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DOI: 10.22559/folklor.2396

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# **Speculative Fiction and Pattern Recognition: Narrative Models for a Retrained Intuition**

**Spekülatif Kurmaca ve Örüntü Tanıma:  
Sezgiyi Eğitmenin Anlatısal Modelleri**

**Berkay Üstün\***

## **Abstract**

The notion of pattern recognition emerged in the late 1950s as an extension of advances in cybernetics and information theory. From the start, authors of science fiction and speculative fiction narratives made their own explorations of the concept, taking it to fields and extremes not predicted by the state of development of pattern recognition technologies. I argue that a pair of these narratives provide opportunities to observe the development of a public understanding of, and imaginaries deriving from, a vision of perception geared toward patterns, arrangements, and configurations that involve historical change. More specifically, these narratives stage questions of historical meaning and intuitive grasp of patterns

Geliş Tarihi (Received): 3.12.2022 - Kabul Tarihi (Accepted):26-06-2023

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Özel not: Bu makaleye hakemlik yaptıktan sonraki zamanlarda vefat eden Prof. Dr. V. Doğan Günay'ı saygıyla anıyoruz. (folklor/edebiyat dergisi / Special note: After reviewing this article we commemorate with respect Prof. Dr. V. Doğan Günay (editor).

of consumer behavior by modifying the notion they borrow from computational research through the intermediary of media theory. A second goal of the article is to examine literary history by taking the relevant works of Brunner and Gibson as favorable cases for observing the beginnings and transformations of the reception of pattern recognition concept by speculative fiction. The common reference they make to historical concretion serves as a constant across their differences here. Both fictions seem to stage the possibilities of pattern literacy as a human capacity that includes but is not reducible to one of its most famous and problematic avatars, which is that of a sense of conspiracy, belief gone awry, and/or paranoia (which, according to Fredric Jameson, is the “poor person’s cognitive mapping”). Methodologically relying on a combination of media theory and close readings, the goal here is to ascertain whether such fictions constitute viable cases for a “pattern recognition from below”, as distinct from a data-intensive pursuit. In this sense, this study neither constitutes an intellectual history of pattern recognition that reduces the object of its study to mere accouterments of context nor simply a close reading of each of the texts on their own terms. It is a comparative exercise that aims to gain surplus of historical and textual intelligibility through the juxtaposition of its chronologically distant narratives. From different angles, the two close readings treat the same core problem of the possibility to retain an affirmative approach to the historical-morphological possibilities inherent in pattern recognition and not consign it to an “ideology” of the information society.

Keywords: *Concrete, abstract, pattern recognition, abductive inference, intuition*

## Öz

Örüntü tanıma kavramı 1950lerin sonunda sibernetik ve enformasyon kuramlarındaki gelişmeler sayesinde hayatımıza girdi. En başından beri bilimkurgu ve spekülâtif kurmaca yazarları teknolojiyi hayal gücüyle yoğurup yaratıcı yönlerde geliştirerek kavrama kendi yaklaşımlarını getirdiler. Bu makalede ürettikleri anlatılardan ikisinin popülerleştirilmiş teknoloji hikayeleri değil kavramsal anlamda daha genel ve tarihselliği mesele edinen bir örüntü vizyonuna yönelik araştırmalar ve katkılar oluşturduğunu gösteriyorum. Daha somut düzlemde, bilgi işlem alanından ödünç aldıkları kavramı tarihsel anlam ve toplumsala dönük sezgisel bir kavrayışı ifade etmek için kullandıklarını, bunu da medya teorisi üzerinden yaptıklarını örnekliyorum. Makalenin ikincil planda bir dayanağı da kavramsaldan çok tarihsel: John Brunner ve William Gibson’ın yapıtlarını örüntü tanıma paradigmasının bilimkurgu/spekülâtif kurmaca tarafından alımlanmasının başlangıcını ve gelişmesini tarihsel olarak da gözlemlemeye imkan veren iki yapıt olarak sunuyorum. Aralarındaki devamlılık toplumsal somutluk ve onu kavrayan düşüncenin biçimine yaptıkları ortak gönderme tarafından belirleniyor. Metodolojik olarak medya kuramı ve yakın okumanın bir birleşiminden yararlanarak burada amaçladığım bu anlatıların veri ekonomisi dışında yani “tabandan” yola çıkan bir örüntü tanımının ikna edici örnekleri olarak görülüp görülemeyeceğini sorgulamak. Bu anlamda bu çalışma ne odağındaki yapıtları bağlamlarına tabi düşünce tarihi olayları olarak ele almak ne de onlara basit ve geleneksel bir yakın okumanın yapacağı gibi yalnızca ken-

di sordukları sorular üzerinden yaklaşmayı amaçlıyor. Dayandığı karşılaştırma stratejisi, iki anlatıyı yan yana ve bir arada değerlendirmenin getirdiği anlamsal artıdeğeri hem metinsel hem de kavramsal otonomisi içinde benimsiyor. Sonuç olarak, buradaki yakın okumaların yolları farklı açılardan aynı temel probleme dönüşüyor: örüntü tanımının bilişim toplumuna özgü bir ideolojiden ibaret mi, yoksa tarihsel-morfolojiye dair yeni imkanlar yaratabilecek şekilde konumlandırılabilir olup olmadığı sorusu.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** somutluk-soyutluk, örüntü tanıma, geriçikarım sal akıl yürütme, sezgi

