means of illuminating a section of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* one moment and then turn around and knowledgeably discuss the aesthetics of splatter punk films the next. *Dark City* is a recent collection (his twentieth book) of poems whose compositional methods can be compared to what artists like David Blair, Negativland or Craig Baldwin have been doing – namely, recontextualizing samples, drawn from an eclectic array of pop culture, philosophy, newspaper reports, and other found materials – into new structures of meaning. Rescued in this way from their original sources – computer lingo, the cant of TV talk shows, junk mail, would-be proverbs, nursery rhymes and pop songs – these snippets of words and phrases wind up being able to speak directly to us, directly and revealingly, about our society's collective concerns, fears and hopes. At times comic, at times bleak, *Dark City* is never merely ironic or cynical. In the end it winds up being a fascinating excursion into the everyday life of late-postindustrial capitalism. The world evoked here is a kaleidoscopic, dissolving collage of semiotic traces of American culture's deepest obsessions, most revealing fears and longings. Out of the mouths of banalities comes moving, evocative images, occasional flashes of insight about the confusions and loss of belief in postmodern life which are nearly always accompanied by Bernstein's humorous, affirmative insistence that meaning and truth can still be found today if one uses the creativity that everyone possess. Mind-expanding A-P-poetry at its very best.

***Avant Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation* (Larry McCaffery, ed., Black Ice Books/Fiction Collective 2, 1993),** Since the person who edited this first anthology of A-P is also same the person who is writing this entry, we can dispense with objectivity and present a biased hype-filled description without apology. *Fiction for a Daydream Nation* (the reference is to Sonic Youth's cyberpunk musical masterpiece) was the most extreme and innovative fiction anthologies to appear in the U.S. during the 90s. If there is a single recurrent motif which predominates in the selections – which includes stories by many of the most exciting new kids on the literary block (e.g., William Vollmann, Eurudice, Kathy Acker, Derek Pell, Harold Jaffe, Ricardo Cortez Cruz, Jill St. Jacques) – it is Avant-Porn; Americans today are living in a virtual world that is so utterly saturated with sexual imagery and sexual-role playing that the sweaty, exhilarating bodily mysteries of actual sex now seem almost beside the point. Imagine fiction that approaches sex by allowing the sexual resonances

of hard-boiled detective fiction, the Marquis de Sade, Sappho, slasher flicks, and composition handbooks to finally parade around in the S&M outfits they've always wanted to display but weren't allowed to, and you'll have some sense of what is going on in this collection. Avant-Prof. Larry McCaffery's alter-ego, "Mac," makes a memorable literary debut in the volume's critifictional introduction ("Tsunami") when a tattooed biker-chick-in-distress named Kathy Acker arrives in his office one rainy night and proceeds to give him a first-hand lesson about just how wild and free literary and sexual life really is these days. This collection helped launch a new Black Ice Books Avant-Pop book series, which McCaffery co-edited as an FC2 in print during the 90s. Publisher Mark Ziesing calls *Daydream Nation* "one of the heaviest and most interesting anthologies ever published." As for the editor himself, one of the blurbs that appears on the back cover of *Daydream Nation* probably says it best: "Larry McCaffery is either an idiot or a lunatic, and someone should stop him." Amen.

***The Heirs of Columbus* (Gerald Vizenor, University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).** *The Heirs of Columbus* provides a perfect example of how Vizenor has used his "trickster" literary program to construct a means of escaping victimization. This trickster approach offers a variety of ways to use the act of writing to re-shape histories. Published amidst all the self-congratulatory hoopla that accompanied the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America, *The Heirs of Columbus* presents a magical, often hilarious new version of the Columbus story that reveals that Native Americans are the true heirs of Columbus. The story incorporates various elements of cyberpunk, detective fiction, gambling stories, talk-shows, and other features of pop mythology to create a story that emphasizes self-empowerment for Native Americans. This willingness to use history for his own purposes – to use the fissures and gaps that exist in even the most meticulously recorded historical event – is one of several aspects of his work that Vizenor shares with his A-P contemporaries like William Vollmann, Kathy Acker, and Harold Jaffe.

***Glimpses* (Lewis Shiner, William Morrow, 1993).** On the strength of his first novel, *Frontera* (1984) and numerous well received stories, Lew Shiner was hailed as one of cyberpunk's leading practitioners. Along with William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, John Shirley and Rudy Rucker, Shiner helped American SF boldly and brashly emerge from the mean streets of SF's literary ghetto and began tooling around the main streets of postmodern fiction and culture, loudly broadcasting their messages of technological self-empowerment in prose equivalents of rap-cum-speed metal. During the remainder of the decade, Shiner moved away from the anti- or non-realism of SF and other genre writing toward more realistic approaches in *Deserted Cities of the Heart* (1987) and *Slam* (1990).

But the best example of the unusual kinds of formal, thematic, and personal strains that collide and interact in Shiner's – and Avant-Pop fiction's – best work can be found in his fourth novel, *Glimpses* (1992). Part traditional psychological narrative, part rock music documentary, part naked autobiography, part alternate world of the Philip K. Dickian variety, *Glimpses* tells the story of a young man struggling to come to grips with the death of his father and the breakup of a long-term

romantic relationship. In the midst of these struggles, he discovers that if he concentrates hard enough, he can conjure up – and then record – songs that were never performed in our world. These songs would have eventually comprised the materials of Jim Morrison's *Celebration of the Lizard*, Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys *Smile*, and Jimi Hendrix's *First Rays of the New Sun* – three legendary "lost albums" that, for various reasons, the artists were unable to ever complete. Ultimately Shiner's hero visits these artists in their past incarnations in an effort to change the circumstances that prevented them from recording these albums, each of which might have positively influenced our culture and history had they been released. In the process of re-entering the past and attempting to change other peoples' personal histories, Shiner's character learns something about his ability to begin making changes in his own life – as well as about certain areas that can't be changed but only accepted and dealt with.

***Going Native* (Stephen Wright, Farrar, Straus, 1993).** Stephen Wright's *Going Native*, is one of those rare works whose innovations in form, character-presentation, language, and theme are able to do nothing less than sum up the defining features of an entire era (in this case, our own A-P era). In *Going Native* Wright propels his central character, Wylie Jones, out onto the same open road traveled by earlier American heroes like Huck Finn, the Joads (in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*), *Easy Rider*'s Billy and Captain America, and the various alter ego's of Jack Kerouac and Bruce Springsteen. This trip doesn't, however, lead to the Promised Land or the American Dream but to something closer to a postmodern version of a Boschian nightmare, or Marlowe's harrowing journey upriver in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Constructed as a carefully ascending series of episodes, each contributing to a sense of postmodern unreality, *Going Native* Wright somehow manages to suck the life-blood out of works as diverse as *Dracula*, *Apocalypse Now*, just about every B-movie you can name (Orson Wells' *Touch of Evil*, for one), and many others you can't, in order to reanimate not just the "road novel" but a number of other standard American motifs (notably, the impulse to flee from responsibility, the veneer of innocence covering – if just barely so – an unspeakable brutality). All in all, then, Wright throws the greatest literary party since Robert Coover's *Gerald's Party* and has created perhaps the first unmistakable classic Avant-Pop novel of the 90s.

