

Article

William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*: Finding Human Agency in a Commodified Techno-Culture

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Abstract: This paper addresses the commodification of the human experience in late capitalism as depicted in William Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* and the potential of technology in helping the human subject in evading commodification. The novel shows how the virtual world and the physical world can become mutually supportive in allowing the characters to search for meaning, pattern and wholeness by using technology as an empowering force for the human subject while managing to avoid being consumed by a powerful capitalist market. The novel's protagonist's success in using technology as a humanizing force proves that humans can thrive within its sphere without necessarily being absorbed or overwhelmed by it.

Keywords: posthumanism; late capitalism; techno culture



Citation: Ghashmari, Ahmad A. 2022. William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*: Finding Human Agency in a Commodified Techno-Culture. *Literature* 2: 265–277. <https://doi.org/10.3390/literature2040022>

Academic Editor: Jerome F. Bump

Received: 18 July 2022

Accepted: 17 October 2022

Published: 26 October 2022

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Pattern Recognition is one of William Gibson's most popular books to date. Set in 2002, the novel tells the story of Cayce Pollard, a marketing specialist and "cool-hunter," who ironically has an unusual allergy to brand names and removes them from all of her clothes. Cayce has a great ability to determine whether a new brand, trend, or product would become successful. In addition to her usual assignments of evaluating new brands and business symbols, she is tasked with an intriguing assignment to find the creator of a series of fragmented online video clips that have gained a massive following and generated popular interest on the internet. The quest leads her on a journey of discovery that ends not only with her revealing the mystery of the online clips, but with new understandings of culture, history, and the relationship between patterns and randomness. The novel addresses several overlapping themes, but one of the most interesting themes in the novel is the commercialization or commodification of life in late capitalism and the quest to protect people's identity and humanness.

In the introduction to *The Consumer Society Reader* (Schor and Holt 2000), Juliet B. Schor and D. B. Holt present a thorough account of the process of commodification of everything by the late-capitalist market and the great influence this commodification has had on American culture. They explain how this process has started to permeate every aspect of human life at the turn of the twentieth century:

Indeed, virtually no aspect of social life appears to be immune from these trends [of commodification]. "Personal style" is now a hot market commodity. Trend spotters scour the nation's inner cities, searching for the successors to the hip-hop innovators of the 1980s. They scrutinized the walk, the talk, the way one's pants are worn. [...] The relentless drive to commodify is also evident in the commercialization of public space and culture. Advertising and marketing appear almost everywhere. [...] Indeed, our deepest personal connections are increasingly dominated by market transactions. [...] Little remains sacred, and separate from the world of the commodity. As a result people become ever more desperate to sacralize the profane consumer world around them, worshipping celebrities, collections, and brand logos. (Schor and Holt 2000, p. ix)

In fact, over half a century before Schor and Holt published their book, two prominent thinkers from the Frankfurt school, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, predicted the emergence of our current commodified culture. Building on Karl Marx's theories of the alienation of workers, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the capitalist market's need for objectified workers also creates a need for passive, controllable consumers; "Everything is directed at overpowering a customer conceived as distracted or resistant" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 133). This results in turning a creative, demanding and challenging culture into a banal, soothing and passive one. Adorno and Horkheimer also predicted that the use-value of objects will be replaced by symbolic social values and that art will be traded for entertainment filled mainly with advertising. Instead of responding to consumers' needs in the production and proliferation of goods, the market will create these needs and also create the illusion of satisfaction for its passive consumers. John Kenneth Galbraith calls this "the dependence effect." In *The Affluent Society* (Galbraith 1958), Galbraith argues that it is "the process of satisfying wants that creates the wants. For then the individual who urges the importance of production to satisfy these wants is precisely in the position of the onlooker who applauds the efforts of the squirrel to keep abreast of the wheel that is propelled by his own efforts" (Galbraith 1958, p. 125).

One of the most powerful commodifying tools used by the market in *Pattern Recognition* is a marketing tactic known as cool-hunting. Cool-hunting or trendspotting is defined by the novel's protagonist, Cayce Pollard, as finding "a group behavior pattern around a particular class of objects" (Gibson 2003, p. 86). She elaborates that this marketing tactic relies heavily on pattern recognition. What cool-hunters do is "recognize a pattern before anyone else does" (Gibson 2003, p. 86). The next steps in this process go as follows: "I point a commodifier at it [...] it gets productized. Turned into units. Marketed" (Gibson 2003, p. 86). This commodification of everyday life where even the most mundane human behavior can be analyzed and commodified through pattern-recognizing consumer experts and cool hunters employed by profit-driven multinational corporations poses a threat to human identity in the age of neoliberal globalization, which has become such a powerful force that it has turned everyday human life into a gigantic shopping mall or a never-ending reel of commercials. Humans have begun to be defined by their market value, and this commodification does not only pertain to the consumers but also those who work within the system including the cool-hunters themselves. Thus, the power of commodification within neoliberal globalization necessitates that the market permeates life, and for this system to function and continue to grow, nobody is allowed to thrive outside of its territory.