In this article I argue that a pair of fictions which lie along a loosely defined continuum of sci-fi narratives, and consisting of John Brunner’s *Stand on Zanzibar* and William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* can be taken to contribute to the philosophically charged problem of the relation between formal abstraction and historical concretion, with additional implications for the aesthetic problem of “cognitive mapping” as proposed by Fredric Jameson.<sup>1</sup> My approach to these questions and their presence in the speculative narratives is largely mediated by the shared way in which a question of “pattern recognition” as a human capacity regularly emerges as a focus of reflection and imagination in these works. Across a radical diversity of imagined worlds and terrains, from scenarios of a divided world under corporate stranglehold, as well as glimpses into enhanced medical technologies, the fictions seem to stage the possibilities of pattern literacy as a human capacity that includes but is not reducible to one of its most famous and problematic avatars, which is that of a sense of conspiracy, belief gone awry, and/or paranoia (which, according to Jameson, is the “poor person’s cognitive mapping”). Fundamentally, at stake are fictional variations on a non-linear semiotic practice of abstraction along the lines of an unavowed cognitive mapping that departs from concrete situations, and attempts to retain critical purchase on the same.<sup>2</sup> Along the way this practice negotiates the tensions between a largely “episodic” and intuitively manifesting skill and its communicable or *common* historical nature.

In its pairing of the narratives mentioned, my article therefore aims to piece together a portrait of the pattern recognizer as a *navigator* of multiplicities: aesthetic, cultural, social, and economy-political. My approach is largely affirmative of the extreme imaginaries prompted by this skill involving at once language, perception, and conceptuality, operating on a level anterior to their rigid demarcation: I think it is possible to find a historically attuned “phenomenology” of concretion in pattern-recognition. To this extent, my material points to different uses for pattern recognition than the ones critics like Hito Steyerl singled out, referring to “informational biopolitics” and the heightened asymmetry between the algorithmic and the human user (Steyerl, 2016).

At the same time, patterns in narrative make it possible to raise questions about the nature of the formal relations which attend the emergence of pattern-recognition as a driver of narrative development, questions pertaining to the (in)dispensability of narrative, and possible alternatives or symbioses for narrative form. These questions have so far found illuminating treatments in the work of Manovich, who establishes a contrast between “narrative and database” (Manovich, 1999) and Hayles, who advocated for a “symbiosis” (Hayles, 2007). Here, I approach this debate mainly through various junctures in Brunner’s and Gibson’s novels.

Abduction and the spy who discriminated patterns (*Stand On Zanzibar*)

“SF must go where the speculation is fiercest, or die” (Brunner)

In British New Wave SF author John Brunner’s 1968 novel and generally underrated masterpiece *Stand on Zanzibar*, the analysis and recognition of complex patterns of information, and skills of situation-literacy both macro and micro, are distributed between two contrasting characters, one human (Donald Hogan) and the other a super-computer portentously called Shalmaneser. In the self-consciously nonlinear tapestry of the novel, which Brunner partly credits to the influence of media theorists Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, these two characters command two different but strongly interrelated subplots, outlined as they are against the novel’s world building with its keen attention to geopolitical and economic context. As it were, the diffusely imaginative cognitive mapping of the novel around these two contexts— driven by the novel’s central diagnosis that “no individual has the whole picture or even enjoy enough of it to make trustworthy judgments” (Brunner, 2003, p. 265)— are specified and concentrated in these two characters, who embody two different styles of pattern recognition between them: The computer acting as a personified data crunching god directing the affairs and decisions of a multinational conglomerate, and the human as a cold and outwardly undriven dilettante who moonlights as a transdisciplinary information “synthetist” at government employ, a type which would later reach fame with the Robert Redford character in *Three Days of Condor*.

If we leave aside the computer for now, whose manner of work is predictable enough, we can nominate Donald as an early native or “intuitionist” of information and pattern, who foreshadows future avatars of pattern seeking, such as William Gibson’s Cayce in *Pattern Recognition*. Characteristically, Donald’s skill is doubled between the singular, procedural and mysterious on the one hand and the iterable and communicable. Simultaneously, his talent oscillates between pattern recognition as information and one as meaning or orientation in significations (Hayles 2007). This dual literacy endows him with a special ability, if not the resolution of the problems about cognitive mapping posed in the novel. On the one hand what makes him tick is common knowledge, or he is a synthesist and diviner in the medium of common knowledge. His activity with patterns smacks of the computer as it is treated by Brunner; and his narrative subplot is clearly implicated with that of Shalmaneser the computer, as an invocation he makes to this new god easily bears out:

“Shalmeneser, master of infinite knowledge, lead me through the valley of the shadow of death” (Brunner, 2003: 335).

