11

Fear and Loathing in Globalization

Has the author of *Neuromancer* really "changed his style"? Has he even stopped writing Science Fiction, as some old-fashioned critics have put it, thinking thereby to pay him a compliment? Maybe, on the contrary, he is moving closer to that "cyberpunk" with which he is often associated, but which seems more characteristically developed in the work of his sometime collaborator Bruce Sterling? In any case, the representational apparatus of Science Fiction, here refined and transistorized in all kinds of new and productive ways, sends back more reliable information about the contemporary world than an exhausted realism (or an exhausted modernism either).

William Gibson, now the author of *Pattern Recognition*, has certainly more often illustrated that other coinage, "cyberspace" and its inner networks of global communication and information, than the object-world of late commodification through which the latest novel carefully gropes its way. To be sure, Sterling celebrated the hackers, the heroic pirates of cyberspace, but without Gibson's tragic intensity and as the oddballs and marginals of new frontiers to come; and the rush and exhilaration of his books, rather alien to the cooler Gibson, has always seemed to me to derive as much from global entrepreneurship and the excitement of the money to be made, as from paranoia.

But that excitement also expresses the truth of emergent globalization; and Sterling deserves more than a mere paragraph or parenthesis here. The novels are often episodic, but stories like those collected in *A Good Old-Fashioned Future* (New York, 1999) are authentic artifacts of postmodernity and little masterpieces in their own right, offering a Cook's tour of the new global waystations and the piquant dissonances between picturesque travellers and the future cities they suddenly find themselves in: Tokyo to be sure (Tokyo now and forever!), in which a Japanese-American federal prosecutor from Providence, Rhode Island, finds herself enveloped in a conspiracy waged with ceramic cats; but also the California of misfit inventors, in which a new process for manufacturing artificial (and aerial) jellyfish threatens to convert all the oil left in the ground in Texas into so much worthless *Urschleim*, then offering an unsurprisingly happy hunting ground for meetings between old

1960s-style terrorists and the former KGB, along with youthful and ruthless ecological nationalists, veteran international industrial spies, and an aged Finnish writer of children's books immensely popular in Japan. Meanwhile, Bollywood actors in flight from the Indian tax system have the great good luck to happen on the biggest mass grave in history, in Bolton, in an England decimated by the plague and now good only for making cheap movies on location; while, in Germany, in Düsseldorf, the new institution of the *Wende* is explored, in which, observed by a "spex" salesman from Chattanooga, periodically all the destructive collective movements of the time, from football hooligans to anti-modern moral majorities, coincide in a ritual "turbulence". Indeed, it is Chattanooga, with its burnt-out downtown future megastructure, now a rat's nest of squatters, which serves as the stage for a more complex and characteristic encounter: between a de-sexed bicycle repairman (new gender movements have proliferated in this future, including that of Sexual Deliberation, which artificially eradicates the sex drive) and the private police of a long-serving and now senile congressional stalwart, whose artificial identity replacement (the so-called mook) risks being unmasked by an unwanted package in the mail. Finally, classic Science Fiction returns with the discovery in a Central Asian desert, by twenty-first-century bounty-hunters, of an enormous artificial underground cavern, in which the Zone (the latest future form of the old East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere, now run, to be sure, by China) has housed three world-sized sealed-off human communities as an experiment in testing the viability of 400-year-long space flights. I have only incidentally mentioned some of the wacky SF technology taken for granted in these tales: what is significant are the priorities of global cyberpunk, in which technological speculation and fantasy of the old Toeffler sort takes second place to the more historically original literary vocation of a mapping of the new geopolitical Imaginary.

This is why such Hunter Thompsonian global tourism has real epistemological value: cyberpunk constitutes a kind of laboratory experiment in which the geographical-cultural light spectrum and band-widths of the new system are registered. It is a literature of the new stereotypes thrown up by a system in full expansion, which, like the explosion of a nova, sends out a variety of uncharted signals and signs of new communities and new and artificially differentiated *ethnies*. Stereotypes are preeminently the vehicle through which we relate to other collectivities (no one has ever confronted one of the latter without their mediation); they are allegorical cartoons which no longer convey the racist contempt of the older imperialism but can often (as Žižek has observed for the racist jokes popular in the old Yugoslavia) function as affectionate forms of inclusion and of solidarity.

Indeed, an inspection of this literature already provides a first crude inventory of the new world system: the immense role, first and foremost – and very much in Gibson's evocations (all the way down to *Pattern Recognition* itself) –

of Japan as the monitory semiotic combination of First World science-and-technology with a properly Third World population explosion. Russia now also looms large, but above all in the form of its various mafias (from all the former Republics), which remind us of the anarchy and violent crime (as well as of the conspiratorial networks and jobless futures) that lurk just beneath the surface of capitalism. It also offers the more contemporary breakneck drama of the devolution of a country that had already reached parity with the First World. Europe's image ambiguity, a kind of elegant museum or tourist playground which is also an evolutionary and economic dead end, is instructive; and the absence of Islam is a welcome relief, in a moment in which it is reality rather than culture or literature which is acting on the basis of that particular stereotype.

