

# AVANT-POP IN THE LIGHT OF BREAKING WITH THE PASSATIST TRADITION

Debates on the exhaustion of postmodernism as the artistic period adequately mirroring the spirit of the age we live in have been dragging on for so long they have lost much of their initial allure. However, at least in the field of literature, the theoreticians have not yet managed to expose a movement or a stream that would decisively exceed postmodernism in the sense of shunning the defining paradigms governing the latter.<sup>1</sup> From the *Geistesgeschichte* point of view, postmodernism as the ultimate realisation of metaphysical nihilism disqualifies the last remaining category defining the Modern Age specific understanding of the world – the immediate reality of the psychical contents of consciousness. Consequently, the literary period succeeding it should be defined by paradigms, which would not only separate it from preceding literary movements and periods in the sense of rearranging of relations among the basic Modern Age categories, but would change the very content of those categories and thus render them obsolete, at the same time signalling the dawning of a new epoch.

Searching for instances of such literature is, of course, highly problematic due to lack of historical distance and comparable patterns. However, certain guidelines can, in fact, be established on the grounds of processes governing such major transitions in the past, and by application of ascertainable common mechanisms directing broader social, cultural and economic changes upon the notion of literature. In this respect, the most promising candidate seems to be a literary movement formed in America at the beginning of the 1990's, namely, the Avant-Pop<sup>2</sup>. Emerging within the reorganized Fiction Collective writers' co-op publishing original, non-commercial works, Avant-Pop's main objective was the production of independent, innovative literary and literary-theoretical works criticising and undermining the ubiquity of corporations and consumerism in general. Their tactic, emphasised both in Mark Amerika's manifesto *Thread Baring Itself in Ten Quick Posts* and Larry McCaffery's introductions to the two Avant-Pop

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anthologies<sup>3</sup>, could be summarised as the (ab)use of pop-cultural segments, which we are no longer aware of due to their ubiquity and which represent the *sine qua non* of our social memory, with strategies articulated by the historical avant-gardes. In other words: just as popular culture absorbs everything that is new, fresh and interesting, exposing merely the qualities which suit its growth and development in the service of the third phase of capitalism, so does the Avant-Pop employ everything that is innovative and exciting, however, foregrounding and using the characteristics which reveal popular culture in all of its artificiality and subservience to the mechanisms capital uses to control the masses. This requires intimate knowledge of popular culture, and an efficient means to accumulate, transform and spread information faster than pop-cultural media. Internet is, of course, the medium best suited to such aspirations, enabling both rapid accumulation and exchange of information, as well as easier access to like-minded individuals, who with their active participation further accelerate information production, manipulation and transfer. As Amerika points out in the manifesto, the medium also drastically changes the traditional, capital-conditioned distribution formula, reducing it merely to a network relation 'authors – interactive participants', in which the two roles are in constant flux.

Avant-Pop's claim to avant-gardism and especially its essential commitment to the electronic medium are the two characteristics which seem the most productive for our intention of investigating the movement's postmodern potential from the Geistesgeschichte perspective. The first on the one hand connects to the instances of literature occurring at the beginning of each literary era and each historical epoch, on the other hand the term is generally used historically with regard to the radical movements formed in the first half of the 1900's. Considering the contexts in which Avant-Pop theoreticians use the term, their concept of avant-gardism seems closer to the second usage, which not only relativises the "avant" in the movement's name but also the ahistorical relevance of their literary efforts. If, however, we manage to establish diversions from the existing Geistesgeschichte schemes, then its production would be automatically granted the status of a literature that was the first to incorporate and internalise the Zeitgeist, and as such now provides the basis for the development of a theoretical framework that would adequately describe and value works created within the given social circumstances. Let us therefore concentrate upon the second characteristic, namely the movement's fundamental attachment to the electronic media, and especially the World Wide Web.

