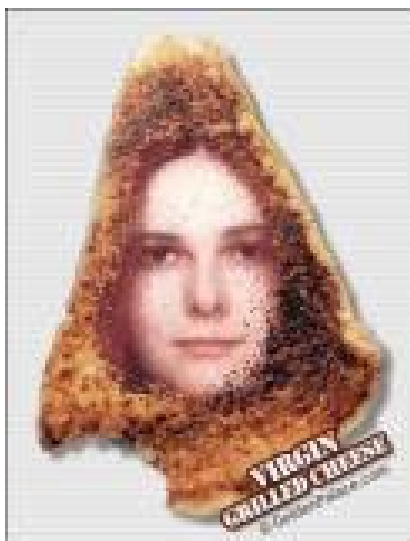


Merchandising God: The Pope Tart

God, mammon and the Internet



Karen Stollznow, when not appearing on cheese sandwiches, brings enlightenment to the natives of California.

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The following scene appeared in a first series episode of *The Black Adder*¹, when dogsbody Baldrick's plans really were "cunning".

Baldrick: *Moving on to relics, we've got shrouds, from Turin; wine from the wedding at Cana; splinters from the cross (his finger gets a sliver from one of the splinters); and, of course, there's stuff made by Jesus in his days in the carpentry shop: pipe racks, coffee tables, coat stands, bookends, crucifixes, a nice cheeseboard, fruit bowls, waterproof sandals... (picks up a piece of wood that's partly carved) Oh, I haven't finished that one yet.*

Percy: *But this is disgraceful, My Lord! All of these are obviously fake!*

Edmund: *Hah, yes!*

Percy: *But, but how will people be able to tell the difference between these and the real relics?*

Edmund: *Well, they won't! That's the point!*

Percy: *Well, you won't be able to fool everyone! Look (he takes a red cloth from his sleeve): I have here a true relic.*

Edmund: *What is it?*

Percy: *(unwraps the cloth) It is a bone from the finger of Our Lord. It cost me 31 pieces of silver.*

Edmund: *Good lord. Is it real?*

Percy: *It is, My Lord. Baldrick, you stand amazed.*

Baldrick: *I am — I thought they only came in boxes of ten.*

Relics

From holy handkerchiefs to sacred socks, relics are artefacts attributed to deceased religious figures. The label covers a broad range of memorial articles, usually classified into three groups.

First Class Relics include physical remains, such as the bones or hair of a saint.

Second Class Relics are the possessions of an iconic figure, the objects intimately associated with them. For example, the 'Veil of Veronica' is a sacrosanct scarf, supposedly used to wipe the sweat from Jesus' brow as he carried the cross, imprinting his image on the cloth.

Third Class Relics are Do-It-Yourself relics, items that are sanctified when they have touched a deceased saint; or items that have a homeopathic holiness, having been brought to the shrine of a saint.

Many churches still venerate relics as commemorative objects, and, like talismans, they are often credited with miraculous powers, such as the ability to heal or to bring good luck.

Thousands of alleged relics are in existence. A veritable Frankenchrist could be resurrected from all of the Jesus relics alone; bones, hair, teeth, tears, blood, umbilical cords, clothes and shrouds. The Vatican is reluctant to validate relics and who can blame them, when there are often multiple claimants? There are at

least three Holy Prepuces in existence... yes, the foreskin of Jesus. Although, this matter was settled when C17th philosopher Leo Allatius convincingly argued that the true Holy foreskin ascended into Heaven with Jesus, and formed the rings of Saturn².