This new geopolitical material marks a significant historical difference between such commercial adventure stories and the equally cynical gonzo journalism of an older period (indeed, the affinities and distinctions between the cultural products of the 1960s and 1970s and those of the 1990s and 2000s would be well worth exploring further). Equally significant is that these protagonists – busy as they are in locating rare products, securing secret new inventions, outsmarting rivals and trading with the natives – do not particularly need the stimulus of drugs (still a preponderant, one may even say a metaphysical, presence in so recent a world-historical expression as David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, of 1996).

But it is by way of the style that we can best measure these differences and position the new literature on some kind of time continuum; and here we may finally return to the main course, which is to be sure the distinctiveness of *Pattern Recognition*, where this style has reached a kind of classical perfection. I will define it as a kind of hyped-up name-dropping, and the description of the clothes selected by the protagonist (Cayce Pollard) for her first day in London is a reliable indicator: "a fresh Fruit T-shirt, her black Buzz Rickson's MA-1, anonymous black skirt from a Tulsa thrift, the black leggings she'd worn for Pilates, black Harajuku schoolgirl shoes. Her purse-analog is an envelope of black East German laminate, purchased on eBay – if not actual Stasi-issue then well in the ballpark."[1] I have no way of knowing whether all these items actually exist; but eBay is certainly the right word for our current collective unconscious; and it is clear that the references work, whether you know the product is real or that it has been made up by Gibson (neither being my own case). What is also clear is that the names being dropped are brandnames, names whose very dynamic conveys both instant obsolescence and the global provenance and neo-exoticism of the world market today in time and space.

1 William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (New York, 2003), p. 8 (all further pages references to this edition are given within the text).

There is a further point, namely that little by little, in the current universe, everything is slowly being named; nor does this have anything to do with the older Aristotelian universals in which the idea of a chair subsumes all its individual manifestations. Here the "high-backed workstation chair" (4) is almost of a different species than the seat in the BA 747 "that makes her think of a little boat, a coracle of Hexcel and teakfinish laminate" (122). But there are also exercise chairs, called or named "reformers": "a very long, very low, vaguely ominous and Weimar-looking piece of spring-loaded furniture" (6), which can also be translated into another language, where it becomes "a faux-classical Japanese interpretation in black-lacquered wood, upholstered with something that looks like sharkskin"(178). Each of these items is on its way to the ultimate destination of a name of its own; but not the kind we are familiar with when we speak of a "Mies chair" or a "Barcelona chair": not the origin, but rather the named image is at stake, so that an "Andy Warhol electric chair" might be a better reference.

In this postmodern nominalism, however, the name must also include the new and fashion. What is worn-out or old-fashioned is only useful as a cultural marker: "empty chrome stools of the soda-fountain spin-around kind, but very low, fronting on an equally low bar" (152), where it is the "low", the "very low" that connotes Japan. And in Moscow the table "flanked by two enormous, empty wingback armchairs" (294) only stands for backwardness. This is probably why Gibson's Russian episode is less interesting: he brings a residual Cold War mentality to this built space, "as though everything was designed by someone who'd been looking at a picture of a Western hotel room from the eighties, but without ever having seen even one example of the original" (282). Current Soviet and Eastern European nostalgia art (*Ostalgie* in German) is far more vibrant and exciting than this, and reflects the situation of an alternate universe in which a complete set of mass-produced industrial products, from toilet seats to windowpanes, from shower heads to automobiles, had been invented from scratch, altogether different from the actually existing Western inventory. It is as though the Aztecs had beaten Cortez and survived to invent their own Aztec radio and television, their own Aztec power-vehicles, their own Aztec film genres and popular culture.

At any rate, the premise here is that Russia has nothing new to offer us (the Sterling aesthetic offers much better chances of appreciating what is genuinely new, world-historically innovative in Eastern nostalgia art); and the conclusion to be drawn is that name-dropping is also a matter of knowledge and an encyclopedic familiarity with the fashions of world space as those flow back into the boutiques or flea markets of the West. What I have called name-dropping is therefore also to be grasped as in-group style: the brand names are also the wink of familiarity, to the reader in the know. Even the cynicism (taking the word in Sloterdijk's rather than in its post-Watergate sense) is a joyous badge of group adherence, the snicker as a form of hearty laughter, class status as

a matter of knowing the score rather than of having the money and the power. In-group style was, I believe, the invention (or better still, the discovery) of Thomas Pynchon, as early as *V* (1963), even though Ian Fleming deserves a reference ("Thank you, Commander Bond," murmurs Cayce, as she pastes a hair across the outside apartment door [73]). But just as we no longer need drugs, so we no longer need Pynchon's staples of paranoia and conspiracy to wrap it all up for us, since global capitalism is there to do so more efficiently (or so we are told).