In pre-capitalist markets, products had a certain use-value that met a specific consumer's need, which kept a clear distinction between the consumer and the product. However, in late capitalist culture, objects and products are no longer produced and marketed for their use-value as businesses start to rely more on the commodification of social values that shape consumer behavior than on the consumer's need itself. Therefore, consumers have lost their position as agents of choice and have been turned into cogs in the machine of neoliberal globalization. This image of the culture where humans and objects are treated equally as actors within a system of production and consumption echoes Bruno Latour's "actor-network" theory, which is widely quoted in critical posthumanist debates. According to Latour, humans and objects are all equal parts within social networks, and the difference between them should not be presupposed but emergent through the network of relations. This theory poses a challenge to the concept of human agency. Latour argues that, "purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of objects, but they are also not properties of humans either. They are properties of [...] collectives of human and nonhumans" (Latour 1999, p. 192). In a consumerist techno-culture, for example, agency, Latour explains, appears through "material-semiotic" formations or the complex relations of meaning and materiality in which consumers, products, machines and other actors are embedded. Therefore, there is no distinction between subject and object; consumer and product; or human and machine as individual actors within the network. Capitalist globalization seems to thrive on this understanding of subject-object relations. Through

mass-production, the proliferation of objects, and the ubiquity of mass-media marketing, the difference between the consumer and the product has been blurred, and the consumer's identity, choice and agency have been taken out of the equation to allow for cultural flattening and neo-liberal globalization. This globalized cultural flattening is described in one passage in the novel as "that country without borders [...] where there are no mirrors to find yourself on the other side of, all experience having been reduced, by the spectral hand of marketing, to price-point variations on the same thing" (341).

The resounding progress of high technology that has accompanied the spread of neo-liberal globalization exerts both fear and hope with regard to the post/human condition in the age of advanced technology and commodity culture. On the one hand, technology continues to be seen as an integral part of the free market that lures consumers and tempts them to sink deeper into the delirium of consumption and commodity fetishism. In *Fictions of Commodity Culture* (Lindner 2003), Christoph Lindner argues that the global advertising industry has manipulated technological advances in media to circulate and proliferate commodities and their images in order to create a spectacle of the image of the commodity and make it infiltrate every last aspect of late capitalist culture "to the point where representations of commodities have become autonomous subjects of consumption and objects of desire in their own right" (Lindner 2003, p. 12). Leaning on the theories of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, who are among the most popular critics of cultural commodification and consumerist culture in the second half of the twentieth century, Lindner concludes that commodity marketing and proliferation aided by advanced media technologies have begun to play a central, commanding role in the social world "mediating and regulating all relations, shaping and determining the fabric of our everyday lives" (Lindner 2003, p. 13). This authority that the market has gained in the age of technology makes consumers more and more vulnerable to its overpowering lure and influence in society. It has been mentioned above that in a neo-liberal globalizing culture, the identities of both producers and consumers have been reduced to market values and functions of labor, and technology has been used to enable and hasten that metamorphosis. Alex Wetmore argues that within the market, "technology serves a more basic purpose as the material means by which subjects construct themselves as networks of commodifiable skills" (Wetmore 2007, p. 73). Indeed, in *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce, the cool hunter, for example, appears to have absorbed enormous data about brands, market processes and market relations and is initially presented as a person constructed specifically to fit a particular market role. Workers like Cayce are trained to be very good at the one thing they do until they become *what they do*.

The emergence of techno-culture, the proliferation of consumer goods and the illusions of satisfaction have influenced the society's sense of time, creating what can be called a "perpetual present." In choosing to base a novel in the present time for the first time in his career, William Gibson responds to this change. When he wrote his *Sprawl* trilogy (*Neuromancer* (Gibson 1984); *Count Zero* (Gibson 1986), *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (Gibson 1988)), Gibson used futuristic themes to tell stories that take place in distant temporalities. His attention then turned to the present world as the main locale of his recent novels *Pattern Recognition* (Gibson 2003), *Spook Country* (Gibson 2007) and *Zero History* (Gibson 2010). The most obvious explanation for this shift is that the futuristic themes Gibson imagined when he wrote his earlier science fiction novels have now become part of our daily life. For instance, although the Internet had already existed before the publication of *Neuromancer*, its idea was much simpler than what it has become in the late-1990s and into the twenty-first century. The idea of a global, powerful network of billions of computers (that is the Internet now) was first imagined and explained in detail in *Neuromancer*. The present of *Pattern Recognition* is characterized by popular sci-fi-like themes: the power of the technology, the rise of the machine, second life, and cyberspace. Gerald Alva Miller sums up the image of the techno-mediated world that *Pattern Recognition* portrays, "Since we live under a constant barrage of information that bombards us from all sides through computers, cell phones, televisions, GPS systems, etc., we never have the capacity to look beyond

the present moment. We already live in the future, so the need to create fictional futures becomes pointless" (Miller 2012, p. 102). This idea of existing in a perpetual futuristic present also echoes what one entrepreneur in Gibson's novel, Hubertus Bigend, claims,

We have no idea, now, of who or what the inhabitants of our future might be. In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile. [...] We have only risk management. The spinning of the given moment's scenarios. Pattern recognition. (Gibson 2003, p. 57)

Looking at how the world functions in the posthuman age, one can argue that Hubertus is right; we certainly live in a present where every pulse of life has been reduced to data and codes which, although they only exist on flickering screens, determine every aspect of human life. Technology is developing great velocity, and yet we want more and more speed.