How does Brunner represent the capacity of his character? He writes, “his computer active subconscious had been stirring information into new patterns” (Brunner, 2003: 149). In one capacity he seems to be nothing more than a lateralist of a sort that gained a high profile recently, moving between different data sets to bring out hidden correlations. Brunner shows this aspect of his character in action: Donald keeps notebooks with “search patterns” to spot hidden associations between seemingly unrelated bodies of data, a little like the real world Don Swanson, the information scientist, who is famous for using big data in spotting a hidden medical correlation-between magnesium deficiency and migraine headaches- consequential for treatment, to the surprise of the medical profession (see Hayles, 2007). There is in fact a clear investment in the database mode in the line of narrative concerned with Donald. He makes summaries and memos on specialist subjects to take flight toward larger abstractions: “susceptibility to the carcinogenic effect of commercial grade carbon tetra...” (Brunner, 2003: 385). He makes correlations, “making cross references from one enclosed corner of research to another” (Brunner, 2003: 49), and there is a table in the book to show us the nonlinear form Donald’s pattern seeking takes.

Moreover, there is an aspect of training and a twist of the pedagogical in the narrative that presents Donald, providing an early example of what Laurent Berlant calls a “retraining of intuition” as a response to a crisis in the status of the present (Berlant, 2008: 846). Donald, we learn, gets drawn to the organization of information patterns because of a desire to educate himself. Ironically, the job of the synthesist which gives him this opportunity, ends up inspiring apathy or a fizzling of intensity. Nevertheless, his talent has an identifiable component that must have been learned deliberately: “accustomed to accepting information dispassionately, organising it like pieces in a puzzle until new patterns emerged (...) he relied on his long training to sift and absorb the salient points” (Brunner, 2003: 477). This is important for my purposes, because it highlights something *developmental* to the various degrees and intensities of pattern-seeking, and the analogy between developmental expansions of latitude of cognitive normality and clinical ones strongly informs this study.

Despite some methodical training, there is a remainder of Donald’s talent that is less transparent, and less easily accounted for by communicable and teachable skills of data mining. In a sense, we could call this aspect a procedural or concrete one, insofar as it implies an inability to express the principle for the way he works. Brunner gives indications of this in others’ perception of him: Impressed by Donald’s lateral thinking, his friend talks about a “latent psi faculty” (Brunner, 2003: 90). And certainly the way Brunner assigns Donald’s skill to his subconscious also supports this intimation of the opaque. Thus, it seems, regardless of the territorialization of his skill as a synthesist in government employ, Donald manifests a more unruly intensity in the contemplation of patterns, which very likely accounts for his original desire to educate himself through-pattern seeking in the first place: “there was one talent Donald Hogan did possess which the majority of people didn’t: the gift of making the right guesses. Some mechanism at the back of his mind seemed ceaselessly to be shifting

around factors from the surrounding world, hunting for patterns in them, and when such a pattern arose, a silent bell would ring inside his skull” (Brunner, 2003: 49).

This interpretation of his talent in pattern recognition as one that is not entirely transparent is also supported by Donald in an episode from the novel, where with some consternation, he comes to realize that the singularity of his talent is already filed, classified and explained in accordance with principles with no reference to the intensity of the way he experiences it. It is from the contrast between the treatment of his talent as a commonplace thing, and his own sense of it, that we get this impression: “(...) ‘I see your special aptitude is pattiducking, so you have a marginal chance of being right more often than other people’ ‘My special aptitude is what-- sir?’ ‘Pattiducking! Pattern generation by deductive and inductive reasoning!’” (Brunner, 2003: 265). Thus, the military officials which recruit him have an already established and casual name for his talent, regardless of the way “he had always cherished the talent as something particularly his own”.

We can certainly ask if this characterization is accurate without resentment on behalf of the pristine opacity of the intuitive. Donald’s talent in pattern generation has a logical valence, no doubt about that, but whether it is encapsulated in deductive and inductive reasoning is debatable. Rather, one is tempted to think that pattern recognition here more closely follows an abductive pattern if abduction is taken in the sense Charles S. Peirce gave it: “The abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash. It is an act of insight, although of extremely fallible insight. It is true that the different elements of the hypothesis were in our minds before; but it is the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation” (Peirce, 1996). “Stirring information into new patterns” in which Donald specializes especially confirms this impression. For Peirce, abduction is a generative logical operation, which brings together perception and insight into the semiotic domain of intelligible abstractions, whereby “inference shades into perceptual judgment”; the larger significance is that the logical makes inroads into and find openings in perceptual pattern, and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> At his best Donald’s is a talent for organization with an edge over mere givenness of information, and presumably a bit different in his fallibility than Shalmeneser who, in a climactic episode of the novel, turns out to be quite incapable of transforming its core assumptions once it gets going.