The surfacing of tendencies uniting under the umbrella term Avant-Pop is fundamentally connected to the eruption of the hyperconsumerist logic and the forming of the so called mediagenic reality in the first half of the 1980's. From the theoreticians of postmodernity, the philosophical thought of which has admittedly had the most profound influence on the Avant-Pop Weltanschauung – and is therefore crucial for the understanding of the Avant-Pop phenomenon –, its protagonists most consistently refer to Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard.<sup>4</sup> The Avant-Pop, understandably,

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focuses primarily on Jameson's concept of culturalisation of all the aspects of social life within postmodern situation, including economy and finance, with culture, in turn, approaching the economy by abiding to the laws of the market and production of cultural objects of consumption. Baudrillard's basic categories can be traced both on the theoretical level in the sense of Avant-Pop's *Weltanschauung*, since all the founding members of the movement place him among the major influences, as well as practically on the level of motives and themes in the Avant-Pop works themselves<sup>5</sup>. That is why the terminology Baudrillard uses for the description of processes and notions in the contemporary society seems best suited for our intention of clarifying and evaluating the main characteristics of the Avant-Pop movement in relation to previous movements and streams. On the other hand, Baudrillard's philosophical thought of a copy without the original is increasingly gaining ground both practically and metaphorically on the level of every day life, which further contributes to the potential of the Avant-Pop as the movement already thoroughly determined by the current social, cultural and economic situation.

Jameson's principle of culturisation and aesthetisation of all the aspects of life, which are as such – according to Baudrillard – network systems of differential signs (Baudrillard 1981: 66) that can be arbitrarily combined, dismantled and shifted according to media transferred trends, on the theoretical level anticipates processes most literally embodied in the rise of the world wide web at the end of 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's. Applying the concept of the latter to McLuhan's claim that societies have always been shaped by the nature of media by which men communicate, the results are stunning. Namely, one-way linearity, defining the relation between the medium and the individual until the emergence of PC's, is replaced by a network system of interactions, first between the computer and the user, and later – with the rise of the Internet – among the users themselves. The technological interface, together with all the possibilities it offers, soon starts to function as a constituent part of the body or even identity, something that is inherent to us, and not foreign like, for example, the print or television. The fundamental characteristic of the computer, enabling all this, is a system, the logic of which is based upon indexation techniques, and which lies in the very core of all information technology: the so called hypertext.

The forming of the Avant-Pop is simultaneous with the spreading of the World Wide Web and the irruption of the logic, conditioning the functioning of the computer, in the social sphere via technological sociality enabled by the net. After all, the common feature of the Avant-Pop writers, mentioned also in Mark Amerika's manifesto, is that they were entering adulthood at the time when the spreading of the electronic media was at its peak, which means that pop culture represents the core of their experiential horizon. Avant-Pop's unreflected, automatic commitment to the electronic medium and its specifics is another reason to adapt our search for the defining categories of such writing to the logic that no longer allows linear hierarchisation, conditioned by the emergence of print, but to strict rhizomatous decentralisation. The fact

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that most of the Avant-Pop's best known production nevertheless still appears in the classic, printed form becomes unproblematic as soon as hypertextual logic replaces traditional hierarchisation at the level of every day life as well. The printed book is thus just one of the possible vehicles for the spreading of artistic production, a medium of information transfer, the specifics of which are of merely technical – and by no means ideological or even spiritual – nature.<sup>6</sup> In other words: a printed book is a metaphorisation of principles that occur in their literal form in the computer hypertext.

The most important difference between the two media is that individuals do not enter hypertext-based communication in *a priori* submissive position of a receiver of a given text. Rather, within the space of hypertext individuals can arbitrarily construct their identity and corresponding reality. Interactive and immersible nature of the medium enable creation of a new sociality, social consciousness and consequently new culture, which due to the increasing number of users have been actively interfering with the “non-virtual” environments for quite some time. Such arbitrary creation of realities and identities from information available is, of course, in accordance with Baudrillard's basic categories of postmodernity, at the same time indicating a productive way out of the crisis of identification after the disintegration of Cartesian subject. The most radical shift triggered by the spreading of the so-called hypertextual logic to the field of literature is the disqualification of the paradigmatic distinction between the author and the reader, which is also explicitly stated in the movement's manifesto. This is only rendered possible with the disappearance of textual anatomy, within which literary worlds appear as independent, finite and clearly demarcated wholes. In the Internet hypertext, the dividing line between the literary work and its environment is completely blurred since the very principle of hypertext functioning enables constant interventions within the work.