The realization of this perpetual present by the teaming up of the market and technology has resulted in the creation of mass culture, or the emergence of mass production and constant producing for the masses. For the market to have better control over the consumers, culture has to become unanimous. According to Adorno and Horkheimer this unanimity then allows the monopoly of the market, and "under monopoly all mass culture is identical" (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p. 94). Furthermore, aspects of culture that the market aims to control and monopolize are not limited to the real but also include the virtual. For example, *Pattern Recognition* introduces an enormous online social interest in viral video footage on a global online forum called F:F:F (Fetish:Footage:Forum). On this website, a sequence of anonymous film clips becomes an online sensation with millions of users around the world theorizing about the origins, meanings and artistic value of the clips. The footage and the search for the maker of the videos connect all the actions of the novel together. This mysterious Internet video footage, the social interest in it and the search for its origins also serve as a turning point in the novel where the commodification of the market and the desire for meaning and depth by the users clash. What is especially interesting about Gibson's novel is that as it addresses the humanizing potential of the Internet, his writing also shows how the market threatens to coop this potential. Indeed, as the phenomenon of the clips begins to have the potential of bringing people together in a quest for meaning, the market aims to spread its tentacles around it in order to turn it from a humanizing social experience into a business opportunity. After Cayce flies to London to sign a contract with a marketing company to evaluate a proposed logo for them, she is offered a completely different contract by Hubertus Bigend, the CEO of the company known as Blue Ant. Cayce eventually finds out that Blue Ant is not really what she was told it was, which is interesting since the name "blue ant" originally refers to an Australian wasp that looks like and is called an ant but really is not. The 135 video segments that go viral and draw a lot of attention on the Internet present a marketing opportunity to a business-oriented person like Hubertus Bigend who now wants Cayce to find the maker of the footage. People on the Internet become obsessed with this footage and try to find patterns and meanings in it, but for Bigend the goal is not to find patterns that might lead to meaning in the footage, but, according to him, to find a way to exploit and market the footage. Bigend makes a bold statement about today's market which has become, according to him, very much a simulacrum more than a real thing, "Far more creativity, today, goes into the marketing of products than into the products themselves" (Gibson 2003, p. 67). Earlier in the novel as Cayce walks into a Harvey Nichols and her allergy to brand names hits, she makes a similar statement about the reality of marketing:

This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row, flavouring their

ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo kit and regimental stripes. But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul. (Gibson 2003, p. 17–18)

Hubertus Bigend is a living embodiment of late capitalism that prioritizes material gain over anything else. For him, life can be seen through the lens of production and marketing. Although Bigend is the one who pushes Cayce to start the search for the origins of the footage, which ironically leads to Cayce's effort to break from the trap of techno-capital and seek a re-appropriation of selfhood, his intentions are merely materialistic. As a representation of the market, Bigend seems to be the only one who has an interest in the clips yet does not care if the clips are parts of a whole or not, or if they have any symbolic or aesthetic meaning. When Cayce raises the question and asserts that she "knows in her heart" that the clips are parts of a whole and thus contain a meaningful message, Bigend rejects the possibility and, instead, emphasizes the importance of turning the footage into a marketable product, going so far as to describe the way in which people are wired to purchase products in a capitalist culture:

"The heart is a muscle," Bigend corrects. "You 'know' in your limbic brain. The seat of instinct. The mammalian brain. Deeper, wider, beyond logic. That is where advertising works, not in the upstart cortex. What we think of as 'mind' is only a sort of jumped-up gland, piggybacking on the reptilian brainstem and the older, mammalian mind, but our culture tricks us into recognizing it as all of consciousness. The mammalian spreads continent-wide beneath it, mute and muscular, attending its ancient agenda. And makes us buy things. (Gibson 2003, p. 69)

This obsession with the footage represents people's desperate search for meaning in a world saturated with signs, a search for origins in a world of simulacra, a search for linearity in a world that celebrates fragmentation, and a search for depth in a world that reflects and reproduces itself in images and surfaces. It is an obsession that Bigend hopes to market and that Cayce hopes will lead to something meaningful.

Cayce Pollard works as a "cool hunter," a job that has resulted in (or from) her unusual ability to recognize patterns in humans' social behavior and predict with very high accuracy what the next market trends are going to be. Although this ability is developed within an overpowering technological market, Cayce succeeds in preserving her human identity from dissolution. Through years of experience in the marketplace, she has internalized huge datasets of logos, trademarks, and marketing tricks and becomes exceptionally able to recognize the next "hot" trend before others do, hence her designation as a "cool hunter." She observes and recognizes patterns in even mere randomness. According to Miller, Cayce's incredible ability to recognize patterns in the market comes as a result of internalizing "not just the commodity marketplace, but also the hegemony of computers" (Miller 2012, p. 110). Cayce, however, has a so-called "trademark allergy", one that develops into a phobia or a nausea of certain trademarks like Tommy Hilfiger and Bibendum, the Michelin Man; it is a "side effect of too much exposure to the reactor-cores of fashion" (Miller 2012, p. 8). To solve this problem she removes the trademark logos from the clothes she wears and avoids contact with any fashion brand names. It is interesting that a person who lives in a "logo-maze" and whose psyche is populated with trademarks and brands cannot bear to have those trademarks come into contact with her body. In the way that Gibson describes it, this rejection is Cayce's conscious attempt to keep herself from being consumed by the hegemonic power of the techno-cultural system and from becoming a mere commodified being. She, more than others, understands the influence of commodities and brands on humans and thereafter starts a journey where she searches for depth in a superficial empire of signs.