Even if one does not deny the computer an expansive potential of abduction that can lead its own assumptions into revision, as Luciana Parisi and Antonia Majaca propose, abduction, be it in computers or in humans, and even more so in the interplays of learning between them, points to a different procedure than deductive and inductive reasoning: “An alien beginning of the new subject calls for abduction, and for the generation of new hypotheses of instrumentality, one that acknowledges the history of techne whereby the machine has been able to elaborate strategies of autonomy from and through its own use” (Parisi and Majaca, 2016). Thus, thanks to his novel’s divergent but linked treatments of machine intelligence and human pattern recognition, as well as his explicit attempt to situate this relation in terms of logical valence, Brunner can be credited with a sense of pattern recognition as an abductive activity, one with rich implications for a technologically intense milieu.

The synthesist is the would-be abductor, and this is likely the reason why the story arc of Donald becoming something else—a killer controlled by, rather than controlling his recently acquired combat skills and readiness for physical engagement— which supersedes and effectively annihilates Donald the pattern seeker, is also the poignant story of value lost. In narrative terms, the basic disorientation and exacerbated heteronomy involved in a world riven by a massive new world war, civil unrest, and unchallenged corporate interest creates pressures of control and crises of self-steering which in turn play up the efficacies of pattern recognition, and justify it narratively. It is not in the least a coincidence that characters like Donald yearn for a measure of control in the narrative economy of this work, and the book raises the question of the mastery of situations from a certain pragmatic vantage point. In the extension of this proper theme of mastery, Brunner also takes a tack that may seem at odds with a strict adherence to the computational in his brief foray into I-Ching, and it is felt there is clearly something of the “nonmodern” in his proclivities, in the sense that he believes in the co-belonging of ancient human techniques of signification/divination and modern technological procedures of pattern recognition: turtle shells and cognitive mapping.<sup>4</sup>

#### Cartographic pathologies (*Pattern recognition*)

A variant of the case of Brunner’s engagement with cognitive mapping, in which fiction in its own right offers rich insight on methods, stakes and possibilities of historical comprehension or concretion, is involved in the work of William Gibson, perhaps to an even greater extent, with accompanying meta-level formulations on what in narrative may respond to a configuration of historical events, or serve as a reprise or offshoot for them. Thus a certain continuity in a (narrative) attention to narrative, and what may possibly supersede it in its narrower forms:

History in the older sense was narrative, stories we told ourselves about where we’d come from and what it had been like, and those narratives were revised by each generation, and indeed always had been...History was plastic, was a matter of interpretation. The digital had not so much changed that as made it too obvious to ignore. History was stored data, subject to manipulation and interpretation. (Gibson, 2013b)

Yet for the very reason of an acute and prescient sense of the growing influence of data and computational modes of analysis on contemporary life, Gibson’s work also stages capacities and types of pattern-seeking not exhaustible by information.

The question of historicity is a constant in Gibson’s work, and modes of presence to a sense of history other than detached knowledge always preoccupy him—be it in the form of the sense of an otherness of one’s own time; a contemporaneity of the past in survivals of unrealized technical possibilities characteristic of cyberpunk; and a resurgent untimeliness, or the thought of a virtual as yet unactualized—and work inside both the series of novels where pattern recognition is an as yet implicit notion and those where it is explicit (the “Blue Ant” novels of the 2000’s). A look at the prehistory of the Blue Ant novels indicates the budding of the idea of pattern recognition in the guise of a mysterious form of data literacy specializing in the detection of the anomalous and the critical: “nodal apprehension”. This

form of pattern recognition is an ability that partly depends on experimental clinical trials undergone by the character Laney, and appears in full form in the novel which immediately precedes *Pattern Recognition* in Gibson's career, namely, *All Tomorrow's Parties*: "The history Laney discovered, through the quirk in his vision induced by having repeatedly dosed with 5-SB, was something very different. It was that *shape* comprised of every narrative, every version; it was that shape that only he (as far as he knew) could see" (Gibson, 2013a). Nodal apprehension in fact seems to specialize in a type of shape detection, "the shapes from which history emerges". After Brunner's Donald, we have yet another strong association between the perceptual and formal category of shape on the one hand and historicity on the other. A more specific characterization of shape as a question of concretion is given in Gibson's reference to the "ability to apprehend nodal points, those emergent systems of history", implying a vision trained to detect critical or singular points serving as bottlenecks for larger multiplicities.

Thus perhaps it is not surprising that *Pattern Recognition* takes the question of this speculative ability into much more specific zones like the question of commodification and the strategies employed by the multinational corporations cashing in on novelties which find their source in the affects of the "multitude". Gibson generates a series of images, alternatives or reflections on pattern recognition, in effect creating a pattern out of various disparate forms of pattern recognition: explored in the novel is not only a political economy of perception, but also pathologies and traumas, as well as certain impasses related to the concept.

Against a background often closely proximate with the time of writing (much less characteristically cyberpunk than his other work), Gibson also gives a more subtle form to the capacity of pattern-recognition, and transforms the dramatically molar, crisis- centered "nodal apprehension" of his previous novel into an affectively couched form of detection at home with the everyday and the undramatic. Here the pattern recognition and the forms of concretion on which it has a purchase seem to find their basis in the selective exposure and receptivities of the "coolhunter" Cayce Pollard, who is not so much the subject of an experimental treatment as of her own pathologically acute sense of form and brand semiotics. In Cayce, Gibson makes pathology cartographic and vice versa.