## MUSIC:

***Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (The Beatles, 1967).** It was twenty years ago today – or maybe a little more now – when this greatest of all A-P mind-blower albums first exploded in the ruins of western civilization – an arrival that ranks up there with Kennedy's assassination and the moon landing as one of the most truly memorable events of the 60s. The Beatles had been pushing the outer envelope of conventional pop sounds ever since *Revolver* (1965), and with *Sgt. Pepper's* the envelope simply dissolved, as in an acid dream. *Sgt. Pepper's* was a landmark work of A-P in so many different ways, it's hard to know where to begin a list. For one thing, the Beatles' decision to include a printed versions of the lyrics on the album cover codified the fact that rock lyrics deserved



to be read in their own right. This was also the first completely integrated "concept album" – not just a collection of songs but a unified work of art whose individual tracks told a story (the conceit being that they are an old-time music hall band singing songs about contemporary English life) and interrelated with one another in various ways to create a whole which was much greater and richer than just a sum of its parts; the album was also a landmark in its use of sonic montages, tape loops, and multi-track recording, and a psychedelic mind-voyage that harkened back to Rimbaud's *Illuminations* and which was loaded with sly and secret references to getting high. *Sgt. Pepper* was a challenge to virtually all artists and performers who were interested in transforming pop cultural forms into serious works of art with genuinely subversive potential – the very essence of A-P aesthetics. That this potential was worrisome to such a wide range of people is a tribute to A-P generally – in the U.S., the Ku Klux Klan put *Sgt. Pepper's* on a wooden cross and set it ablaze and the Klan's Grand Wizard exhorted radio audiences to "Get out there, you teenagers, and cut off your Beatle-style long hair. Join those at the bonfires and throw your locks into the fire! Burn, burn, burn everything that is the Beatle!" One can image the ghost of Arthur Rimbaud looking down and smiling. Meanwhile Bob Larson's *Hippies, Hindus and Rock and Roll* was asking, "If the Beatles are going to pray to Hindu Gods, invite demon spirits to enter and control their bodies, and encourage Americas youth to do likewise, where might it all lead?" The answer, of course, was that, along with Tim Leary, Hendrix, and LSD, it led to the first full flowering of A-P; like other A-P bombshell's that blazed across the sky during this period – Dylan's *Highway 60 Revisited*, Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, Kubrick's *2001 – Sgt Pepper* effectively legitimized A-P as a major new art form capable of producing significant changes in people's consciousness. When acid-guru Tim Leary first heard the album, his response of ecstatic: "I declare that the Beatles are mutants. Prototypes of evolutionary agents sent by God with a mysterious power to create a new species." That species was, of course, the Avant Pop Species. ***Andy Warhol Presents the Velvet Underground and Nico (Velvet Underground, 1967)***. Like fictional A-P innovators from the same period (Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme, John Barth, and Thomas Pynchon, for example), the Velvet Underground systematically and self-consciously re-examined and then openly disrupted their genre's conventional assumptions about formal unity and beauty, about the "proper" was to manipulate their medium's elements into a structure, and about the nature of the creative "self" and "authenticity." Sponsored initially by Andy Warhol, whose role in the A-P's breakdown of the division between avant-garde and the mainstream is central and ongoing, the Velvets mixed musical styles (folk, minimalism, thrash, jazz, gothic rock) and messages in a way ideally suited for expressing the multiple, contradictory textures of postindustrial urban life. In their early performances in Warhol's multi-media happenings (the "Plastic Exploding Inevitable"), the Velvet's music was presented within a dissolving, multi-genre display of Warhol movies, dance, light shows, and improvisational poetry – a bewildering cacophony of avant-garde noise, light, humans interacting with images and sounds, and the Velvet's deliberately dissonant,

minimalist three-7 chord progressions. These performances were composed of discrete parts – photographers taking photo's of the audience, dance, different Warhol movies being continuously projected onto the bodies of musicians and other performers, etc. – all presented in a non-hierarchical simultaneity that defiantly refused to cohere in any traditional sense. Although the Velvet were, like the Beatles, interested in the way technology could be used to produce unusual sound effects and distortions, they used technology to capture a raw, "naked" sound; thus, in songs like "Sister Ray" (on their second studio album, *White Light, White Heat*) and "European Son" (both influenced by Avant-Jazz innovator Ornette Coleman's equally unconventional notions of dissonance and harmony), they experimented with the effects of repetition, of the accumulated and chance effects of feedback, even the concepts of boredom and willful crudity (cf. Warhol's movies such as "Sleep" and "Empire" from the same period), so that a tension develops between the tight, monotonous formal structure and bursts of piercing sounds and pure noise. Often playing with their backs to the audience, and occasionally abandoning the stage altogether while their guitars continued to shriek and drone on, the Velvet also foregrounded the concepts of rock musicians as *image* or mechanical simulacrum (essentially an extension of Warhol's fascination with the mechanical and reproducible qualities of life and art, the artist-as-machine) in ways that anticipated the more elaborate and playful A-P methods of David Bowie, punk musicians, and Madonna. In short, the Velvet Underground ushered in the A-P era of self-conscious, self-referential rock – the rock music that would segue into the glam and punk phenomena of the 1970s, into the New York art rock scene of the same period that produced later A-P artists like Patti Smith, the New York Dolls, Jim Carroll and Talking Heads, and which would eventually mutate into the rap/scratch/dub and funk collage-sounds of urban blacks, the performance art music of Laurie Anderson, and the peculiar jazz/rock creations of John Zorn and Hal Willner.