The marketing system that Cayce works within necessitates that she become, in effect, a conscious machine programmed to do one thing and to do it well. As we meet Cayce at the beginning of the novel, she works in recognizing patterns out of randomness for

the market by deciding what will or will not work. To do so, she compares what she sees with the massive amount of information about the market that she has acquired over the years. This gives one the impression that she has developed a computer-like binary system. For example, when she is flown over from New York to London at the beginning of the novel, the sole purpose is for her to only say “yes” or “no” to a company’s new sneaker’s logo. Despite all the money that has been invested in the logo, if she says “no” (without offering any reasons) the logo is not going to be used. Cayce was compared, both literally and metaphorically, to an artificial intelligence system on several occasions at the beginning of the novel, but one of the most intriguing of all is when her friend Damien refers to her clothes as CPUs: Cayce Pollard Units. CPU is a popular computer acronym that stands for “central processing unit” and functions as the brain in a computer. The CPU basically processes or executes a computer program which is made of sets of stored instructions and data. Cayce’s CPU is her brain, which has stored a vast amount of information about thousands of trademarks and logos and makes her responses to trends, fashion and marketing very much like a computer’s. After returning home from a meeting with Hubertus Bigend, “Cayce pauses to do a recompute” (Gibson 2003, p. 74) on that meeting. That is how Cayce is introduced to the reader, as a person whose deep immersion in the market and techno-cultural life has turned her into a soulful machine.

However, Cayce Pollard, in Donna Haraway’s terms, is a cyborg. Her subjectivity and identity have undergone a mutation as she exists in a techno-mediated space. The cyborg’s immersion in techno-culture constantly redefines the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. The cyborg embraces newness and possibilities. This new position of the human does not, however, necessarily mean that humans have lost their value or exceptionalism. It is basically a new world that requires a new and different way of connecting with the other elements of culture. According to L. R. Rutsky, “The position of human beings in relation to this techno-cultural unconscious cannot, therefore, be that of the analyst (or theorist) who, standing outside this space, presumes to know or control it. It must instead be a relation of connection to, of interaction with, that which has been seen as ‘other,’” (Rutsky 1999, p. 21). Rutsky does not see this change as an abandonment of our humanity or as a beginning of a transhumanist age. Rather, this position of the human in relation to techno-culture can be understood, he argues, as an acknowledgement of “the otherness that is part of us. It would involve opening the boundaries of individual and collective identity, changing the relations that have distinguished between subject and object, self and other, us and them” (Rutsky 1999, pp. 21–22).

Similarly, Rob Latham even argues that adapting to this new system of being is crucial for our survival. He builds on the argument of Douglas Rushkoff who praises the young generation that adapts to cultural mutation with enthusiasm and calls them “screenagers.” Latham then adds that these “cyborgs serve as models of how we must all learn to “youthen” ourselves—for either we incorporate the appropriate psychic prostheses [...] that permit us to interface with new technologies, or we consign ourselves to stagnation” (Latham 2002, p. 141). This stagnation can be either in the form of resisting technology or of becoming passive to its power. Thus, the key for human progress is incorporating and appropriating the power of technology in ways that can advance our humanity.

Despite the overpowering impact of the market that *Pattern Recognition* portrays, hope for the human to preserve an identity can still be salvaged through the possibility of interaction between humans and technology outside of the manipulations of the marketplace. Alex Wetmore argues that Gibson wrote *Pattern Recognition* as a more optimistic version of the technological world of his 1984 cyberpunk masterpiece *Neuromancer* by presenting a posthuman culture in which “forms of autonomy and agency survive even after the boundaries have broken down between oppositions such as organic and artificial, humans and machines, reality and simulation, and labor and the self” (Gibson 1984, p. 73). This human-technology interaction, Wetmore maintains, can allow for new modes of representation and new narratives of identity without threatening human survival or human subjectivity. As we see in *Pattern Recognition*, the most influential media technology, the

Internet, which has been highly manipulated by marketing and advertising, can still present a realm of hope for individuals to counter the threat of the market through regaining and expanding a sense of self and identity, through searching for meaning and new interpretations, and through building bridges of communication and compassion. In “The Brand as a Cognitive Map in William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*,” Lee Konstantinou argues that the Internet has so far played a significant part in transforming consumer culture by creating “hyperinformed consumers,” who have the means necessary to “survive the strains of our evolving consumer culture” (Konstantinou 2009, p. 68). Konstantinou stresses that the right way for humans to survive is not by trying to stop the rate of commodification or by adopting anti-consumption or anti-technology lifestyles, but by taking advantage of what high technology has made available to us and that is “historically unparalleled knowledge-gathering abilities, tied into the ‘central nervous system’ of the Internet” (Konstantinou 2009, pp. 68–69). Therefore, instead of becoming just another tool for the market to fasten its grip over the masses, the Internet can turn into a democratizing and humanizing force.