Reputedly, there are thousands of fake nails from the True Cross. There are so many alleged pieces of the crucifixion cross that C16th Humanist Erasmus is credited with two unpius punch lines;

1. *Jesus must have been crucified on a whole forest, or,*
2. *there are enough pieces of the cross to build a ship.*

As Baldrick's con job suggests, the sale of fake relics was big business during the medieval era. Thomas Serafin, of the International Crusade for Holy Relics, cites this little yarn:

During the Middle Ages, a travelling monk, hoping to purchase a saint's relic for his monastery, found little success and returned home disappointed. Luckily, he soon encountered a merchant who offered to sell him the skull of John the Baptist. The monk was dumbfounded. Hadn't he just seen the skull of St John in a church during a recent visit to France? "That was the skull of St John when he was a child," explained the merchant. "This is his skull when he was an adult."³

This reads like skepticism, but Serafin still believes in the existence of "legitimate relics" and is a self-professed "Knight of the Last Crusade for Holy Relics". Their quest: *attempting to revive the Cult and veneration of Holy Relics (through exhibits, retreats and conferences) and rescuing and protecting Holy Relics from profanation and neglect. They seek to: continue to help locate and rescue genuine relics that have fallen into pawn shops and occult stores and bring to the attention of the local Ordinary (Bishop) any Catholics*



You have nothing to lose but your suds

selling relics in stores, mail order, or the Internet.

Many churches still house these supposedly 'legitimate' relics, and in these surroundings, they hold credibility for the believer. These churches are unwilling to authenticate their relics using dating methods; not because this would discredit their claims, but this would damage these fragile goods! While the Vatican still tacitly approves of the display of relics, they oppose the sale of sacred items; so much so, that they have a name for the act: simony. But this rule only extends to First and Second Class relics. So, with these restrictions in mind, how do we merchandise God today?

Religious apparitions seem to form a Fourth Class Relic category, replacing the Holy Grail as a modern-day beacon for the faithful. In popular usage, apparition refers to a broad range of miraculous phenom-



Virgin of the underpass

ena, including: physical 'materialisations', ie, reported visions of Jesus or the Virgin Mary (but never God!). An apparition can also be the manifestation of an iconic figure through a statue or image, eg, a weeping statue of the Madonna, oil seeping from the image of a saint or 'bleeding' stigmata. An apparition can also be an illusion, an object perceived to bear the likeness of a religious figure. For example, the 'Nun

Bun', a cinnamon bun that 'resembles' Mother Theresa (for an excellent metamorphosing image, visit: www.indiana.edu/~jkkteach/P335/nunbun.html). Ironically, on Christmas day 2005, the Nun Bun was stolen from the Nashville, Tennessee coffee shop where it was displayed. The bun and thief are still at large.

Pareidolia

To the skeptic, this latter category is known as pareidolia. This term refers to the phenomenon whereby a vague, random stimulus is perceived to resemble a specific, recognisable form, usually an animate or iconic figure. Whether we see a face in the clouds or a shape in the tea leaves, our instinctive ability to respond to pareidolia is the whole basis of the Rorschach ink blot test (although it doesn't necessarily reveal our deepest psyche. This psychological analysis is an interpretation of an interpretation).

Infamous examples such as the 'Face on Mars', the 'Pete Townshend potato' and the 'Bob Hope potato chip' confirm that this phenomenon is by no means restricted to religious themes. Perceiving pareidolia is intuitive profiling, our propensity to search for the familiar in the unfamiliar. Carl Sagan links the facility to a survival mechanism⁴. We recognise similarities and often superimpose a mental image onto a visual image. We discover patterns in nature and match facial features with familiar faces. Think about the times you've temporarily mistaken a

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stranger as your boss in a crowded place, when you've taken a sickie!