***The Wild, the Innocent and the E-Street Shuffle (Bruce Springsteen, 1973).*** "Wait, a minute!" you're saying, "an A-P album by *Springsteen* is on this list?" Well, for people who bought into the mistaken hype surrounding Springsteen's fabulously successful *Born in the USA* (1984) – Springsteen as basically just an "ordinary guy," a conservative, flag-waving patriot (the "Rambo of Rock") whose music upholds the values (and musical tastes) of middle class America – *The E Street Shuffle* should be an ear-opener. In fact, Springsteen is one of America's most inventive and innovative composers. *The Wild, the Innocent* was his second album and remains perhaps his most experimental work to date. What's interesting in listening to this songs today is how truly peculiar and experimental Springsteen really is. What we find here are songs in which pop clichés drawn from films and rock mythology have been reprocessed into street poetry and musical textures of great power and beauty. Springsteen was one of the first figures creating self-conscious rock – rock which examined its own status and original sources even while exploring new musical avenues, connections, and so forth. Here "Uncle Billy's Circus Song" evokes the image of a rundown circus to examine the contrast between the public perception of rock and the gritty, sleazy realities to create one of the great of all

meta-rock songs. Likewise, in "Rosalita" Springsteen created a joyous, comic version of his own trail to rock success while also developing a more universal suggestions about the ways rock can be seen as a mythic expression of larger patterns of American experience (rock as transcendence, rock as an embodiment of the American Dream, etc. etc.).

What's equally striking in this album is the ways Springsteen at this period in his career was restlessly seeking ways to blend musical idioms drawn from jazz, soul, and folk music in original ways. A song like "The E Street Shuffle" opens slowly as a piercing guitar note begins to interact with a New Orleans Dixieland riff, and as the song unfolds, we move through different musical territories – jump blues, R&B, jazz jamming – until we finally arrive at the smoky intensity of the East Coast bar-band sound that Springsteen had revitalized so successfully. The unexpected, rapid-fire movements in and out of different tempos and musical textures, the use of musical instruments which are utterly unexpected within a rock context (accordions, glockenspiels, trumpets, tuba's, even violins), the richness and beauty of Springsteen's transformations of street talk into street POETRY, the rush of startling one-liners that are tossed off, like many of the greatest lines in rock, almost as throwaway lines, while still being able to retain rock's passion, excitement, intensity – maybe Saturday night really *isn't* ever going to end – all this makes *The Wild* not only one of A-P seminal albums but one of the great rock albums of any kind.

***There'll Be no Tears Tonight (Eugene Chadbourne, 1980).*** Chadbourne may well be the greatest of all contemporary A-P musicians. He's released over two dozens albums of his own and several other collaborative efforts with other artists like Evan Johns and Camper Van Beethoven. Although Chadbourne has had a major impact on people like John Zorn and various other musicians working on the boundaries of jazz, rock, and other pop musical forms, his work is so truly *twisted* and unique that as yet it remains largely unknown outside of a small, devoted groups of fans. Chadbourne's first album, *LSDC&W* (1969), included utterly crazed and hilarious "cover versions" of famous Beatle tunes like "Day Tripper" (it also featured a young saxophonist named John Zorn, who also appears on *There'll Be No Tears Tonight*). Imagine a cross between Les Paul, Jimi Hendrix, Chet Atkins, and Spike Jones and you'll get some sense of what Chadbourne's free, improvised country and western bee-bop sounds like. Essentially he's a brilliant jazz guitarist and composer who has been working mostly with the straightforward lexicon of country-western music because this materials offers the opportunity to crunch musical expectations and to explore a realm of instrumental freedom in songs that are so simple that they have to be split wide open, not by merely trashing them, but by looking for the hole (as they say in pro football). And Chadbourne finds holes where you never thought they existed – in songs like Johnny Paycheck's horrifically sentimentalized, macho tunes like "Take This Job and Shove It" and "I'm the Only Hell My Momma Ever Raised," or Roger Miller's "Dang Me" and "The Last Word in Lonesome Is Me"; he then proceeds to fill them with whatever seems incongruously perfect: assorted squeals, squawks, buzz-saw grindings, and other out-to-lunch

interludes supplied by Zorn and percussionist David Licht. What would Hank Williams sound like on LSD? For the answer, check out this album.

***Zen Arcade (Husker Du, 1982).*** How might Eastern mysticism somehow be relevant to the concerns of punk? To answer this question, the premier American punk band of the 80s, Minneapolis' trio, Husker Du, released their third album, *Zen Arcade*. It's not clear that *Arcade* ever succeeded in sending any of its listeners off to join a monastery, but certainly Bob Mould's mind-blowing guitar work throughout this album had a kind of mystical effect on nearly everyone who heard the album. Among other things, this album also demonstrated that punk was a musical form capable of embracing and exploring large and significant topics outside narrowly political/social issues it had most dealt with up until this point.

***Avant Pop (Lester Bowie, 1984).*** My first encounter with the term Avant-Pop was when I bought an album by that name by Lester Bowie, the great alto-sax player and jazz composer best known for his work with the wildly inventive Chicago Art Ensemble. Listening to Bowie do his collaborative treatments of such pop standards as "Autumn Leaves," was instrumental in shaping my subsequent thinking about what I was to later term "the A)P Phenomenon." Bowie's "Avant-Pop" provided musical evidence that jazz musicians could apply their improvisatory, collaborative methods to familiar pop materials whose very familiarity made them seem resistant to reinterpretation— and that the result could be zingingly ironic and funny, at other times genuinely. Later jazz composers like Eugene Chadbourne and John Zorn provide more contemporary examples of artists whose sensibilities I would describe as being "avant-pop."

Bowie's "Avant-Pop" included a whole series of crazed, hilarious, and yet often quite gorgeous versions of such familiar, bland pop standards. Listening to way Bowie used the basic structures and "content" of "Autumn Leaves"— a bland, catchy pop song I had grown up listening to on the radio during the mid 50s— as a springboard for producing a collaborate, improvisatory new work was instrumental (no pun intended) in beginning the process of my thinking of what I was to later term "The Avant-Pop Phenomenon." It immediately occurred to me that such methods were analogous to those being used by postmodern fiction writers like Kathy Acker's "re-writes" of classic novels (e.g., GREAT EXPECTATIONS and DON QUIXOTE), or the various treatments of Biblical and mythological materials by Robert Coover, John Barth, Steve Katz, and Harold Jaffe. In the case of Bowie's "Autumn Leaves" the results of this improvisatory approach to earlier material were at once zingingly ironic and funny, and yet also genuinely expansive. Subjected to Bowie's alchemical imagination, the bland and utterly familiar elements of this simple pop tune had undergone a remarkable sea-change into some fresh and surprising— these materials which had seemed so simple and exhausted were in fact capable of being re-cycled in such a way that had opened up them, exposing the numerous layers of resonances and aesthetic possibilities that had been lying there all along, invisible to most people's eyes, but patiently waiting for just the right moment when an

aesthetic explorer like Bowie might come along who was capable of recognizing their untapped possibilities. I was teaching a graduate course at that time in postmodernism and rock music, and I was soon using the musical works of contemporary innovators like Eugene Chadbourne, John Zorn, Laurie Anderson, rap musicians, as well as those by earlier figures like Carl Stallings (who created the musical scores for many of the great Warner Brothers cartoons) as a means to give students a better understanding of a whole series of concepts central to postmodern aesthetics and critical theory – e.g., appropriation, slippage, jouissance, intertextuality, sampling, and so on. These works were also useful in providing students with examples of the ways po-mo artists were beginning to question the basic tenants of originality.