The Internet can also turn pattern recognition from a marketing tool into a human desire for meanings and interpretations. The novel offers an interesting perspective on the phenomenon of pattern recognition, that is, the human capacity, stemming from our evolutionary past, to discern meaningful shapes among otherwise random patterns. What the novel suggests is that this age-old human capacity has been eroded by techno-culture. Indeed, after the videos become an Internet sensation, “footageheads” around the world have formed what Fredric Jameson calls “a worldwide confraternity,” (Jameson 2006, p. 126) which starts following these clips and offering their interpretations of the content and wondering whether the clips are “a work in progress” or “something completed years ago, and meted out now, for some reason in these snippets” (Jameson 2006, p. 22). Cayce waits impatiently for every new segment; she plays and replays them again and again. As she watches the clips, Cayce becomes more and more desperate for meaning, for wholeness and depth, and she “wants nothing more than to see the film of which this must be a part. Must be” (Gibson 2003, p. 24). On the other hand, her “online” friend, Parkaboy, whom she knows through the website F:F:F, celebrates the randomness of the clips. He tells her to “go to new footage as though you’ve seen no previous footage at all, thereby momentarily escaping the film or films that you’ve been assembling, consciously or unconsciously, since first exposure. [...] Homo sapiens are about pattern recognition” (Gibson 2003, p. 22). Parkaboy’s theory, that pattern is a thing of the past, reflects life in a techno-cultural society where everything is about data and profit. For Parkaboy, pattern recognition is “both a gift and a trap” (Gibson 2003, p. 22), so since there is a 50/50 chance of erring when it comes to human pattern recognition, being both a “gift” and a “trap,” Parkaboy thinks that it has to be abandoned. He refers to pattern recognition as something that “homo sapiens” needed, but at this age and time it no longer makes sense. What he believes in instead is technology because it eliminates doubt.

Cayce, on the other hand, thinks that taking risks with pattern recognition should be cherished as part of our humanness. Interestingly enough, her search for patterns and meaning as she accepts the job by an untrustworthy employer like Hubertus Bigend to track down the origin of the clips and find the maker can be seen as an emotional response to a more mind-numbing question of meaning: the mysterious disappearance of her father an ex-CIA agent who disappeared on the morning of 9/11. The loss and the trauma in the videos, which are reminiscent of the tragedy of 9/11 and the loss of her father, make Cayce eager to search for meaning. Cayce joins a large subculture that spends days on end studying the fragments, and despite her previous knowledge that “the one hundred and thirty-four previously discovered fragments, having been endlessly collated, broken down, reassembled, by armies of the most fanatical investigators, have yielded no period and no particular narrative direction” (Gibson 2003, p. 24), she insists on trying to find meaning beyond the glowing surface of the videos.

Within the intersection of technology and the posthuman, Cayce’s search for the maker yields an important discovery regarding the use of the Internet in expanding the potential

of the human, one that brings disability studies into conversation with posthumanist discourse. The maker of the film clips turns out to be a young Russian woman named Nora. In an assassination attempt that resulted in the death of her parents, Nora suffered neurological damage that rendered her mentally and physically disabled. She has one way to communicate with the world which is by producing video fragments. Disability studies are currently connecting with posthumanism. In *The Posthuman* (Braidotti 2013), Rosi Braidotti criticizes the narrow humanist ideas of “normality, normalcy, and normativity” (Braidotti 2013, p. 26) that have for centuries pushed people with disabilities to the edge of the human. As the disabled have suffered marginalization, and a subhuman status, it is sobering to see a mentally and physically disabled woman given voice and an opportunity for self-expressions through technology. The disabled also symbolizes the other that has been excluded by certain obsolete criteria of humanism. The constructive power of technology has allowed the “subaltern” to speak.

Cayce’s search for the maker of the video clips is in itself of great significance as well. Ever since the video clips started surfacing online, Cayce has become obsessed with them, she studied them carefully, looking for meaning and clues, but one thing that she wanted to know the most was the identity of the author or “the maker.” Referring to the person who created the clips as “the maker” gives the author a god-like significance. This god-like significance of the maker gives Cayce a much needed assurance that what she is pursuing is not mirrors and smoke or mere apophenia, which is, as the novel defines, “the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things, [or] an illusion of meaningfulness, faulty pattern recognition” (Gibson 2003, p. 115). Cayce’s search for the maker and the origins of the clips is also symbolic of meaning and depth in a world saturated with machines and consumer products.

Cayce’s constant refusal to be consumed by the culture of brands and simulacrum and her desperate attempts to reconnect with reality and search for deeper meanings in life is a clear indication that while she, an avid Internet user and fashion cool hunter, explores “the new vistas that cyberspace has made available for colonization,” she also remembers “the fragility of a material world that cannot be replaced” (Hayles 2008, p. 49). Her understanding of how important it is to connect with the “fragile” material world is reflected clearly in her trip to Tokyo. As she arrives in Tokyo, “the manically animated forest of signs,” (Gibson 2003, p. 125) she starts looking for any vestiges of nature and reality. She believes reality has been banished in this city to the extent that paved streets do not seem to hide any soil underneath, and everything looks artificial; “she’s never actually seen soil emerge from any incision they might make in the street, here; it’s as though there is nothing beneath the pavement but a clean, uniformly dense substrate of pipes and wiring” (Gibson 2003, p. 125). Tokyo is the techno-cultural space that epitomizes the posthuman city. Its densely complex structure and perfectly designed scape resembles high-tech networks. It gives city dwellers the illusion that no world exists outside of this network. Cities like Tokyo are “founded on the premise that, at least in highly technologized societies, technology [...] has become such an inseparable part of our everyday cultural life that we now feel ourselves surrounded by, immersed in, a new, techno-cultural environment” (Rutsky 1999, p. 121). In Tokyo, Cayce’s subjectivity goes through a new phase, one in which nostalgia for the real and a desire for meaning create a sense of alienation in a simulated city that does not need a past, because it has already reached and perpetuated the future, and a city that thrives on signs and simulacrum. However, through individual re-appropriation, which is a resistance of overwhelming dominant cultural discourses that threaten her identity, Cayce is able to refuse to be consumed by the simulacrum.