Nonetheless, *The Crying of Lot 49* remains a fundamental paradigm; and, as with Hunter Thompson, the differences are historically very instructive indeed. For the posthorns and the other telltale graffiti have here been replaced by something like a "work of art"; the clues point, not to some unimaginable reality in the social world, but to an (as yet) unimaginable aesthetic. It is a question of an unidentified film of some kind, which has come to be known (among insiders) as "the footage", and which shows up in stills and clips in the most unlikely places (billboards, television ads, magazines, the Internet), in "one hundred and thirty-four previously discovered fragments ... endlessly collated, broken down, reassembled, by whole armies of the most fanatical investigators". Indeed, as one might expect, a whole new in-group has formed around the mysteries of the footage; we are experiencing, one of the characters observes, the "birth of a new subculture"; a world-wide confraternity comes into being, committed to this new object and passionately exchanging and arguing contradictory theories about it. The footage thus makes *Pattern Recognition* over into something like Bloch's conception of the novel of the artist, which carries the unknown unrealized work of art inside itself like a black hole, the empty present of a future indeterminacy, the absent sublime within the everyday real:

> Light and shadow. Lovers' cheekbones in the prelude to embrace.
>
> Cayce shivers.
>
> So long now, and they have not been seen to touch.
>
> Around them the absolute blackness is alleviated by texture. Concrete?
>
> They are dressed as they have always been dressed, in clothing Cayce has posted on extensively, fascinated by its timelessness, something she knows and understands.
>
> The difficulty of that. Hairstyles, too.
>
> He might be a sailor, stepping onto a submarine in 1914, or a jazz musician entering a club in 1957. There is a lack of evidence, an absence of stylistic cues, that Cayce understands to be utterly masterful. His black coat is usually read as leather, though it might be dull vinyl, or rubber. He has a way of wearing its collar up.
>
> The girl wears a longer coat, equally dark but seemingly of fabric, its shoulder-padding the subject of hundreds of posts. The architecture of padding in a woman's coat should yield possible periods, particular decades, but there has been no agreement, only controversy.
>
> She is hatless, which has been taken either as the clearest of signs that this is not a period piece, or simply as an indication that she is a free spirit, untrammeled by even the most basic conventions of her day. Her hair has been the subject of similar scrutiny, but nothing has ever been definitively agreed upon.
>
> The one hundred and thirty-four previously discovered fragments, having been endlessly collated, broken down, reassembled, by whole armies of the most fanatical investigators, have yielded no period and no particular narrative direction.
>
> Zaprudered into surreal dimensions of purest speculation, ghost-narratives have emerged and taken on shadowy but determined lives of their own, but Cayce is familiar with them all, and steers clear.
>
> And here in Damien's flat, watching their lips meet, she knows that she knows nothing, but wants nothing more than to see the film of which this must be a part. Must be.

The problem, for the group forming around this artifact, as indeed for all group formation, is that of the contradiction between universality – in this case the universality of taste as such – and the particularity of this unique value that sets us off from all the others and defines us in our collective specificity. A political sect (as we now seem to call these things) wishes to affirm the universal relevance of its strategy and its ultimate aims, and at one and the same time to keep them for itself, to exclude the outsiders and the late-comers and those who can be suspected of insufficient commitment, insufficient passion and belief. The deeper anxiety of the practitioners of the footage website and chatroom is, in other words, simply that the footage will go public: that CNN will get wind of this interesting development; that the footage, or the completed film, the identified and reconstructed work of art, will become, as they say, the patrimony of mankind, or in other words, just another commodity. As it turns out, this fear is only too justified; but I omit the details, as I hate people who tell you the ending, except to express my mixed feeling that Pynchon's solution was perhaps the better one, namely to break off *Lot 49* on the threshold of the revelation to come, as Oedipa is on the point of entering the auction room.

After all this, it may come as something of a surprise to learn that the footage is not the central issue of this novel, even though it supplies the narrative framework. Yet it ought already to have been clear that there is a striking and dramatic contradiction between the style, as we have described it, and the footage itself, whose "absence of stylistic clues" suggests a veritable Barthesian "white writing". Indeed, it is rather this very contradiction which is the deeper subject of *Pattern Recognition*, which projects the Utopian anticipation of a new art premised on "semiotic neutrality", and on the systematic effacement

of names, dates, fashions and history itself, within a context irremediably corrupted by all those things. The name-dropping in-group language of the novel thus revels in everything the footage seeks to neutralize; the work becomes a kind of quicksand, miring us ever more deeply in what we struggle to escape. Yet this is not merely an abstract interpretation, nor even an aesthetic: it is also the existential reality of the protagonist herself, and the source of the "gift" that informs her profession.