Cayce is a freelance consultant in fashion design who detects new fashion trends in the street, and "points a commodifier" at it. Her ability resides in an aesthetic or intuitive recognition of pattern, without being able to explain the principle of her sensitivity and codify it. In Lauren Berlant's apt formulation, she is "the empress of the amygdala" (Berlant, 2008). Gibson talks about Cayce's "peculiar, visceral, but still somewhat undefined sensitivities" and "the opaque standards of her inner radar". Thus hers is an uncodifiable and procedural ability for what is strictly codified, semiotic, and out in public, which partly explains the contradictory political energies and implications of her talent, wedged as it is in a high pressure zone between the singular and the social, the intuitive and the iterable, and finally novelty and its systemic recuperation.

What Berlant calls the work of “retraining the intuition” involved in this novel therefore rests on a signal ambiguity, and Gibson has a well-articulated sense of pattern recognition as “both a gift and a trap” (Gibson, 2013b). The novel determines the conditions of insufficiency as well as the complicity of pattern recognition on a few different accounts, allowing Gibson to make major statements on pattern recognition as an impasse. On the one hand, there are contemporary factors like the symbiosis between commodification and pattern, and the novelty-defusing uses of pattern recognition. On the other, there is “faulty pattern recognition”, otherwise known as delusional paranoia (cognitive mapping gone haywire), intimating the symptomatic nature of pattern recognition.

One of the earliest and most explicit takes on pattern recognition in the novel is by the advertiser and entrepreneur Hubertus Bigend, who represents the cynical extreme for the attitudes to the concept. In an important exchange between Cayce and Bigend, the latter argues how the accelerated technological and economic changes in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century effectively shrinks the window of the present, limiting in turn the possible purchase of historical consciousness and the possibilities of concretion. In this sense, Bigend is the voice who continues the line of inquiry the previous novel opens with history as “subject to manipulation”: “For us, of course, things can change 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, 2013b). Bigend’s vision of history and the sense of pattern that emerges from it offer no possibility of redeeming abduction, and instead identify pattern recognition with neutralization of change. In a world where everything is contingent, nothing ultimately is. This is *recognition* with a vengeance, or at the expense of pattern, since it means no relation to pattern essentially goes beyond the already preexistent parts and predetermined scenarios to donate something new to becoming.

The cynical take is important because it corresponds to an interpretation which finds actualization in the predatory actions and capital acquisitions it makes possible. A certain narrative authority resides in Bigend, who is a central figure in the other two novels of the trilogy, and is the one character who invariably keeps setting the “events” of Blue Ant novels in motion. Cayce with her undefined sensitivities to pattern is employed by Bigend because of the latter’s own sense of the possible commercial uses of her talent: “You know in your limbic brain. The seat of instinct....When I founded Blue Ant that was my core tenet, that all truly viable advertising addresses that older, deeper mind, beyond language and logic. I hire talent on the basis of an ability to recognize that, whether consciously or not. It works” (Gibson, 2013b).

Thus the surrounding framework in which pattern recognition acts in the novel stacks the cards against an employment of the capacity at once creative and critical, by identifying it with a species characteristic at its most inescapable, generic, and finally, exploitable. It is certainly hard to deny the emphasis on cooptability and recuperation insofar as even Cayce describes her talent in ways remarkably attuned to its more necessitarian, complicit, and

species-oriented aspects: “No customers, no cool. It’s about a group behavior pattern around a particular class of object. What I do is pattern recognition. I try to recognize a pattern before anyone else does. ..I point a commodifier at it” (Gibson 2013b). Gibson’s novel therefore accumulates instances of fetish products, leisurely describing objects with heavy cathexis like Cayce’s Buzz Rickson jacket, along with their routes of distribution. However, for the very same reason, fetishism is transformed in a manoeuvre which injects it with a qualitatively different visibility, serving in effect to put a cognitive mapping “tracker” on myriad sorts of new consumer objects, making their circulation serve an intelligibility that is not necessarily the cynical or neutralizing type of pattern recognition. Thus, it remains debatable whether the possibility of pattern-recognition as a potential capacity of critique is ruled out completely, insofar as the tame pattern-recognition preserves links with Gibson’s wilder “nodal apprehension” with its more precipitate and agential brand of detection geared to crises.