***United States, Parts I-IV (Laurie Anderson, 1985)***. Like Avant-Punk diva Patti Smith, Laurie Anderson's career has its roots in the New York art scene of the early 70s. There are other significant points of comparison: both developed ambiguous, androgynous stage personas that confounded pop cultural sexual stereotypes; both were influenced by the Beat authors (and by William S. Burroughs in particular), as well as by Dada; and both relied upon lyrical styles that emphasized collage and reflexiveness as a means of exploring their mutual, obsessive fascination with language generally, and particularly with the failure of language to communicate our most basic fears, longings and sensory impressions. Much more than Smith, however, Anderson's music needs to be seen in the wider context of performance art. The components of Anderson's A-P synthesis – a mixture of literature, theater, music, photography, stand-up comedy, film, architecture, poetry, fantasy, and dance – are, in effect, a veritable landscape of mass cultural forms. Especially in her large scale performance pieces that were eventually collected into her magnum opus – the two evening, eight hour long *United States, Parts I-IV* – which includes most of the songs that appeared in her first two surprisingly popular albums *Big Science* (1982) and *Mr. Heartbreak* (1985) – we see Anderson developing multi-media arrangements of text, image, movement and musical sounds that employ technologies to present a bemused, often bitterly A-P critique of technology. Like Michael Stipe of REM, David Byrne of Talking Heads, Captain Beefheart, Brian Eno, and many other recent A-P composers, Anderson's approach to song-writing takes its cue more from sculptural and painterly notions than from narrative. As she weaves together vignettes, found language and oblique references to pop culture, "serious literature," philosophy, and advertising into verbal and musical collages, Anderson relentlessly circles upon issues central to A-P: the ways mass culture problematizes language's ability to function properly; the way that our alienation and confusion are produced by mass culture and *Big Science*; and the ways that mass culture's constant stream of words and images serves to stimulate, alienate and exhilarate people who are exposed to them.

***Lost in the Stars: The Music of Kurt Weill (Hal Willner producer, A&M Records, 1985)***. "I have never acknowledged the difference between 'serious' music and 'light' music," Kurt Weill once told an interviewer. "There is only good music and bad music." Weill was a German Jewish composer best known for his collaborations with Bertolt Brecht (e.g. *The Threepenny*

*Opera*) and who subsequently fled Hitler's takeover to establish a career in Manhattan as the greater of a series of Avant-Broadway musicals such as *Lost in the Stars* before his death in 1950. Weill was already a composer of opera, symphonies and orchestral works before he hooked up with Brecht and began crossing all sorts of musical barriers. One of the 20th centuries' greatest A-P musical figures, Weill is a composer whose works have been simultaneously in the repertoire of the NY Metropolitan Opera (*The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany*), the Doors (who recorded Weill's "Alabama Song" on their first album), Bing Crosby and Willie Nelson (who both recorded "September Song"), and Louis Armstrong and 50s pop crooner, Bobby Darin (who covered "Mac the Knife").

It was therefore entirely appropriate that *Lost in the Stars* – a major retrospective of Weill's works – was produced by perhaps the most influential single figure in American A-P music: Hal Willner. Wilmer's acceptance of two key A-P dictums – that *no work of art* is ever "finished, and that there are a near infinite number of ways that "light" art can be transformed into "serious" art (and vice-versa, of course) – led him to produce a series of startling, brilliant "cover albums" in which the work of a single artist was recontextualized and reinterpreted by an eclectic array of contemporary musicians with backgrounds in jazz, punk, folk, classical, rock and just about every other musical idiom imaginable. In *Lost in the Stars* Weill's greatest tunes were interpreted by a fascinating series of musicians such as Lou Reed ("September Song"), Charlie Haden ("Speak Low"), Tom Waits ("What Keeps Mankind Blue"), Van Dyke Parks ("Johnny Johnson Medley"), Sting ("Mac the Knife"), Carla Bley ("Lost in the Stars"), and Todd Rundgren ("Call for the Crime"). Also recommended by Willner: *That's the Way I Feel Now: The Music of Thelonious Monk* and *Stay Awake* (covers of Walt Disney movie tunes).

***Spillane (John Zorn, Electra/Nonesuch, 1987).*** John Zorn is an alto saxophonist and one of A-P's music's most daring composers and original theorists. Although he is usually associated with the current enormously vital jazz scene of lower Manhattan, Zorn in fact has been producing a body of A-P work that systematically demolishes genre distinctions and high brow/low brow divisions, while opening up radically new approaches to organizing sounds. In collaboration with musicians such as drummer Bobby Previte, saxophonist Tim Berne, Keyboardist Wayne Horvitz, and guitarists Bill Frisell and Fred Frith, Zorn has created a music whose "content" and methods of improvisation and composition grow naturally out of our media age's longing to recuperate the past and its restless need for new stimuli.

Zorn's application of these notions is was first fully realized in *The Big Gundown* – an entire album of music by Ennio Morricone, who is best known for his scores of films by Sergio Leone, Bernardo Bertolucci and Brian DePalma and who is, along with Carl Stallings perhaps the most important early A-P composer. Morricone's musical compositions are usually unsettling, peculiar transformations of popular American idioms (analogous, say, to Sergio Leone's surreal, Italian versions of America's wild-west mythologies); reworked by Zorn's radical A-P composition methods,

these works undergo a sea change into something utterly distinctive, as the individual "quoted" materials in *The Big Gundown* appear and then dissolve into one another at varying paces; some are inverted, others speeded up or slowed down, while many of them are further transformed by the insertion of bizarre vocal, instrumental and other sound effects. But *Spillane* is Zorn's masterpiece to date; it is probably also the most successful single A-P musical composition to date of any kind. The title refers to hard-boiled detective novelist Mickey Spillane, and the thirty-minute title piece is a kind of mulligan stew of musical ingredients that Zorn serves up as a musical banquet tribute to Spillane. In his album liner notes, Zorn explained the composition methods involved. After he had thoroughly researched his subject – which turns out to be not only Spillane but the whole tradition of detective fiction and its *film noire* relative – Zorn wrote his findings on filing cards. Some of these cards contained biographical data; others were sounds that Zorn associates with Spillane, his work and detective films (windshield wipers, rain falling, screams, gunshots, phone rings, bar crowds, and so on). Zorn then meticulously organized these cards into the order that eventually created the linear progression of the composition. Like most of Zorn's other pieces, "Spillane" is a mixture of improvised and notated elements, including brief prose texts by Arto Lindsay that are read by Jonathan Lurie in a voice that is eerily and hilariously appropriate for the ambiance being established. The results are roughly equivalent to the Avant-Prose Assemblages of language poets such as Ron Silliman, Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, and with A-P authors such as Kathy Acker, Harold Jaffe and Donald Barthelme, where a single theme or image is used to hold together otherwise disparate materials (obviously there are equally valid analogies that one can make with painterly and sculptural assemblages). MTV-like in its rapid paces and the heterogeneous nature of its materials, "Spillane" evolves and moves forward as a free-associative work that presents a composite aural portrait of its subject in a spirit of playful homage and exuberance. Operating at the boundaries of A-P's reinvestigations of artistic originality and compositional processes, John Zorn's music perfectly illustrates the ways that developments within popular music have been busy assimilating the chief aesthetic and cultural evident in other A-P art forms.