To illustrate the random nature of pareidolia, our good mate Phil Plait (the Bad Astronomer) writes about his experience of having a shower with Vladimir Lenin. On an otherwise normal day, Phil was washing away his sins. Upon stepping out of the shower, his eyes were drawn to the shower curtain. What he saw sent a shiver down his spine; *"There was a face in the shower curtain, looking directly at me"*. Unbeknownst to Phil, he'd had a voyeur during his shower, none other than the revolutionary Lenin. It was a communistic miracle! Did the Bolshevik leader bring a message of socialism to this consumerist society? Was he bringing the Iron Curtain to the shower curtain? Phil quickly admits that this was no paranormal event but a pattern formed by water droplets on the shower curtain. He vows not to set up a bathtub Lenin shrine but marvels over the uncanny likeness, *"and let me tell you, my Lenin face is the best example of this phenomenon I have ever seen. Usually, the resemblance people see is vague at best"*. For more of this tale, visit: <http://www.badastronomy.com/bad/misc/lenin.html>.

While pareidolia is an intrinsic phenomenon, something we're 'hard-wired' for, the observer's reactions can differ greatly. Bob Carroll states that, *"most people recognize illusions for what they are, but some become fixated on the reality of their perception and turn an illusion into a delusion"*⁵. While some were amused at the resemblance the sweet pastry bore to Mother Theresa, others made pilgrimages to the 'Virgin Mary' who 'appeared' on the wall of the Kennedy Expressway, Chicago, in 2005. In their thousands, followers kept vigil and paid homage with prayers, candles and flowers, weeping before the image and disrupting traffic. Until council staff painted over the salt stain. Pareidolia is truly in the eye of the beholder. While many interpreted the hooded shape as the customary pose of the



The Nun Bun

Madonna, others likened the stain to a certain part of the female anatomy!

We had our own Antipodean visitation in 2003, a Marian apparition at Coogee Beach headland. The "Coogee Madonna" was an optical illusion, sunlight reflecting off a crook of a fence post, the shadow perceived by some as the veiled image of the Virgin Mary. The cliff turned into a shrine, the faithful waiting in the afternoon sun, watching for the image, the surfers watching them. Some years on, a group is lobbying to have a church built at the beach side, but the Catholic Church in Sydney is less convinced. The unusual outpouring of emotion from Sydneysiders has since been linked to grief of the Sari Club bombing in late 2002, and social anxiety resultant of the ongoing Iraqi war.

Saviour as savoury

True to the Bible, Jesus returned to Earth, just not in the form that everyone expected. Jesus 'appeared' on a flour tortilla in New Mexico in 1977 (near Roswell, if anyone wants to dabble in confirmation bias). Although the 'apparition' looked like a



Crucified Cheetos

simplistic, rubber stamped image, the owner enshrined it and even to this day, thousands of the faithfully credulous make the pilgrimage to view this 'miracle'. This visitation popularised religious pareidolia. In quick succession, Jesus made appearances on foodstuffs throughout the US. But for a while, the occurrences lessened, or at the least the media fascination ebbed. However, with the emergence of *eBay.com*, religious pareidolia has made a fervent resurgence. In the beginning, God created a sandwich.

In 1994, Diana Duyser of Hollywood, Florida, made a fried cheese sandwich, but this wasn't any old sandwich:

When I took a bite out of it, I saw a face looking up at me, It was Virgin Mary starring (sic) back at me, I was in total shock, I would like to point out there is no mold or disingration (sic).

Duyser resisted eating any more, and preserved the sandwich in a clear plastic box with cotton balls, keeping it on her night stand. She claimed that the divine sandwich had brought her "many blessings" over the years, including a casino windfall of \$70 000. Despite the divine powers of the sandwich, Duyser generously decided to "share this with the world" or the highest bidder. And so, a decade later, she listed the sandwich on eBay:

www.goldenpalaceevents.com/ebay_archives/grilledmary01.html. The bidding quickly rose to \$28 000 before eBay disqualified the auction. They reinstated the auction when it became apparent that they would receive their listing fee and commission, *"There's nothing to indicate that the seller isn't willing to give up this cheese sandwich to the highest bidder"*, said a spokesperson for eBay. The item generated phenomenal worldwide publicity, receiving about 2 million viewing 'hits' before it was sold for a whopping \$28 000 to publicity hunters, online casino Goldenpalace.com.