In support of this hypothesis is an episode in the novel where Cayce is proved to be much less politically indifferent than to neatly fit a type of neutralizing recognition. Her sense of social semiotics and affective responses are not necessarily neatly aligned with the interests of capital, for instance:

if there’s anything about England that Cayce finds fundamentally disturbing, it is how class works [...] there’s a certain way they can have, on first meeting, of sniffing one another’s caste out, that gives her the willies. Katherine her therapist, had suggested that it might be because it was such a highly codified behavior, as were all other areas of human activity around which Cayce suffered such remarkable sensitivity. And it is highly codified; they look at one another’s shoes first... (Gibson 2013b)

It is thus perhaps not an accident that Cayce ultimately evolves in a direction diverging from-in ambivalent parallel however-- Bigend’s agendas of capitalizing on “cool”, which independence allows her to untangle the mystery of the footages driving the events of the narrative. At least while Bigend seems mainly interested in creating new forms of marketing that would serve to recoup novelty and extend the present of smooth market transactions and enterprise, Cayce’s self-understanding incorporates a reference to more problematic ideas like “soul” or “soul delay”--“soul delay plays tricks with subjective time, expanding or telescoping it seemingly at random”-- which allow for different and presumably more unruly modes of temporality, leaving some elbow room for effects of untimeliness and nonconformity, to the side of a present always “too volatile,” only to foreclose real change.

Before engaging the question of the footages, it is necessary to highlight one final ambiguity or possible impasse for pattern-recognition as an access to historical concretion. One may define this aspect as a crisis of belief in a sense that is not necessarily religious, but as a crisis of our relation to the world, in the sense Gilles Deleuze used in his discussion of cinema (Deleuze, 1989). In fact, the crisis at stake is one that is a natural offshoot of an exacerbated social overdetermination. As in a formulation of Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, germane to this aspect of the discussion, overdetermination and systemic complexity necessarily involve opacity, which in turn makes the role of belief more salient: “systemed

under, ready to believe anything” (Delillo, 1997). Illusions of pattern, and its correlates in exacerbated believing is a function or symptom of a semiotic and informational overload attending ever overhanging systemic relations; belief means one is under illusions with a certain positivity of their own, which are not strictly speaking errors.

Therefore Gibson to some extent reestablishes the centrality of plots of conspiracy that closely accompany the early formulations of cognitive mapping in Fredric Jameson’s work. This question finds expression in a notion whose formulation Gibson inserts all the way into the intuitionist Cayce’s family history: apophenia, or “the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things”. In the novel, Gibson represents this delirium of pattern-recognition in the instance of Cayce’s mother, and her obsession with detecting messages from beyond the grave in random bits of media or “Electronic Voice Phenomena”. As objectively unverifiable personal impression of pattern, EVP naturally also brings up the question of accuracy and truth, prompting Cayce to think that there might be “faulty pattern-recognitions”. Interestingly it is Cayce’s father -- an intelligence agent-- who refers to the notion by its name, not without a sober view to the potential real world efficacy or vigilance-enhancing aspects of this hypertrophy of meaning: “Like someone who’d learned how best to cope with chronic illness, he never allowed himself to think of his paranoia as an aspect of self. It was there, constantly and intimately, and he relied on it professionally, but he wouldn’t allow it to spread, become jungle. He cultivated it on its special plot, and checked it daily for news it might bring: hunches, lateralisms, frank anomalies” (Gibson, 2013b).

Even beyond its uses for the gathering of intelligence, apophenia is a significant point of reference as the question it raises is something like a “felicity condition” for pattern-recognition; put simply, it emphasizes pattern as a problem of difference. Ironically, the accumulation of perceptions of “rhyming events” cannot but threaten an effacement of difference, and pattern-recognition can only be felicitous as the accession to a sense of intrinsic difference of the historical present. In fact, apophenia at its worst implies a compulsion, or a state of *not being able to help* seeing patterns; the “spontaneity” it involves has not a little of acquiescence and a path of least resistance. Here then the part of belief in pattern recognition should not be dismissed-- because belief involves a relation to the world-- but rendered open to being informed by a measure of difference. It is not belief that makes for a “faulty pattern-recognition” but an effacement of the possibility of difference, in a specious system that actually excludes the world in its drive toward completion (Cf. Apter, 2006).

In a sense, both with apophenia as a crisis of belief and the preexistence of statistical possibilities, Gibson’s novel raises the possibility that pattern recognition is something merely symptomatic for a context of overdetermination and accelerated change. Both versions represent impasses for pattern recognition as a possible access to real concretion and a sense for the difference of the present. This makes it necessary to ask what may go beyond these in the novel and what the predominant role given to aesthetics at large may mean.

The passages focusing on a series of anonymous footages released on the web, and the online communities and heated discussions that concentrate around them not only provide the main plot arc of the novel, but also certainly one of the most fascinating aspects of it in its own right. While contentwise the footages are perhaps not that impressive (a man and a woman kissing in an unidentifiable place and time; someone walking in a subway tunnel; dusk light and urban roofs), in terms of their serial presentation, spontaneous circulation, and finally the overall affective impact of underground distribution and expectation, they build up a fervent group of followers whose experience is like an addicted hang-up on and communal gathering around the next appearance. What is more, the seriality and the seeming absence of a proper plot context for these bits of singularity offer an opportunity of reflection on plots, narratives and their suspension, through the debates generated in the online forums for the footages; a reflection that stages a meeting between (extra)narrativity and questions of concretion and historical present becomes possible, and the question whether “the apparently careful lack of period markers might suggest some attitude, on the maker’s part to time and history” is among the first references to the footages in the novel (Gibson, 2013b).