Let us examine some of the more obvious consequences of the spreading of hypertextual logic to the realm of literature. From the point of view of Baudrillard's predictions concerning postmodern literature as third order simulacra (Baudrillard 1999: 143-149), all data have the same value before their actualisation in hyperreality, which means that there is no essential difference between the concepts of what is “realistic” and what is “non-realistic”. Furthermore, Baudrillard's concept of “fractal subject” as infinite differentiation of one and the same subject implicitly anticipates the return of the first person, biographical narratives. The first indication that Avant-Pop literature might indeed already embody or “metaphorise” the logic of hypertext is the primacy of the first person, biographical narration and consequently “realistic” mode of writing and comprehension of Avant-Pop production. Waning of distinction between the author and the reader endows this biographicality with a status that is different from all the former statuses: if the author is merely the source of data, which the user (reader) manipulates into the building of his/her own reality or realities, and at the same time an individual defined by the hypertextual logic of his own identity construction, then the terms “biographical” and “autobiographical” in the sense they acquired

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within literary tradition are completely nonsensical, and in addition to that, the whole concept of past changes. (Auto)biography – the past – becomes fictional and fiction (auto)biographical, which means there is absolutely no difference between the “autobiographical” and fictitious elements since both serve as building materials for the creation of the actual hyperreality, which also knows no difference between the real and the fictional. Furthermore, this “biographicality” is no longer the property of an individual but of all who come in touch with its system: all the “readers” or “users”, including the author. Implicit in such approach is also the disappearance of difference between the subject of the “autobiographical” first-person narration and any other type of narration, since the logic of “literary character” creation is synonymous with the building of any given identity. The “I” is estranged and loses its (Cartesian) meaning, the consequence of which is the typically postmodern “failure to differentiate self from other” (Nash 2001: 89). In practice, this brings us back to the definition of Baudrillard’s fractal subject.

Such playing with identity in the sense of constant morphing is best illustrated by probably the most successful Avant-Pop author Mark Leyner. The main protagonist of all of his novels is writer “Mark Leyner”, so we could assume that the works are autobiographical. The style of narration is accordingly realistic, events provide an impression of a coherent structuring of the world. Yet the literary “Mark Leyner” constantly moves within the mediagenic reality, arbitrarily choosing elements from it to build (or add to) his existing system of identity. Leyner’s “autobiographical” identity is thus constructed along the way, the reader places individual information on “Leyner” within systems of information, the probability and stability of which depend on their connectivity. Leyner’s authorial existence is entirely fluid and depends on reader’s capability of connecting information provided into both the already existing “literary systems” of the story as well as systems of reader’s actual, experienced reality. Similar “autobiographicality” can also be found in, for example, Sukenick’s *Doggy Bag* and *Mosaic Man*, relying primarily on Jewish mythology and popular cults, Acker’s novels, exploiting the systems of popular philosophy and pornography, Eurydice, relying upon feminism and poststructuralism, etc., as well as in the works of authors not explicitly members of the Avant-Pop, Don DeLillo and Bret Easton Ellis.

Unlike “classical” characters, the unchangeable characteristics of which can be determined from their reactions to the environments they are placed in, meaning that the reader can at least to some extent anticipate their actions, in Avant-Pop, the environment seems to be the defining factor in identity creation. With introduction of new information into the system of “environment” or “story”, the identity – according to the laws of cybernetics – arbitrarily changes. The study of strategies authors use for the creation of literary environments reveals the simulacrum nature of the elements entering the system of the given environment over and over again.<sup>7</sup> Avant-Pop landscapes are completely fluid systems, within which places or locations are no longer the sum total of a finite number of characteristics, but established only with regard to the placing of these characteristics into the system of



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more or less stable environments. The precondition for their existence – both within the reality of the literary work as well as for the reader/author – is the constant influx of new information, enabling the verification and stability of the environments introduced. The device providing them – in most Avant-Pop works the task is performed by television, print, radio, internet or their derivatives – thus becomes the guarantee of each immediate reality, while its logic assumes the status of Truth in the sense of experiencing the world.