Goldenpalace.com is famous for collecting notorious online auctions.

With a penchant for paranormal pareidolia, they also purchased the Weeping Jesus Rock for \$2550, the Holy Pretzel for \$10 600, the Pope's Hat Dorito Chip for \$1209, the Holy Pierogi: Fried Image of Christ for \$1775 and the Jesus Shower Plaster for \$1999.99. Milking the Cheese sandwich for all it's worth, Duyser also listed the "Official Holy Pan that made the Grilled Cheese Sandwich". To add to their collection, Goldenpalace.com snapped this up for a cool \$5999.99. Surely the kitchen sink will follow. (For other bizarre purchases, visit: <http://www.goldenpalaceevents.com/auctions/>)

Is this a good example of pareidolia? While we don't have any genuine images of the Virgin Mary, we have many depictions of her. From a cultural perspective, these portrayals form our modern ideal of purity. However, the image on the sandwich isn't of a demure woman with her gaze cast downwards; the caricature-like image shows a flirty, outward stare that has been compared to Marlene Dietrich, Carole Lombard or a Kewpie doll. The image on the sandwich doesn't resemble our 'idea' of how Mary looked, but pareidolia is often suggestive. Duyser either believes that this 'is' the Madonna, or she wants us to see it her way. Mother Mary or Mother Nature, whoever made this yeasty visit, it's a curious phenomenon that deserves investigation. Religious icon or movie star, is the image real or a hoax?

Typically, pareidolia is imperfect. The 'Face on Mars' doesn't resemble all of the natural features of a real face, it was a vague protrusion, with an indistinct 'mouth', 'nose' and 'eyes'. Our Lady of Watsonville, an 'image' of the Madonna in Watsonville, California, is an oval discolouration on a tree, a 'stooped' shape that could be a penguin as much as Mary. However, the Cheesy Virgin is an uncharacteristically distinct and sharp image. I had the good luck to examine the sandwich with CSICOP Investigator Joe Nickell at last year's TAM 3 in Las

Vegas. The supposedly ten-year-old toast was framed, behind thick glass and came complete with its own security guard, the 'relic' on loan from Goldenpalace.com. Joe is reluctant to accuse Duyser of any trickery, but I'm not. But does opportunist equal con artist? Any further commentary would necessitate a few scientific tests; until then it remains a curdled piece of pop culture.

D-I-Y Relics for fun and profit

The Virgin Mary Cheese Sandwich became a great gimmick. Ebayers began capitalising on the notoriety of the Holy Sandwich, using the name to generate search results for their more secular listings.

L@@K! Bicycle and Virgin Mary toast!

Virgin Mary CD of Elvis classics!

Virgin Cheese Sandwich leather coat — preloved

Imitation is the sincerest form of greed. The fiduciary success of the sandwich had spawned a new industry of 'simony' that was becoming known as E-Simony, the 'trafficking' of 'relics' through internet auction houses. Within days of the sale of the Holy Toast, a friend called. Had I heard about the Holy Cheeto? A search online revealed this lame piece of pareidolia. A fellow was auctioning a "Cheeto" chip that supposedly resembled "Jesus' legs on the cross". In fact, the chip resembled nothing more than it was; two Cheeto chips melded together. The owner had just undergone heart surgery and, with his diet choices, was well on the way to his next operation.

When I walked in the convient (sic) store, there was a line because everyone was trying to hit the jackpot for the lottery...I went to wait in line and was standing near the bag of chips. I was looking at the chips and one bag of Cheetos caught my eye. I decided to buy the bag of Cheetos since it stood out from the rest...I looked in the bag of Cheetos and found this piece of Cheeto that was shaped like legs... Since this was

found the night before Easter, I believe that this is the legs of Jesus. I believe that the legs represent him walking and carrying the cross when he was crucified and that it is a sign that he will be back. I am recovering from surgery and I believe that he was watching over me when I was taking a walk round the block and to make sure that I got home safely.