Cayce Pollard's talent, lying as it does halfway between telepathy and old-fashioned aesthetic sensibility, is in fact what suspends Gibson's novel between Science Fiction and realism and lends it its extraordinary resonance. To put it simply (as she does), Cayce's business is to "hunt cool"; or in other words, to wander through the masses of now and future consumers, through the youth crowds, the "Children's Crusade" that jams Camden High Street on weekends, the teeming multitudes of Roppongi and Shinjuku, the big-city agglomerations of every description all over the world, in order mentally to detect the first stirrings of anything likely to become a trend or a new fashion. She has in fact racked up some impressive achievements, of which my favorite, reeking somewhat of DeLillo, is the identification of the first person in the world to wear his baseball cap backwards. But these "futures" are very much a business proposition, and Cayce is something like an industrial spy of times to come. "I consult on design ... Manufacturers use me to keep track of street fashion" (87); these modest formulas are a little too dry and underplay the sheer physicality of this gift, which allows her to identify a "pattern" and then to "point a commodifier at it". There is here no doubt something of the specialized training of the authenticator of paintings and the collector of antique furniture; but its uncanny temporal direction condemns Cayce irredeemably, and despite her systematically black and styleless outfit, to the larger category of fortune-tellers and soothsayers (and also occasionally puts her in real physical danger).

This new *métier* thus draws our world insensibly into some science-fictional future one, at least on the borders, where other details also fail to coincide: such as the paid job of another character to start rumors, to drop the names of products and cultural items enthusiastically in one bar after another, in order to set in motion what would in Pynchon have been a conspiracy, but what is here just another fad or craze.

But Cayce's gift is drawn back into our real (or realistic) world by the body itself; she must pay for it by nauseas and anxiety attacks, the commodity bulimia, which are the inevitable compensation for her premonitory sensibility. It is as if the other face of the "coming attraction", its reification and the dead-end product of what was once an active process of consumption and desire itself, were none other than the logo. The mediation between these two extremes of *ergon* and *energeia*, of product and process, lies no doubt in the name itself, of which we have said that in the commercial nominalism of the

postmodern everything unique and interesting tends towards the proper name. Indeed, within the brand name the whole contradictory dialectic of universality and particularity is played out as a tug of war between visual recognition and what we may call the work of consumption (as Freud spoke of the work of mourning). And yet, to paraphrase Empson, the name remains, the name remains and kills; and the logo into which the brand name gradually hardens soaks up its toxicity and retains the poison.

Cayce's whole body is a resonator for these omnipresent logos, which are nonetheless louder and more oppressive in certain spaces (and places) than in others. To search for an unusual item in Harvey Nichols, for instance, is a peculiarly perilous activity:

> Down here, next to a display of Tommy Hilfiger, it's all started to go sideways on her, the trademark thing. Less warning aura than usual. Some people ingest a single peanut and their head swells like a basketball. When it happens to Cayce, it's her psyche. Tommy Hilfiger does it every time, though she'd thought she was safe now. They said he'd peaked, in New York. Like Benetton, the name would be around, but the real poison, for her, would have been drawn ... 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, flavoring their ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo knit and regimental stripes. But Tommy Hilfiger 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. (17–18)

These nauseas are part of Cayce's navigational apparatus, and they stretch back to some of the oldest logos still extant, such as her worst nightmare, Bibendum, the Michelin Man, which is like that crack through which the Lacanian Real makes its catastrophic appearance. "National icons", on the other hand, "are always neutral for her, with the exception of Nazi Germany's ... a scary excess of design talent."

Now it is a little easier to see the deeper meaning of the footage for Cayce: its utter lack of style is an ontological relief, like black-and-white film after the conventional orgies of bad Technicolor, like the silence of solitude for the telepath whose mind is jammed with noisy voices all day long. The footage is an epoch of rest, an escape from the noisy commodities themselves, which turn out, as Marx always thought they would, to be living entities preying on the humans who have to coexist with them. Unlike the footage, however, Gibson's novel gives us homeopathy rather than antidote.

It does not seem anticlimactic to return to the future and to everything also autoreferential about this novel, whose main character shares the sound of the

name of that of *Neuromancer*, if not its spelling (or gender). Is it possible that Cayce's premonitions of future novelty can also stand as the allegory of some emergent "new Gibson novel" as well? *Pattern Recognition* at any rate does seem to constitute a kind of pattern recognition for Gibson as well, as indeed for Science Fiction generally.

2003