The style and metaphors are the areas, in which the crucial changes signalling a different understanding of the basic paradigms have already been triggered by the literary cyberpunk. Since the Avant-Pop explicitly admits to having been profoundly influenced by cyberpunk,<sup>8</sup> let us briefly examine how the features attracting attention in cyberpunk are dealt with by the Avant-Popsters. The main difference between the cyberpunk technological neologisms without symbolic correspondents, which provides their simulacrum – and thus postmodern – status, and the style in the Avant-Pop works is that in cyberpunk all systems eventually conform to a single, closed system of a linear story with a distinct beginning and end. The absence of such a system of “familiar references”, enabling the unknown to lean upon the familiar and thus contributing to the creation of a clear, linear story, is what seems to be the defining feature of the Avant-Pop style. If cyberpunk neologisms predominantly serve as stylistic devices spicing up the manifestation of an undisputed cover story, the Avant-Pop neologisms (or basically their interpretation on the part of individual readers) define the direction of the possibilities for a story and its meaning.<sup>9</sup> Similarly Avant-Pop develops the potential of cyberpunk technological metaphors, in which the notions from the fields of informatics and technology are used to describe natural phenomena.<sup>10</sup> Their simulacric status is provided by the fact that technological notions in themselves function as copies without the original and that their meaning is generally ascribed to them through verification in reality. In a media governed society each event, or for that matter individual, is technological, which eliminates the border between nature and technology, or better, technology becomes the guarantee of nature’s existence. And only within such technologised, mediagenic reality, the Avant-Pop practice can broaden cyberpunk’s strictly technological metaphors across the entire spectrum of media phenomena forming the basis for creation and understanding of the more complex segments of every-day hyperreality.<sup>11</sup>

Avant-Pop style in general relies upon modes of writing traditionally regarded non-realist, abstract or inorganic, which corresponds to their essentially avant-garde premises. Yet at the same time such modes are directly connected to the principles that form the very core of mediagenic reality; they are fundamental to contemporary individual’s experiencing of reality. This paradox of creating or even conditioning the realistic style by using techniques traditionally pertaining to the field of abstract or the “avant-garde” signals a major deviation of Avant-Pop literature from the Geistesgeschichte frame governing the traditions before it. In practice this means that Avant-Pop literature can no longer be satisfactorily described or evaluated by the existing

literary-theoretical categories and tools that rely upon clearly defined binarisms, except for oxymoronic pooling of previously incompatible notions. That, of course, necessarily leads to devaluation and arbitrary interpretation of their importance, at the same time revealing their essentially historical character.

Considering all that has been said, Avant-Pop does in fact seem to be the first discernable instance of a literature that can no longer be relevantly discussed in terms of Cartesian tradition, yet can, on the other hand, be understood and described in terms of mechanisms connected to the artefacts of late capitalism, namely media, advertising and high technology. Late capitalism conditioned postmodern cultural and social paradigms namely rely upon the ultimate rejection of organity, which is also implicit in the aspirations of the historical avant-gardes. The latter were, however, directed towards the rehabilitation of the paralysed Cartesian subjectivity. The avant-gardes' will to establish a productive subjectivity is paradoxically rendered possible only by the abolishment of the principle of subjectivity, which triggered such tendencies in the first place, that is, when individuals no longer understand themselves as clearly defined organic wholes but as systems of signs that can be arbitrarily and productively manipulated with. In practice, such shift takes place with the spreading of hypertextual logic onto the level of every-day experiencing of both the world and of the Self, which means that the governing principle of identity creation is fundamentally inorganic, decentralised and fragmentary. With that, the necessary preconditions for a drastic reorganisation of social relations and characteristics of their systems as demanded by the historical avant-gardes are fulfilled. Only when individuals understand themselves as systems of signs in the sense of Baudrillard's third order simulacra, they can actually condition the break, which historical avant-gardes, due to their fundamental dependency upon the almighty Subjectivity, were unable to perform. The Geistesgeschichte framework, gradually revealing itself through the application of Baudrillard's theoretical notions onto the current social and economic situation – and the Avant-Pop phenomenon as one of its segments – identifies the concept of Transcendence as the foundation for identity creation in the media, the essence and logic of which are on the one hand summarized and on the other accelerated into the every-day reality of individuals by the Internet. By internalisation of logic and principles of the media, enabled precisely by the latter, the Subject is revealed as *a priori* simulacric, as a sign that incorporates into different systems of reality. The paradigm of Reality is established through constant verifications of the stability of systems that individuals accept into the structure of their "subjectivity". The relation between the individual and reality, describing the category of Truth, is defined by the notions of rhizomatous decentralisation decentralisation, in this particular study referred to as "hypertextual logic".