In the small print, the owner admits that the 'legs' are "novelty only", but, "I only asked (sic) that you bid seriously on this auction". Strangely, people were bidding on this ridiculous 'relic'. Was this kitsch value or real belief? And what were people thinking about the recent spate of pareidolia? What does it take to make skeptics of the credulous?

Snap, Crackle, Pope

My idea was a pre-emptive strike against pareidolia. In the religious world, the most recent and notable event was the death of Pope John Paul II. This is the kind of significant event that believers link to apparitions, so this was a believable theme. The death of Mother Theresa triggered a plethora of 'miracles', the path to beatification. But where was I going to find a genuine piece of pareidolia, on demand? I would have to fake it. While we might think that apparitions are often contrived, like 'weeping' images or 'bleeding' statues, Joe Nickell states that "deliberate simulacra hoaxing seems rare"⁶. While Joe once expertly imitated the Shroud of Turin in an experiment, (the Shroud of Bing...Crosby), I am no forgery artist.

I decided that my medium would be a Kellogg's Pop Tart, ordained to be the 'Pope Tart'. So, I had the witty name but no 'apparition'. How would I make the 'relic'? I made some hopeless attempts at fashioning a believable image. Like a malevolent Martha Stewart, I tried to 'sketch' an image onto the tart. I only succeeded in cracking the brittle surface. Ingeniously, I dampened the next tart, to press the image onto the surface,

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but it became too soggy. Then it dawned upon me...I didn't have to do a thing. Autosuggestion is part of the 'miracle' of pareidolia, and people would convince themselves! Confirmation bias would do the rest. I took a few digital images of an untouched pop tart (the last one in the pack after my fumbling experiments). I decided to use a blurry image, to add an element of uncertainty. hilariously, the photo had an 'orb' in the right-hand corner. I positioned this next to a photograph of John Paul to subtly coax people to perceive similarities. The natural markings of the tart, when studied closely, appeared to reveal an indistinct face-like shape. Although, it looked more like Edvard Munch's *The Scream* than the Pope!

And so, I listed the following auction to the 'Relics' category of eBay:

The Pope Tart

Papal Pop-Tart

Genuine modern-relic!

Bears likeness of His Holiness Pope John Paul II!!

We have all heard of the recent spate of religious icons, the Virgin Mary Grilled Cheese Sandwich, the Madonna and Child Pretzel and the more recent Holy Cheeto. To be honest, I was skeptical about it all. I had pinned the owners as either out to make a fast buck or just delusional! Then I remembered the words of Christ: "Why do you doubt, O ye of little faith?" (Mt 14:30). I suddenly understood the true purpose of this phenomenon! This is God's way of reaching the modern person! In today's jaded world, where people are turning their backs on the Lord, He has found a solution! God is trying to reach people through the simple, the mundane, the ordinary. If people won't come to Him, He will appear to them...and in a form they can truly stomach!

This week has seen the passing of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II. The faithful still keep vigil over his body, pilgrims praying at his tomb. The Lord said, "I am with you always even to the end of the world" (Mt



The miraculous tart

28:20). He has returned our Pope to us, miraculously, in the fashion of Jesus. He has been resurrected, in a most humble form. For breakfast this morning, I had two Kellogg's Pop Tarts, French Toast flavored. I had set the toaster to low. When I pulled the Pop Tarts from the toaster, I was astonished to see that one Pop Tart bore the image of His Holiness! Not only is the picture of the Lord's representative on Earth but it is an image of the Pope looking youthful and more refreshed. The other Tart was secular. I wept when I saw this image. The morning sun shone through my kitchen window, illuminating this holy image. It was an ethereal, religious moment for me and is proof that there is an afterlife. Through transubstantiation, we receive Christ, and now, through this breakfast bread, we receive His Holiness. And now I want to share my blessed breakfast with the world!