***The Carl Stallings Project: Music from Warner Bros. Cartoons, 1936-1958 (Carl Stallings, with liner notes by John Zorn, Warner Brothers Records, 1990).*** It wasn't Dylan, Hendrix, Chuck Berry, the Beatles or even Elvis that most American postmodern artists were weaned on when they were kids but the music of Carl Stallings, who during the 1940s and 50s composed most of the scores for the classic Warner Brothers cartoons. It was only when they were a little older and hanging out, drinking cheap wine, smoking cigarettes (and wishing it was grass), that they began listening to scratchy 78s of Miles Davis, Bird, Coltrane (in jazz) and Elvis, Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard. In short, the common view that postmodernism emerged out of the 60s sensibility simply misrepresents the origins and influences of the movement. At any rate, listening today to Stallings' music without the cartoon context they first appeared in, it's obvious how truly strange, innovative, and original his compositions actually are. Stallings' music was created to reinforce and

interact with the surreal world of cartoons – a world whose landscape typically undergoes an bizarre and eclectic series of transformations within the courses of just a few moments of frantic action. Thus a Bugs Bunny cartoon might start off with Bugs being chased out of his comfortable rabbit hole by a gun-toting Elmer Fudd, then find himself playing the role of a matador in a Spanish bullring, then a waiter at Monte Carlo casino, then suddenly zapped into a Puccini opera, facing off Yosemite Sam at high noon in a Western showdown, and then rowing his boat into the sunset as the cartoon ends (with Elmer perhaps shown paddling futilely after him mumbling "I'll get you yet, you cwazy wabbit!!!"). Stallings' approach to composing scores for such works was a revolutionary "blocks of sound" method in which a familiar musical melody or idiom (say, "The Flight of the Bumblebee") would be recreated, appropriated and pastiched – but only for a few moments before being replaced by completely different tune (something like "Do Not Forsake Me Oh My Darling" theme from Fred Zinneman's western classic, *High Noon*) which typically had a very different set of resonances and associations for the audience. Growing up with this kind of music helped prepare later television audiences for creating similarly bizarre "aural stews" as they casually zapped past 20 or 30 different TV shows during a ten or fifteen minute interval; it also would have an enormous impact on the aesthetics employed by A-P artists like Steve Erickson, John Zorn, Robert Coover, Mark Leyner, and Quentin Tarantino. In other words, John Zorn isn't kidding when he refers to Stallings as "one of the 20th century's most original composers." And in fact, my own view is that once critics finally get around to seriously examining the impact of cartoons on postmodern (and A-P) aesthetics, they're going to discover that these "primitive" forms played an analogous role in the evolution of postmodernism as African art did in the evolution of Picasso's and other major modernist masters. Check it out.

***Spiked: The Music of Spike Jones (Spike Jones, BMG Music, 1994).*** Spike Jones was the first American A-P composer and band to achieve national recognition (by contrast, his contemporary, Carl Stallings – creator of the music for the Warner Brothers Cartoons – was almost completely unknown until the late 80s). During the 40s and 50s, Jones and his talented orchestra used the soothing, banalities of familiar pop musical materials as a well-grounded launch site for their own extended, wildly inventive, and often hilarious improvisations. Like Eugene Chadborne (the only American musician to come close to Jones in terms of sheer range of crazed inventiveness), what Jones was doing was actually akin to jazz's improvisational treatments of familiar materials and as is also true of Chadbourne, Jones often selected country music for a number of his greatest reconstructive appropriations because of the narrowness and conservative nature of the county audience and most of the music it loved. But Jones' approach to composition – which could be summarized as something like, "Okay, boys, now I want the drums to set the beat, the piano and the reeds will get the melody going, and then we'll use the cowbells-and-gunshots for syncopation" – not only produced a lot of mayhem and laughs; it also opened up whole new areas of sound for musicians to explore. The fact that no less a luminary than A-P Top Gun Thomas Pynchon was



brought in here to write the appreciative liner notes for this retrospective of Jones' work suggests how much of an influence on the budding A-P movement Spike Jones had.

#### FILM:

***Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying About the Bomb* (Stanley Kubrick, 1963).**

Stanley Kubrick is, along with Woody Allen, the greatest of all contemporary A-P filmmakers, and during a remarkably productive fifteen years period Kubrick created a number of classic A-P films that mined rich veins of genre materials such as horror (*The Shining*) and SF (*2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Clockwork Orange*) that most artists assumed had long since been exhausted. In *Dr. Strangelove* Kubrick took the basic plot device of one of the most familiar (and disturbing) SF formulas of the 50s – accidental nuclear warfare – whose purported aim was to force Americans to "think the unthinkable." *Dr. Strangelove* certainly did that, but its A-P approach to this formula also asked something more of audiences: to *laugh about it*.

***A Hard Day's Night* (Richard Lester, 1964).** About a year before the release of the first two major Avant-Rock albums were released (these were Bob Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* and the Beatles' *Revolver*), Richard Lester had already demonstrated that rock's visceral power and passion could be wedded successfully to the avant-garde's experimental formal features. In *A Hard Day's Night* Lester used his background doing TV commercials and many of the innovations of French New Wave cinema (most notably "cinema verite" techniques) to create a wonderfully zany Avant-documentary about the Beatles phenomenon.

***Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Goddard, Pathe Contemporary Films, 1965; originally released as *Alphaville, Une Etrange Aventure de Lemmy Caution*).** The appearance of Goddard's *Breathless* in 1959 not only signaled the arrival of the French New Wave as a major cinematic movement of great stylistic verve, freshness, intelligence, but it signaled how crucial A-P aesthetics were going to be to the evolution of serious European and American cinema throughout the 60s. In *Breathless* Goddard used reference to the characters and plot lines of Hollywood's great *noire* and hard-boiled films to provide viewer understanding of the psychological and mythic dimensions of his own films. Jean Paul Belmardo's self-understanding is so thoroughly saturated with the clichés and images of Hollywood that even during the famous death scene that concludes the film, he seems to be acting out one of Bogart's scenes.