In the “The Poetics of *Pattern Recognition*: William Gibson’s Shifting Technological Subject,” Alex Wetmore draws on the work of Michel de Certeau, especially his book *The Practices of Everyday Life* (Certeau and Rendall 1984) to show how Cayce’s mundane practices like walking in the city are of great importance in maintaining a sense of selfhood in the face of a dominant late capitalist discourse that threatens to absorb her subjectivity. In one section of the book entitled “Walking in the City,” Certeau contrasts two practices,

the first is reminiscent of the Foucauldian panoptic view of the city as one looks down on New York from the top floor of the World Trade Center, and the other is what he refers to as “spatial practices” that escape the dominant discourse and mark “a contradiction between the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation” (Certeau and Rendall 1984, p. 96). One of these “spatial practices” is walking in the city. In London and Moscow, as well as in Tokyo, Cayce finds herself tempted to walk the city streets and evading the dominant cultural discourses, exemplified in the novel by spying, marketing, and automation of everyday life, that have begun to threaten her individual selfhood. It is through these mundane everyday life practices, that Cayce feels that she can connect with reality and its contingencies and gaps in meaning and interpretation.

Both Cayce and Nora share a significant human marker that triggers an urgency for meaning which seems to be the only possible way to break from the “dominant-based paradigms of interpretation.” Loss and its subsequent trauma become that shared human quality. Cayce’s goal of searching for the origins of the clips results from her deep feeling of the loss of her father, Win Pollard, on the morning of 9/11. Cayce describes the events of 9/11 as “an experience outside of culture” (Gibson 2003, p. 137) that has left her with many unanswered questions. For her, the terrorist attacks intercepted a culture that has terminated any sense of time and shielded itself against the harshness of reality.

However, even this trauma, and the idea of death and destruction, has been absorbed by the dominant cultural narrative of the media. Film and television’s constant depictions of catastrophes have turned it into a spectacle. The infinite entertainment and pleasure that the market promises gives the illusion that pain has no place in culture. When Cayce sees a low and loud plane flying over West Broadway on the morning of 9/11, the only thing she could think of was “They must be making a film” (Gibson 2003, p. 137), and after she watched the event live, it all felt like “watching one of her own dreams on television” (Gibson 2003, p. 137). Thinking of movies and dreams at that moment echoes how we’ve begun to view catastrophes even when they happen in real life. We have reached a point where destruction and violence are only associated with movies and television, so when a destructive event of this magnitude makes an unexpected appearance in our reality, comprehending it becomes a challenge.

It is interesting that Cayce’s first reaction to the events combines both movies and dreams. Movies and dreams are similar in their effect to the way we perceive what we see. In his review of “Inception,” a 2010 blockbuster that deals with dreaming and reality, Jonah Lehrer ties the idea of movie-watching to the idea of dreaming in convincing fashion by using the theories of neuroscience. He writes, “From the perspective of your brain, dreaming and movie-watching are strangely parallel experiences. In fact, one could argue that sitting in a darkened theater and staring at a thriller is the closest one can get to REM sleep with open eyes” (Lehrer 2015). Cayce’s inability to comprehend the harshness of reality after the attacks is a result of the “Hollywood-ization” of everyday life. From a neuroscientific point of view, Lehrer adds, there is a connection between watching a movie and seeing a dream because when people watch movies or see dreams the prefrontal cortex of the brain, “an area associated with logic, deliberative analysis, and self-awareness,” becomes inactive (Lehrer 2015). When the prefrontal cortex is inhibited, we lose ourselves in the movie or the dream no matter how unbearable, absurd or nonsensical the events are; “it’s as if our cortex is entertaining us with surreal cinema, filling our strange nighttime narratives with whatever spare details happen to be lying around.” A possible explanation of how Cayce felt as she witnessed the events is that the shock of the spectacle was probably too much for her to handle so she felt like dreaming or watching a thriller which quieted her prefrontal cortex while her visual cortex becomes more active than usual. “It’s a process in which [her] senses are hyperactive and yet [her] self-awareness is strangely diminished.” When we become desensitized to catastrophes through movies and simulations, this might be the only “mode” we can “switch to” in order to absorb such scenes. We can possibly connect this analogy between movies and dreams to consumption and marketing as well. This differentiation between parts of the human brain and their unparalleled reactions to

different simulants resonates with Hubertus Bigend's marketing philosophy: "You 'know' in your limbic brain. The seat of instinct. The mammalian brain. Deeper, wider, beyond logic. That is where advertising works, not in the upstart cortex" (69). Bigend differentiates between the "upstart cortex" of the brain, which does the pattern recognition and works to build meaningful associations and the "limbic brain," which, he believes, a cool hunter like Cayce needs to appeal to when it comes to buying and selling. This is why Bigend wants to find the maker of the videos and end the speculations about patterns, meanings and origins, which makes people use their "upstart cortexes." He wants to end the pattern recognition quest, put that active "upstart context" of consumers to sleep, commodify the videos and awaken the consumers' "limbic brain."