Because I have been blessed to have owned and toasted the papal tart, I now feel that I can pass it on. I am not out to make money, merely to share this wondrous object. So, I am starting the bidding at the low, low price of \$1!

To His Holiness, Requiescat In Pace. To you, peace be with you and happy shopping!

I emailed the seller of the Holy Cheeto, complimenting his 'relic' and giving a plug to my own auction.

What a remarkable item! I hope it goes to a deserving home. I too, have been blessed with a visitation from our Lord. See: [cgi.ebay.com/ws/EBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=6171209997](http://cgi.ebay.com/ws/ eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&item=6171209997)

The seller responded with the following sage advice.

What a great auction. I think you should write a press release for it. That's what I did with my auction. Best of luck to you.

Of course, there was no religious awe here; it was for money, not love. In the end, the Holy Cheeto was sold, for \$102.59, and that much too much. But how would people react to the even more obviously contrived Pope Tart?

Within hours of listing this "modern relic", the emails started flooding in. The responses ranged from amused viewers who knew the item to be a prank, to offended believers who saw me as 'cashing in on God', to frustrated viewers who couldn't 'see' the likeness and were oblivious to the humour. In what I call "Magic Eye" syndrome, guided by the auto-suggestion, some appeared to 'see' an image in the pastry, because they thought everyone else could!

eBay allows for question and answer interaction between the seller and potential bidders. I received a flurry of questions from amused observers. Here are some of the exchanges:

Q: *What flavor is the Pope Tart? I'm hungry!*

A: *It is French Toast flavored. However, if you are hungry, I would counsel you purchase something less expensive and less Holy to masticate.*

Q: *Why must we not eat the Pope tart?*

A: *Well, it is a Holy Relic. Would you eat one of Jesus' finger bones or a splinter of the Holy Cross? Some would call this sacrilege. However, purchase it and you can bloody well do what you like with it! Toast it, nibble it, invert it, sacrifice it, desecrate it... at your will.*

Q: Greetings! I think that if you look very closely, you will see that this actually looks like Pope John Paul the FIRST the predecessor of JP II. The large Roman like nose, and outline of eyeglasses. Would you not agree that this is a sign from above for the cardinal electors?

A: I strongly disagree with your assessment. How can you not see the clear resemblance to PJP II? The strong jawline, the thin lips, the high cheek bones, the dimple and well placed ears! There aren't any spectacles...that is part of his liturgical vestments! I believe the Pope's return is a strong ecumenical message for religious unity and world peace. Perhaps the French Toast flavor is a sign we are in for a Francophone Pope.

Q: I was a fallen Catholic but seeing this I have refound my way. As soon as I saw this food I prayed and the LORD told me to give exactly \$3.27. It's good to know I'm not the only lost soul crying out from the dark of a damned world.

A: Peace, Brother. Your story touched me deeply, as I was once a lapsed Catholic. Recent events have brought us all back to His fold. Now, I truly feel a divine presence watching over me, even at breakfast. Thanks for bidding!

Q: THANK YOU!!! I have had a crappy several months and this droll item has, and still continues, to give this tired old Jew boy a hearty guffaw. Bye the bye — hope it is the AB of Paris — Jew ya know!!!!

A: Guffaw is a splendid word that deserves a revival. I aim to please... and I have scalped Oasis tickets to pay off. ;)

Although, not all observers were in on the joke.

Q: I think your disgusting (sic) to be selling something such as this. Personally, I think you're on something.

A: Sadly, not on anything. Wish I was though... Why does this auction attract all of the fundamentalists?!

Q: you quoted - "I am not out to make money, merely to share this wondrous

object." If this were so (true) then why merely share this type of idolatry at ebay?...of all places really...ebay! this is so sad and I hope one day you fully understand that by making money off of what you say is from God... is wrong... remember when Jesus knocked the money off a table claiming to be from God and his house (Church)... maybe next week you'll have sugar pope cereal... the way for kids to stomach more sugar coated lies.