But it was *Alphaville* (1965) where Goddard's A-P impulses reached their apotheosis. Here Goddard took Lemmy Caution (in "real life" a well-known French film detective) and inserted him into a dystopian future where you can drive to the planet Alphaville in a Ford Galaxies (the same car which would be used by the serial killer in Steven Wright's astonishing A-P masterpiece, *Going Native*). The plot is pure recycled SF-dystopia cliché: Assigned to bring back or liquidate Prof. Von Braun, Lemmy winds up being tricked by his daughter (the luscious Anna Karina), an emotionless citizen rules by Alpha-60, the ultimate control computer, which on a daily basis rewrites the Bible/

dictionary used by ordinary citizens by changing the meaning of words and banning others. But like all great A-P innovators, what interested Goddard was not the familiar associations that such stereotypes could evoke in audiences, but their untapped potential for revealing key features of contemporary life—here the tired elements are recontextualized so that *Alphaville* becomes a fascinating allegory of a world psychological and metaphysical confusion, of governmental control and media manipulation, and of the meaning of human freedom in a world suddenly under the thumb of media control.

***Popeye* (Robert Altman, 1980; based on comic characters created by E.C. Segar).** Comic character created by E. C. Segar. Cartoons. Altman here fleshes out an alternative universe. When Popeye arrives in the comic-bookish fishing village of Sweethaven searching for his father, he initially seems more human and less of a comic strip stereotype than Sweethaven inhabitants; but gradually he becomes drawn into this bizarre world until he comes to stand as its very emblem. Thus, here we observe human actors portraying cartoon characters who seem more real than the real thing—a kind of reversal of what would be found in later A-P television cartoons, such as *The Simpsons*, *Dick Man*, and *King of the Hill*, where cartoon figures portraying real people wind up being the most “human” figures found on television. In recognizing the archetypal nature of Popeye—the ways he embodies mythic archetypes from Homer's Odysseus up through the figures in Tom Waits early albums—Altman is also able to examine the need for people to adjust to things as they actually are, as well as to explore the relationship between dreams and obsession, truth and illusion, sweetness and savagery. Sweethaven IS a haven, not just for Popeye, but for many of the fantasies of the great American Dream.

***Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994).** To paraphrase something that rock critic Jon Landau once said about Bruce Springsteen, I have seen the future of A-P cinema and its name is Quentin Tarantino.

#### **TELEVISION, VIDEO, HYPERTEXT, RADIO, MULTI-MEDIA:**

***Laugh-In* (conceived by George Schlatter, NBC, 1967).** *Laugh-In* (technically titled "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In") was an Ed Sullivan-on-acid comedy/variety series unlike anything that had previously ever been on American television. Hosted by Dick Martin (the suave, handsome guy) and Dan Rowan (the goofy one), the show swung in and out of control at a demented pace that would be matched only fifteen years when MTV premiered. *Laugh-In* was the first television show to abandon the tired formal mannerisms that television had always relied on—mostly ones borrowed from vaudeville, theater and film—and began to develop stylistic features more suitable for the "hot" visual medium of television itself. While Rowan and Martin stood around looking amused and befuddled by the whirlwind of hip bits of condensed satire and meta-TV commentaries that encircled, them, each show unfolded as a barrage of cockeyed sight gags, irreverent one-liners, parodies and commentaries on current events and social issues (a rarity in American television outside the news), meta-television skits, off-color sketches, and surprise cameo appearances by celebrities ranging from

Tiny Tim (who premiered his "Tiptoe Through the Tulips") to presidential candidate Richard Nixon saying "Sock it to me?" in 1968. Unquestionably the first postmodern television show, *Laugh-In* helped pave the way for the considerably darker humor and outrageousness of shows like *Monty Python* and *Saturday Night Live*, which began to inject was a vortex of biz and developed a form that took advantage of a perfect example of postmodernism's non-hierarchical methods of presentation.

***Saturday Night Live* (Loren Michaels, director, NBC, 1975).** What can I say? During the first several years of its existence, *Saturday Night Live* was not only the greatest A-P television show of its day, but with the possible exception of *Twin Peaks* and *Duckman* – which I haven't had time to write entries for but which should be included in any list of important A-P works – was, quite simply, the greatest American television show of any kind.

***The Simpsons* (originally written and directed by Matt Groening; Fox Network, 1990).** *The Simpsons* first achieved national recognition due to the popularity of Bart Simpson, the adorable monster-child who delighted audiences in the ways he departed from the drearily-predictable portrayals found in most American TV of kids as diligent and well-meaning. There was, of course, a tradition of mischief-making kids in American pop culture, but Bart's personality was far darker and more unsettling than Denis-the-Menace ever dreamed of being. Thus Bart's gleeful delight while watching the mayhem and horrific violence of "Ren and Stimpy" (a cartoon-within-the-cartoon, and one of many regular meta-media devices used in *The Simpsons*) is funny, but also a disturbing commentary about the ways American youngsters are encouraged by pop culture to view violence of an occasion for empathy and enjoyment rather than as something all-too-real and to be avoided. Likewise the other members of the Simpson family are all anti-heroes (with good souls) who seem uncomfortably similar to the citizens living next door to us in the suburbs: Homer (the dad), who spends most of his time at his job at a nuclear plant eating donuts, sucking up to his boss, and spilling beer on sensitive monitor instruments, is the lovable dad-from-hell who is utterly self-absorbed, full of grandiose (but ill-fated) plans, and who has all the wrong answers to family problems. His wife, Marge, sports a blue beehive hairdo that has been compared with the coif of the bride of Frankenstein, struggles in vain to make Homer and Bart more couch – and only occasionally falls victim to gambling-fever or other addictive vices. Rounding out the family are Bart's mirror opposite, the goody-two-shoes Lisa, and baby Maggie, who is always shown brainlessly sucking on a pacifier.

The show began as a series of short (30 and 60 second) animated segments that were used in the James L. Brooks "The Tracey Ullman Show" as buffers between live action segments and commercials. These cartoon segments were written and directed by Matt Groening, whose portrayal of tortured, alienated existence of a family of buck-toothed rabbits in his "Life in Hell" comic strips established him as perhaps the most brilliant Avant-cartoonists in America.

*The Simpsons* were not the first TV program to display the ugly underbelly of American family life – Jackie Gleason's *The Honeymooners* did it (though the Kramdens were childless) and so did *All in the Family*; what's original about *The Simpsons* was its success in blending features of A-P aesthetics

into a family-sit-com situation. These features include its pop-cultural info density, its speed-metal paces, its hilarious send-ups of so many different features of the media, and its extremity of vision. Along the way, it's also somehow managed to create a much more thoughtful and moving portrayal of a love affair (between Homer and Marge) than any other American television show using "real people."