In addition to her coolhunter skills, Cayce is one of the “footageheads” exchanging theories about the videos online, and this conjunction has very little that is coincidental about it, not least because she is employed by Bigend to unravel the mystery of the footages with a view to using their viral dissemination as a new mode of marketing. However, as if to refuse from the start the marginality of aesthetics to the problems of historicity and historical sense inherent in pattern-recognition, the online debates in the novel about the footages themselves take the form of an extended argument about the possibility that formal categories like episodism and narrative closure might simultaneously indicate different attitudes to history. Gibson’s intuitionist Cayce, for instance, belongs to a group loosely identified as “Progressives”, who do not expect to find the footages belonging to an overall narrative organization or closure: “Parkaboy is a de facto spokesperson for the Progressives, those who assume that the footage consists of fragments of a work in progress, something unfinished and still being generated by its maker. The Completists, on the other hand, a relative but articulate minority, are convinced that the footage is comprised of snippets of a finished work, one whose maker chooses to expose it piecemeal and in nonconsequential order” (Gibson, 2013b). When combined with Cayce’s sense of the retrospective action of history which creates alternative relevances against the self-importance of historical actors, the progressive reading of the footages can be taken to reject any teleological orientation, not without implications for the status of the present. The absence of deference toward the measure of narrative coherence inherent in the “progressive” attitude may mean the present is not necessarily an indefinite stall that awaits the rupture of an event, but has a different status.

To elaborate, we need to skip forward to the moment of disclosure of the artist behind the footages. In discovering the artist and demystifying the nature of the videos for herself, Cayce also resolves the debate between the two schools in the progressives’ favor, since Nora, the footage artist, we learn, is not guided by any ostensible narrative motive. Here is a case which

plays up the clinical significance of pattern faculty, insofar as she starts making the videos after a catastrophic change—survival after a bomb attack. If Nora as the artist is the origin of all the pattern- and coherence-seeking that becomes possible thanks to her footages, making videos that *induce* seeking for an open community of footageheads without being the object of that seeking, it makes a difference to know that she is disabled, and struggles with aphasia. Thus Gibson delegates synthesis and orientation to Cayce, in the medium of what Nora the post-catastrophic artist creates, splitting what could otherwise be a unitary role. As Nora's sister explains in the novel, after her injury, "she could not talk at first. When she did talk, it was only to me, and in a language that had been ours in childhood" and Gibson dramatically likens the expressive locus to a wound: "it's the wound speaking wordlessly in the dark" (Gibson, 2013b). Thus what induces pattern seeking and gives rise to all the tension between narrative and nonnarrative form are the post-catastrophic adjustments of a very singular artist who reduces her earlier longer films to single frames, "saturating" everything, in a phrase Virginia Woolf used once. In formal terms, what induces pattern seeking is a unique blend of poverty and saturation which offers a different sense of time than capital's recycling of new things for the same purposes.

Despite lacking narrative coherence, the footages do afford a certain intimation of "nascent meaning," and Cayce's clearest articulation of her experience with the films makes a similar emphasis: "Becomes sort of poliphonic. Then there's a sense that's going somewhere, that something will happen. Will change....It's just such a powerful effect, induced by so little actual screen time...There's that sense of I don't know. Of an opening into something. Universe? Narrative?" (Gibson, 2013b) This crucial passage reveals a great deal: about the capacities of pattern recognition (not only in the novel, but as such) to tease out incipient sense as well as to unfold the possible relations between narrative and pattern as an extranarrative form. Something that is not spelled out but nevertheless must be inferred is a relation in which seeking patterns would not be an indifferent part of a given narrative economy, but rather the anterior condition for its possibility. Cayce's response to the episodic fragments points to a zone where pattern can be generative for narrative, opening into it, which in turn makes narrative something different than a readily summarized affair of plots and "closed worlds".

The experience of pattern-seeking is an experience of nascency, which makes it conceivable that rather than a mutual exclusion, it is a generative relay which is at work between narrative and nonnarrative. Pattern is like protonarrative without that being its only use. Next, without admitting it, Gibson institutes a sense of pattern seeking much more favorable (less delirious) and less symptomatically couched than apophenia, insofar as no suggestion of compulsiveness attends Cayce's remark. A sense-making whose measure is not cognition, or intelligence gathering, or eternal suspicion finds room here. The emphasis on the nascent also opens up a line of reflection similar to Berlant's when she writes that the "very need to block the becoming-object of the event is what embeds the affective in the historical" (Berlant, 2008). The nascent and its affective tenor become the vectors of a reactualization of navigational capacities in the historical, even calling for a different mode of subjectivation.

### **Concluding remarks**

The possibility that a form of pattern-recognition or pattern sense may liberate an intensity in the occupation of the historical present and an amplitude of motives is largely the reason why pattern “faculty” across the novels in question commands affirmation and even value here, with some qualifications of course. In this sense the strategic pair of sci-fi works have helped me construct an account of pattern recognition different than the darker one critics like Hito Steyerl propose and which I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion (Steyerl, 2016). This alternative, however, is meant more in the spirit of a problematic complementarity rather than contradiction: there are asymmetries that effectively realize new versions of bio-politics, but there are also uses of pattern recognition that continue along a stubborn line of critical navigation and logical inventiveness.