The structure before us fundamentally differs from the one defining the specifics of the Modern Age. Thus we can claim with a fair amount of certainty that Avant-Pop is, in fact, *the* first movement to actually exceed the "passatist" tradition, the battle against which the historical avant-gardes, relying upon paradigms fundamentally establishing such tradition, had

seemingly lost. With that, Avant-Pop is revealed as the first literary movement already thoroughly defined by a new Geistesgeschichte situation, which on the one hand means it is postmodern in the sense of corresponding to the ascertainable postmodern paradigms, on the other hand, it is also avant-garde in the ahistorical sense of doing the spadework for artistic practices, the postmodernity of which will no longer be problematic. Considering the fact that ahistorical avant-gardism of Avant-Pop rests upon the very elements historical avant-gardes proposed, we can further establish that the attempts to break with the exhausted tradition as intended by the radical movements in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have finally succeeded, and that historical avant-gardes are finally truly over and thus definitely historical.

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- 1 In this respect, the greatest amount of attention was paid to the cyberpunk movement, which did in fact introduce a number of innovations, yet nevertheless remained essentially bound to postmodernism as it essentially materialized postmodernist formal techniques on the level of content (McHale 1992: 225-242; Krevel 2003).
  - 2 Founding members of the movement Mark Amerika, Ronald Sukenick and Larry McCaffery borrowed the name from the 1985 Lester Bowie album, on which the trumpeter submitted evergreens and kitschy pop tunes (for example *Blueberry Hill*, *Saving All My Love for You*, *Crazy*, etc.) to jazz improvisational play. Bowie's intention was to show that materials, the structure and meaning of which seem fixed, offer and provide myriads of hidden meanings, alternative contexts and fresh combinations. Transferring unquestioned and unquestionable socio-cultural artefacts to the level of raw materials that can be arbitrarily shifted, combined and transformed corresponds to the basic tendencies of the Avant-Pop movement.
  - 3 I'm referring to *Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Day Dream Nation*, published in 1993, and *After Yesterday's Crash* from 1995.
  - 4 Both, for example, appear in Larry McCaffery's "Random Sampling of Avant-Pop Works" (McCaffery 1995: xxxi).
  - 5 Most notably in Sukenick, Coupland, Ellis and Leyner, as well as in the production of Don DeLillo (Krevel 2003: 47, 129).
  - 6 The latter has also been pointed out by a number of theoreticians of hypertext and hypertext literature.
  - 7 For a more detailed presentation and examples, see Krevel (2003: 115-125).
  - 8 Mark Amerika and Lance Olsen in *In Memoriam to Postmodernism*, Mark Amerika in the manifesto, Larry McCaffery in his introduction to the *After Yesterday's Crash* anthology.
  - 9 Best illustrated and even thematised by Coupland's system of footnotes in *Generation X*, which provide more or less random explanations of hip-terms and neologisms (Krevel 2003: 138-139).
  - 10 Let us remember the much quoted beginning of Gibson's *Neuromancer*: The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel." (Gibson 1995: 9).
  - 11 Some random examples from Coupland's *Miss Wyoming*: "He felt intact but worthless, like a chocolate rabbit selling for 75 percent off the month after Easter" (Coupland 2000: 53), "I 'ook like a used Pampers" (Idem: 82), "Staring at the pavement, like prince William behind his mother's coffin /.../" (Idem: 12).

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## SUMMARY

### AVANT-POP IN THE LIGHT OF BREAKING WITH THE PASSATIST TRADITION

The article examines the phenomenon of the Avant-Pop movement from the perspective of its potential as the first organised literary movement exceeding the Modern Age specific setting of Geistesgeschichte paradigms. Focusing upon the nature of Avant-Pop's avant-gardism and its fundamental attachment to the contemporary electronic media, the study first examines the broader social, cultural and economic environment surrounding the emergence of the movement, discusses and defines the mechanisms at its core, and applies them to those traditional aspects of literature, which provide an insight primarily into the relation between the paradigms of Subject and Transcendence. Examined against the Avant-Pop production employing the traditional literary medium, the established results of such application correspond to the Avant-Pop practice.