A: Bloody Protestants! Anyway, look at the trouble Jesus landed himself in, when he behaved in that wilful manner! 'Sugar pope cereal'? You have a devious, sacrilegious mind! As for idolatry, G.K. Chesterton said; "Idolatry is committed, not merely by setting up false gods, but also by setting up false devils."

Q: His Holiness chose to visit in his image and your (sic) selling out this miracle.

A: You'd think he'd do a better job too. It doesn't even look like him.

The following appeared on a blog; an amazing unity of gullibility and fad dieting:

The seller, obviously a scam artist, quotes the bible in order to convince the naive ebay browser he believes this is god's way of reaching out to a faithless world. Right. As if something so full of carbs could ever be holy.

Why, even Father Allen could see the joke!

I was relieved after I saw the auction. I read the title and thought it'd be a Catholic personals ad!

Over the course of the auction, I posted a new update every day.

NOT INTENDED FOR CONSUMPTION

Important Update! Many have sent queries asking if the Immaculate Tart foretells the 265th Pope. The Archbishop of Florence states: "The new pope has already been chosen by the Lord, we must only pray to know who it is."

If you want my tip, given the French

Toast flavor of the relic, I would venture that the Pope elect may be a Francophone.

More Pontiff Presaging... I postulated yesterday that the Immaculate Tart may portend the pontiff-to-be. The Holy Tart of Berkeley is French Toast flavored and thusly, I deduced that the new Pope may be a Francophone. It now appears that Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustinger, former Archbishop of Paris, is the prelate tipped to take the title, according to spokespeople and bookies. Tres bien! The smoke is still black... Stay tuned.

Okay. So I was wrong. It should have been the Holy Strudel. I've never claimed to be psychic (at least, not in this article!).

Ted Gwin, my accomplice throughout this prank, submitted the following (under the monicker Right Reverend Teddy, of Cash of God Ministries):

SERMON ON THE TART

1 And seeing the multitudes he appeared to them upon a TART and when he was toasted his bidders came unto him.

2 Blessed are the TART bidders because theirs' is the kingdom of E-bay.

3 Blessed are those who are outbid for they may re-bid for the TART.

4 Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after the TART: for they shall be satiated.

5 Blessed is the winner: for they shall obtain the holy TART.

6 Blessed are the postal workers: for they shall deliver the TART.

7 Blessed are they whom are persecuted for the TART's sake: for theirs' is the kingdom of E-bay.

8 But I say unto you, that ye resist not generic TARTS: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right toaster slot, turn to him the other.

9 Take heed that ye do not your alms before breakfast, to be seen chowing forth : otherwise ye have no reward of your TART which is in thy bathroom.

10 Toast not, that ye be not toasted.

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By this time, the auction had only days before it would end.

Armageddon!

We near the auction endtimes...

Bid today!

I enjoyed blending religion and commercialism. Then, in a surprising and hilarious turn, I received the following email.

The Library of Congress would like to archive this auction record as part of the Library's research collections documenting the Pope and information about him on the Web.

Displaying no critical thinking, the Library of Congress legitimised my prank! Of course, I said 'yes', completed the online consent form and promptly posted a final note to the auction web site.

Congress Approves Tart

I have been formally approached by the United States Library of Congress whom wish to archive information about my tart for their research collection, to document the life of Pope John Paul II. This Library "preserves the Nation's cultural artifacts and provides enduring access to them." I am proud to relay that I have agreed to this honor. The tart shall live on, contributing to the education and scholarship of this nation!

Get your piece of tart history today!
Bid now!

The result

In a country that adores its pop culture, The Pope Tart became instant folklore. The 'relic' quickly became the gossip of message boards, blogs and mailing lists. I was called a 'scam artist', "a liar", "evil", "insane", "crazy", "loony", "funny", "a genius" and "sacrilegious". The Tart even became immortalised in the poem, *The Ballad of the Cafe Cheezus* by Angus O'Mann, 'Fast Food Poet'.