***The Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop: Or How to Be a Sex Goddess in 101 Easy Steps (Annie Sprinkles; prod. and directed by Sprinkles and Maris Beatty, 1992)***. In her Avant-Porn videos, performance pieces and theater works, Annie Sprinkles blurs the distinction between artist and whore, performance art and pornography has invented a whole new vocabulary of the body which performs bosom ballets, female money shots, and six-minute orgasms to speak the bodily language of female desire, please and agency in these things. It goes without saying that the results of highly subversive in all sorts of ways. In *Sluts and Goddess* Sprinkles uses one of porn's most basic formulas – the sex manual advice about the best positions – as a means of developing a broad (no pun intended), erotically charged parody of and commentary on masculine sexual conventions. Appearing in the role of a "legitimate" sex educator whose sometimes clinical and sometimes raunchy version of show-and-tell offers more knowledge than pleasure, Sprinkles' "performances" of spectacular orgasms is contextualized so that these orgasms take on very different meanings than they traditionally have in masculine-oriented pornography, where female orgasms are nearly always shown to satisfy the (usually male) audiences' desire to have visual proof that a woman's pleasure is taking place.

***Beavis and Butthead***, USA Network, 1993). There's was a lot said about MTV's most notorious show during the 90s, but not enough said about how truly *brilliant* and *timely* it's ultra-minimalist, Beckett-meets-Dick Clark's Bandstand approach to meta-dada and meta-teen-exploitation genres actually was. Nor how *significant* and genuinely *perceptive* their "reviews" of contemporary music video (and rock musicians) are (Beavis and Butthead are far – *far* – more reliable about what music "roles" versus what "sucks" than their counterparts in *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, allegedly "serious" rock magazines which increasingly are becoming virtually indistinguishable from the more bland corporate-sponsored-magazines-still-masquerading-as-a-counter culture which indeed receded away into an image-of itself). One of the most significant formal innovations is one that other A-P artists are certain to do more with as the technologies to do them become more available – that is, devising a work that creates an ongoing commentary about (and collaboration with) another work of art in "real time." B&B's brilliance can be summed up with Beavis's comments while watching the opening the opening moments of the Stray Cats video of "Rock This Town" (a meta-Rockabilly tune that straddles the border of parody and a brilliant simulation); after a few moments of watching Brian Seltzer (lead singer in the Stray Cats) trying (in vain) to lip sync the song while simultaneously riding a motorcycle around late at night, Beavis dead pans, "Is that Billy Idol?" If you understand the resonances of that

remark, you'll understand the kind of subtlety, range of reference, and viciously accurate commentary about how much 98% of the material shown on MTV *really does suck!*

***Wax, or the Discovery of Television (David Blair, 1991)***. David Blair's quirky, brilliant feature length electronic video, *Wax, or the Discovery of Television Among the Bees* (1991) is quite simply the aesthetic culmination of the cyberpunk movement. *Wax* is a mind-warping and yet emotionally-engaging film which relied in part for its startling and poetic visual effects on Blair's access to state-of-the-art digital image-processing and non-linear editing equipment. These new technologies had allowed Blair to manipulate the individual images in his film, and to blend documentary and archival materials, and 3-D military VR footage together with "live" location shots – all of which were subsequently reprocessed and collaged in post production. The visual resulting that emerges on the screen have been repeatedly compared by reviewers to *2001's* concluding "Star Gate" sequences, but they are actually closer in look and texture to the work of early video and cinema innovators like Nam June Paik, Harry Smith, and Jordon Belson. Whatever one thinks of *Wax* as a whole, it is unquestionably one of the most startling *looking* films ever made.

In terms of its themes and plot, *Wax* deals with many of the personal, aesthetic and metaphysical issues that are emerging as a result of the same technologies Blair utilized in the making of his film. The story evolves out of a Pynchonian labyrinth of actual and imagined historical reference, Biblical, mythological and cyberpunk archetypes, Baudrillardian "simulations" of present-day pseudo-events, plus brief glimpses into quirky visual realms created by early cinema and television artists. Bathed in paranoia, grotesquerie, and black humor, and presented by Blair (who also stars in the film) in a narrative style that blends lyricism, precision and sheer goofiness, the end result is an image-and-information dense, hallucinatory film experience – a postmodernists roller-coaster ride that takes viewers to places that seem at once familiar and dream-like.

***U2, Zoo TV Tour (1993)***. In this tour, everybody's All-World band from Ireland used 90s technology (notably the interactive video technology and sampling techniques of avant-video artists, Emergency Broadcast Network) as a means of creating a kind of auto-deconstruction of their own status as rock icons while simultaneously encouraging audiences to recognize the way their own identities are essentially media-constructs that had grown stale and clichéd. In the process U-2's Avant-concert also managed to explore traditional questions of values lost – and rarely regained.

***Xplora (Peter Gabriel, 1994)***. Ever since his days with Genesis, it was obvious that Peter Gabriel recognized the inherent interactivity of the rock medium. During his distinguished career, he has sought to combine his musical talent with various technological innovations (for instance, his video's for "Shock the Monkey" and "Sledgehammer" were, in different ways, landmark experiments merging experimental video with music). With *Xplora* Gabriel released a work that merged his own music with an interactive medium that allows audiences to collaborate with the original materials in various ways.

**OJ NATION (1996-7)**

"I should be glad to see the proceedings of our courts kept from the public eye, when they expose or punish monstrous vices." — Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, 1786.

Given A-P's emphasis on the transformation of public narratives into disruptive (hopefully liberating) alternatives, it is hardly surprising that A-P artists have found the increasing media-coverage of criminal trials to be a rich source of inspiration. Three very different A-P treatments of trial materials are included here: the first is Mark Leyner's "Oh Brother," a hilarious send-up of the most sensationalized pre-OJ trial of the 90s—the murder trial of Lyle and Eric Menendez, two brothers accused of murdering their wealthy parents at their luxurious Southern California home in a hail of automatic gunfire and then embarking on a wild shopping spree.<sup>2</sup> The OJ murder trial provides the starting point for Paul Difillipo's "Pulp Fiction" — which describes how Quentin Tarantino, fresh from his masterful treatment lurid, media-generated, sensationalized violence in *Natural Born Killers*, might have filmed various alibis proposed for Simpson on the night his wife was murdered — and Lance Olsen's hard-boiled, post-cyberpunk extravaganza, "Kamikaze Motives of the Immaculate Deconstruction in the Data-Sucking Rustage of Insectile Hackers."