This quieting of our prefrontal cortex does not only affect our ability to absorb the shock but also our ability to remember it. Although Cayce has seen people jumping and falling from the towers, she realized "there will be no memory of it" (Gibson 2003, p. 137) because tragedy, destruction and loss are too real to be comprehended or even imagined by a culture saturated with hyperreality. In an essay written a few months after the attacks, Don DeLillo describes the events' influence on our culture in similar terms; "The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the Internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there's *no memory* there, and this is where markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limits. All this changed on September 11" [emphasis added] (DeLillo 2001, p. 33). As Cayce becomes more and more frustrated with the fact that her father has disappeared without a trace and that no one seems to know where he was, she lamented, "the city seemed to have acquired a very specific amnesia" (Gibson 2003, p. 187). After this realization, Cayce's interest in meaning, depth and wholeness becomes a defining aspect of her work. Her insistence that there is pattern and meaning in the clips reflects her feeling of loss and her desperate need for closure after the disappearance of her father. However, her obsessive interest in the clips could also be part of a cultural counter-narrative used against the unimaginable disaster that was "too real" to handle. This counter-narrative seems to be exemplified by a fascination with objects. Right before the attacks, as Cayce was waiting for a meeting at the SoHo Grand Hotel, she witnessed what Gibson calls a "micro-event" that has announced the destruction that was about to come. "She had watched a single petal fall, from a dead rose" (Gibson 2003, p. 135) in a display window in an antique store. This image of the falling petal seemed to have stuck in her memory for a while after the events. This micro-event becomes part of an obsession with objects, or as Georgiana Banita calls it a "panoptic obsession" (Banita 2012, p. 251) that followed the terrorist attacks. This obsession was triggered by an attempt to deal with a shocking unimaginable event. DeLillo lists more of these objects.

The cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women. The box cutters and credit cards. The paper that came streaming out of the towers and drifted across the river to Brooklyn backyards, status reports, résumés, insurance forms. Sheets of paper driven into concrete, according to witnesses. Paper slicing into truck tyres, fixed there. These are among the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day. We need them, even the common tools of the terrorists, to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response (Gibson 2003, p. 35).

It may seem that objects, machines, and data that were once blamed for dehumanizing us are now the very thing we look for in order to take control of our humanness, but if we look closer at these objects listed by DeLillo and compare them to the clips Cayce has become fascinated with, we find they share a significant similarity. Those 9/11 objects are fragmentary, a pile of disconnected items that survived a holocaust of objects. What they lack now in their current state is pattern, but they are not necessarily random, and that gap between pattern and randomness is what initiates the search for meaning and depth. The loneliness and silence of these objects is similar to the loneliness and silence of the scrap video footage that Nora compiles together in the viral clips. Fredric Jameson wrote

that the clips' lack of pattern and style provides "an ontological relief" to Cayce because they can give her "an epoch of rest, an escape from the noisy commodities themselves, which turn out [...] to be living entities preying on the humans who have to coexist with them" (Jameson 2006, p. 114). Therefore, as Cayce sets out to search for her humanness and a redefinition of her subjectivity after realizing the overwhelming power of media technology and the commercialization of everyday life, she never rejects the system or tries to seek herself outside of it. On the contrary, as she resists the dominant discourse of late capitalism, Cayce seeks to re-understand her position in the system through negotiation and re-appropriation. She rejects trademarks and the simulacra of commercialism but at the same time chooses to immerse herself in the infinite possibilities of the World Wide Web through the online fascination of video footage that does not abide by the laws of linearity and sequential narrative. Her strategy echoes Katherine Hayles', which entails that technology and information are not dangerous in themselves, but "the computational universe becomes dangerous when it goes from being a useful heuristic to an ideology that privileges information over everything else" (Hayles 2008, p. 244). What Cayce looks for in the online world of F:F:F and the video footage is what Hayles refers to as "fracture lines" in the system that allow people to envision other possibilities and other "futures in which human beings feel at home in the universe because they are embodied creatures living in an embodied world." (Hayles 2008, p. 244).

One way to see the difference between the current human position in a techno-mediated existence and the one characterized by a theorized radical transformation of humanness proposed by the transhumanists is to consider the difference between the protagonists of Gibson's *Neuromancer* and *Pattern Recognition*. Cayce Pollard in *Pattern Recognition* represents the version of the posthuman this study advocates while Henry Dorsett Case in *Neuromancer* represents the more extreme transhumanist version that this study discredits. Gibson's first novel *Neuromancer* (Gibson 1984) announced the birth of Cyberpunk and Cyberspace which started a new trend of science fiction that focused mainly on the relationship of subjectivity and machine and tackled issues related to embodiment, immortality, and cyborgism. *Neuromancer* gives us a world that could only have been dreamt by transhumanists. In *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson* (Cavallaro 2000), Dani Cavallaro sums up the transhuman world of *Neuromancer*:

The human body immersed in a virtual environment is made harder and shinier by its fusion with technology. Yet it also crosses over into the domain of the hybrid, for its humanity is indissolubly linked to nonhuman apparatuses. The responses elicited by such an interpenetration of the organic and the inorganic are ambivalent; on the one hand, technology is viewed as a kind of magical mirror capable of multiplying human powers ad infinitum and of reflecting humanity in an idealized form; on the other, technology is associated with the engulfment of the human by the nonhuman. Either way, the 'hyper-texted' body constructed via technology, 'with its micro-flesh, multimedia channelled ports, cybernetic fingers, and bubbling neuro-brain,' displaces the binary opposition between wired corporeality and organic corporeality. (Cavallaro 2000, pp. 28–29)