*They traveled there from many lands,
some distant and some odd,*

*To see the Holy Mackerel and the Glory
Be to Cod.*

*To see the famous Pope Tart and the
Passionfruit of Christ.*

*The armored car came once a day, then
started coming twice.⁷*

I did two interviews about the 'relic', and had to decline two others, due to work commitments. One interview was with qtelevision, an online 'queer' TV station. After overcoming their initial surprise that I was female, rather than male (an intriguing assumption that most people made), the interviewer asked me, "are you a Catholic?" I broke the ice with the unexpected reply, "No, I'm an atheist". I went on to explain the concept of pareidolia, urging the viewers to think about the natural causes of these phenomena.

In the end, the Pope Tart sold for \$46. Measly, in comparison to the six figured sum of the Virgin Sandwich, but extravagant in comparison to a \$4 pack of Pop Tarts. Not bad, considering it was an absolutely unconvincing piece of pareidolia and a blatant hoax! Furthermore, I didn't engage in fervent promotion of the Pope Tart, unlike the press releases of the Holy Cheeto or the worldwide publicity of the Virgin Sandwich. I simply emailed the listing to my usual address book and, in the contagious nature of the Internet, the word spread. Before eBay removed the listing, a routine act after 90 days of the auction closing, the web site had received just over 20 000 hits. Amusingly, Internet folklore believes the Pope Tart was purchased by GoldenPalace.com.

In the end, the joke was on me. The winning bid, like the auction, was a hoax. This suited my ethical purposes well. And so, I contacted Russell Rush, radio DJ for KXXM, San Antonio. Russell was the second highest bidder for the Tart. I offered to donate the Tart to the radio station, as a 'testimony to human gullibility'. He accepted.

Did the Pope Tart succeed in making people more skeptical? Not really. The prank suggested that people can be skeptical of how convincing pareidolia can be, but not skeptical of pareidolia itself. In fact, the divine

pastry initiated more of its kind, the 'Jesus Ascension Chip', 'Jesus' face on a rock' and the 'Face of God photocopy'. The quality was of the following convincing nature.

Jesus Rock for sale. Do I have good story about it? Not really. I found it in my driveway. Picked it up, and noticed that it looked like Jesus (the dark color). Also, if you turn it upside down, it looks like Elvis with a big nose (the light color). All I can tell you is that when I hold the rock, it makes me sneeze. Kind of weird, I know.

The Virgin Mary Cheese Sandwich, as sponsored by Golden Palace, re-popularised pareidolia; a common, psychological phenomenon. It's natural for us to search for, and recognise pareidolia. It's also natural to exhibit an example to others, seeking to confirm our perception; also explaining why people claim to see something, even when they don't. What is unnatural is when we see beyond the likeness, and assign significance to it. So, the next time you see Jesus in your meat pie, masticate it, don't venerate it!

Notes

1 *The Black Adder*, Episode Three, The Archbishop. With thanks to Sup's Blackadder page for the transcription: www.geocities.com/TelevisionCity/8889/bladder.htm

2 According to the essay *De Praeputio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Diatriba* en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo_Allatius

3 Thomas Serafin — www.ichrusa.com/
4 Sagan, Carl. *The Demon-Haunted World - Science as a Candle in the Dark*. New York: Random House, 1995, p.45.

5 Bob Carroll, *The Skeptic's Dictionary*. skepdic.com/pareidol.html

6 Joe Nickell, *Rorschach Icons*, www.csicop.org/si/2004-11/i-files.html

7 From the upcoming book *For Whom the Taco Bell Tolls* by Angus O'Mann. angusomann.blogspot.com/

With thanks to Phil Plait for the Lenin Shower Curtain photograph.