The OJ Simpson murder trial was not the first time that a murder trial triggered an orgy of lurid media coverage to help feed the American public's appetite for the sensational — such periodic feeding frenzies are well documented back as far as the Aaron Burr murder trial in 1807. What was different about the OJ trial was the unprecedented *degree* of media saturation the case generated — and the ways that this saturation eventually wound up working its way into the imaginations of nearly all Americans, including fiction writers. The result was a deluge of data and information, a labyrinth of "micro-stories" drawn from testimonies, police records, alibis, talk shows, claims by prosecutors and the defense lawyers (often presented at dueling-press conferences), and tabloid coverage. Appearing in this garden of forking paths were dozens of memorable, eccentric characters, many of whom became instant celebrities while testifying at the trial before making the rounds of all the talk shows. Meanwhile, in the highly competitive realm of the tabloids, each week's coverage seemed to up the ante in terms of sheer improbability — rumors that Nicole's dog would testify, OJ's connection with UFO's, the Apocalypse, Elvis, the assassination of JFK. . .

Soon the OJ case had become a kind of magical mirror reflecting back to Americans many of their deepest fears, prejudices, desires, and obsessions. A-P writers and artists quickly recognized the potential of the case as a narrative-generator, and soon began recycling and reworking these materials into new contexts that offered fresher (or amusing) perspectives, or which satirized media coverage; inevitably, some A-P writers began to recognize the many ways that the Simpson case could be used as a springboard to comment on larger public issues concerning racism, the American legal system, the privileges of wealth, spousal abuse, and many others.

## CRITICISM:

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<sup>2</sup> During the first trial—which like OJ Simpson's was conducted amidst the background of Southern California's celebrity hood, wealth, and glamour—the brothers admitted to having done the murders, but were acquitted when their lawyer (a gorgeous, TV-friendly blonde who tenderly stroked the heads of the two burly youngsters when they seemed especially distraught) somehow managed to obtain a hung jury for her clients by mounting a unusual version of "self defense" —i.e., it was claimed that having been abused and mistreated throughout their childhood, the brothers had developed paranoid delusions about what their parents might do to them; fearing for their lives, the brothers decided that their only chance to defend themselves was to launch what amounted to a "pre-emptive strike" on mom and dad. [NOTE: In all fairness to the American judicial system, which has been held up to ridicule so often during the 90s, it should be mentioned that when the case was retried, the Menendez's compelling (but patently ludicrous) defense theory resulted in guilty verdicts.]

*Journey to America*<sup>3</sup> (Alexis de Tocqueville, 1846, Faber and Faber, 1959). In the "Panic Tocqueville" entry included in the Arthur Kroker, et al. *Panic Encyclopedia* Alexis de Tocqueville is cited as being "the first political theorist of postmodern America." Tocqueville's political analysis emphasized that American power would rest on the spreading out of an empire of communication. In his very first entry about America, Tocqueville wrote of the 4 of July celebration he observed with considerable amazement of the "Perfect order that prevails" despite the fact that there was "No police. Authority nowhere. Festival of the people." Later, in his fascinating study of prisons in America, Tocqueville concluded that whereas Europe was a "prison without walls" (where social power is dispersed into the residues of high culture which form a network guiding the movements of tourists, artists and, increasingly, capitalists and their government), America was a "prison without walls" — a place where power rested on a daily technology of social and aesthetic reproduction in the poles of discipline/dissipation constantly feed off one another. This mechanical reproduction of power was complemented by the manipulation of the sensory organs in the form of a violent control of communication. This technologically-produced form of manipulation reached new levels of power and control via the rise of mass media in the years following WWII. As the media expanded and pop culture began to exert a growing influence on individuals — creating an ever-more effect prison (a prison described by DeBord as "The Society of the Spectacle" that required physical walls less and less. It was the awareness of the alarming significance of the rapid expansion of these media-ated barriers in the 50s and 60s that sparked the emergence of an A-P aesthetic which sought to resist this form of pop-cultural control and manipulation.

*On Photography* (Susan Sontag, 1977). The invention of the photograph in the early part of the 19th century probably had just have changed the nature of the world, the ways we think about it (and remember it and create art about it), and the ways we actually live it more than any other single invention. This is probably the most intelligent and persuasive discussion of the aesthetic and philosophical and cultural tendencies that are today associated with postmodernism. Baudrillard's precession of simulacra, Jameson's lack of affect and random cannibalization of cultural forms, the transformation of the world into images of itself, lack of affect, schizophrenia, and nearly all the other features ascribed to POMO by the trendiest cultural theorists were already discussed here by Ms. S — who never mentions the P word.

*Down and In: Life in the Underground* (Ronald Sukenick, Beech Tree Books/William Morris, 1987). This was *the* book that got me thinking about what an A-P aesthetic might mean. Part critical study, part cultural history, and part personal meditation, Sukenick examines the story of the underground culture in America as it grew out of the old Greenwich Village Bohemia of Hipsters, Beatniks and artists in the 40s and 50s of his own youth until it began regularly appearing very much above ground during 60s' and 70s during the ascendancy of Pop, the Beatles, punk, splatter punk, and rap.

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<sup>3</sup>This entry was inspired by the "Panic Tocqueville" entry in Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, and David Cook, eds., *Panic Encyclopedia* (NY: St. Martin's, 1989), pp. 86-91).

Sukenick's thesis is very simple: the "triumph" of American counterculture during the 60s wound up eviscerating its soul by the mid-70s, as genuinely radical artists found themselves becoming victims of burn-out, wipe-out or sell-out while the *image* of radicalism increasingly dominated the circulation of mainstream art.

***Panic Encyclopedia* ( Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, and David Cook, eds., St. Martin's, 1989).** In their introduction, the editors note that "Panic is the key psychological mood of postmodern culture." This mood finds its expression in the various forms of "panic culture" (sample entry titles: Panic Art, Panic Shopping Malls, Panic Sex, Panic Suburbs, Panic Fashion, Panic Feminism, Panic Elvis, etc.). These topics are analyzed here in densely argued, free-wheeling entries that, sometimes playfully, often ironically, and always provocatively explore the ways the interlocking structures of media, economics, politics and education have joined forces to control people's minds and bodies. "Panic culture," the editors note at the end of their introduction in a passage that illustrates the kind of imploded, Avant-Crit discourse that characterizes the writing in most of these entries, is "a floating reality, with the actual as a dream world, where we live on the edge of ecstasy and dread. Now it is the age of the TV audience as chilled superconductor of the stock market crash as a Paris Commune of all the programmed supercomputers, of money as an electronic impulse, fibrillating across the world, and of the individual as a quantum energy pack tracing/racing across the postmodern field. The editors' introduction also provides a useful listing of some of the key cultural sites whose meanings and ideologies are currently being contested by A-P artists.