These properties of a transhuman subject are exemplified in *Neuromancer's* main character, a "cyberspace cowboy" and a hacker who through several complex neurosurgeries is able to exist hybridly, between physical reality and virtual reality. This ability allows him to enter cyberspace and hack into corporate accounts and steal information. Case's world is characterized by the great hegemony of information technology and the astounding advances of biotechnology that makes it possible to replace body parts and engineer them to give the body more powerful capabilities. In fact, in the world of *Neuromancer*, there is a black market that trades body parts and other genetic materials. Like *Pattern Recognition's* Cayce Pollard, Case is hired by mysterious employers to find or steal information. Interestingly enough, the most important employer of Case is an artificial intelligence known as Wintermute who seeks Case's help in order to unite with another artificial intelligence

known as “Neuromancer.” Their unity in the end creates “the sum total of the work, the whole show” (Gibson 1984, p. 259). Since the beginning, Case was bedazzled by the infinite possibilities of the Matrix of cyberspace and considered his body as “meat” and that he was in “the prison of his own flesh” (Gibson 2003, p. 6). At the end he meets his disembodied clone in the Matrix.

By comparing the main characters in Gibson’s two seminal works, the reader can see that their names (Case and Cayce) are pronounced the same. Of course, one would assume that Cayce should be pronounced like “Casey” or “Cassie,” but she explains that she prefers to be called “Case.” (In fact, Cayce mentions that her mother named her after Edgar Cayce—pronounced Casey—a man who was known as the Sleeping Prophet because he claimed to have psychic abilities and could tell the future, which is also another reference to Cayce’s cool-hunting and pattern recognition skills). Another similarity between the protagonists, Cayce and Case, is that they both travel between a virtual and a physical world in search of information and access. Despite these similarities, a closer examination of the two novels reveals an important change of tone in the whole debate of posthumanism in Gibson’s fiction. *Neuromancer*’s Case reflects the exaggerated view of transhumanism about the future of humanity. The cyberspace that *Neuromancer* describes is built on the idea of disembodied existence which is shown as a world of infinite possibilities and freedoms, a world in which the body is nothing but a shell that can be enhanced and replaced or simply cast away when one feels burdened with it. The matrix, as Gibson refers to it, is the next step in human’s search for immortality and an ultimate refuge from the incarceration of the body. While *Neuromancer* embraces a panopticon culture in which humans are technologically controlled, *Pattern Recognition*, on the other hand, “moves away from totalizing depictions of technologically determined subjects and toward a more hopeful vision in which the self is occasionally able to elude the grasp of totalizing forces through everyday practices of re-appropriation” (Wetmore 2007, pp. 71–72). The *Neuromancer*’s Matrix, a totally simulated realm of existence, is what makes its premise of a posthumanist future flawed. The idea that one can cross over from a physical world into a virtual, simulated existence originates from the notion that humanity can survive without embodiment. *Pattern Recognition* comes as realization that just as human body and consciousness can never exist separately, so do the physical and the virtual spheres.

Of course, the market will continue to manipulate technology and form an overwhelming and totalizing force that looks to commodify every last aspect of culture, so there arises an urgency for humanity to avoid falling under the spell of that force. *Neuromancer* serves as a cautionary tale that what Case does is a mere escape from one radical view of humanness to another; both are based on the same theoretical premise, an obsolete version of humanism in which the human must always find a way to dominate the world. What Case has done is “replaced an identity once dominated by notions of ‘biology as destiny’ with one dominated by ‘technology as destiny.’” (Wetmore 2007, p. 73). *Pattern Recognition*, therefore, presents the more compelling version of human life in a techno-cultural world where humanness can still be preserved without necessarily rejecting technology or escaping life in a simulated dimension. Countering the commodification of culture and humanness must arise from within techno-culture and not by escaping it.

The ending of *Pattern Recognition* carries profound meanings in terms of the quest for humanness and the preservation of a human identity in the face of the commodifying machine. The novel ends with Cayce falling asleep peacefully after accomplishing what she sets out to accomplish from the start: finding the maker and solving the mystery of the footage. However, before Cayce falls asleep, her brand allergy, a side effect of excessive exposure to the market, is suddenly cured. Cayce is no longer afraid of the Michelin Man or of Tommy Hilfiger products. This cure symbolizes her ability to preserve her identity from the “logo-maze” (Gibson 2003, p. 18) that threatened to dissolve it because she now has gained a much better understanding of the system. Furthermore, of similar significance in the last scene of the novel is Cayce’s weeping “for her century, though whether the one past or the one present she doesn’t know” (Gibson 2003, p. 356). This display of human

empathy by Cayce is significant especially when contrasted with Molly's, Case's partner in *Neuromancer*, who, after multiple prosthetics were implanted in her eye sockets to add superhuman optical enhancements, loses the ability to cry, so when she feels sad her tears are transferred to her mouth, and she spits them.

Finally, preserving humanness in a deeply commercialized world is more relevant today than it has ever been. In recent years, the internet, especially social media, has claimed a critical role in forming people's worldviews and dictating their behaviors. It has become the main source of both information and misinformation, and, in terms of how people view other people, it can be both a humanizing and dehumanizing force. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 US presidential elections, and the climate crisis have been shrouded by conflicting information and endless disagreements on the internet to the point where many could no longer tell the real from the fake, and the friend from the enemy. While we cannot escape the power of the internet and its overwhelming appeal, we have a responsibility to examine and judge carefully lest we become consumed by it. Cayce Pollard's success in averting brands while actively working in a world dominated by brands shows that navigating this technologically saturated world without losing one's path is still possible.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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