Particularly, this article has demonstrated elusive resonances between the novels’ takes on pattern recognition, independently of a claim of influence. Perhaps most significantly, there is the way the informational rebounds as something akin to intuition, awakening a sense of presence to history and helping the subject of intuition navigate an overdetermined social totality. Both narratives make a point of taking a barely articulable skill and plunge it into the medium of what is common or public information: instead of being dismissed as an impasse or merely irrational, such a procedural or concrete skill is acknowledged as an irreplaceable-albeit recalcitrant-part of any data economy. In a related way, these narratives generate different approaches to the aesthetic problem of cognitive mapping than the one that takes paranoia and its pattern seeking as the most pressing issue. To put it simply, paranoia does not exhaust the richness of the responses to the historical expressed in these narratives, allowing a more reparative sense of pattern recognition to emerge. Finally, be it implicitly in their nonlinear organization or in their explicit thematizations of narrativity, the novels engage the problem of the symbolism of narrative form created by their preoccupations with pattern recognition: multiplicities created out of episodic fragments work both as an object of inquiry (as in the progressive vs. the completist argument in Gibson’s novel) and a strategy of discourse (e.g. the structure of Brunner’s novel), as if only this could do proper justice to the tensions between meaning and information inherent in pattern recognition. While Brunner brings raw data into his book in the form of news items, correlation tables, and encyclopedic tidbits, Gibson aims to dramatize the dawning of a sense of meaning out of information, thus looping back to the question of intuition.

From an intellectual history standpoint, my gestures toward pattern-recognition follows the precedent set by other espousals of types of thought bearing on alternative causalities, as exemplified by what Claude Levi-Strauss identified as a “science of the concrete,” in relation to coordinative and associative modes of classification and inquiry into nature that were found in some of the cultures he studied.<sup>5</sup> Parallel to the way Levi-Strauss extended a “value of its own” to classification in what he called the “science of the concrete” in an anthropological context, pattern faculty can also involve a value that attaches to “structure” proper in Levi-Strauss’ discourse. In contrast with understandings of structuralism which restricts it to the interplays and differences between the inert terms of an already given diacritical space,

something can be found in the activity of pattern-recognition which pertains to the genesis or coming into being of pattern across behavior and form, so that it is no longer a recognition which it involves, strictly speaking. Novelty of pattern, too, can be the subject of fictional modeling, and finds witnesses in these sci-fi narratives of pattern-recognition, accounting for the pertinence the model of semiotic/logical *invention* called “abduction” --as defined by Charles Sanders Peirce-- finds in the discussion above. Thus, any reclamation of pattern recognition has to take into account the antistructural that is coiled with the structural in it, and endows it with dynamism, if it wants to hold a sufficiently capacious and non-reifying vision of human potentiality.

This brings me to the question of “good form” which haunts some significant views on the aesthetic deployment of Gestalt theories of perception at large, and indirectly inform the concept of patterns. From Theodor Adorno’s critique of Gestalt theory to Jean François Lyotard’s famous proposal to base a new artistic avantgarde on the rejection of the “solace of good forms,” the role of pattern in aesthetics has often tended to be identified with an ideologically suspicious hang-up on the deceptively whole, representational, and even finalistic organic integration. The overall implication would seem to be that the inclination to pattern finding in perception, let alone serving a possible critique of concretion, acts to lure one away from vigilance, lulling to sleep with patterns because of the innate attractions of good form. This indirect but momentous association between pattern and good form --which comes largely to signify an over-reliance on *given* continuities and unities of form-- is incompatible with the results of this study. I think pattern-generation can be rescued from the given and the finalism of stability in good form with reference to two specifications here: First of all, as I conceive it, pattern capacity does not necessarily lack a moment of negativity: patterns relate to wholes, but they also inscribe them with their own contingency of formation; an amplitude of motives can find its departure in what is ostensibly only an interstice from the perspective of a ruling “totality”, for which the energies harnessed by Gibson’s footage forums may serve as an example.

Secondly, pattern does not have to be representational, but may have a great deal of the sub-representational and subliminal in it, which in turn implies an indirect purchase on a domain eluding direct steering. A cognitive mapping that deserves the name and reckons with powers and evidences that co-constitute psyches all the way, should be able to formulate responses vis-a-vis a cognitive nonconscious as well (Hayles, 2019). In the depictions of pattern recognition these narratives offer, the emphasis on grasping/being grasped on-the-fly they make must be particularly hard to accommodate for a reliance on good form, with its associations of stability, preexistence, and necessity: something more engaged, enactive, and more importantly, hard to reconcile with an understanding of cognition and abstraction on a subject-object basis. For the very reason that such grasping is an instance of a form-seeking/finding that makes no necessary reference to narrative, it can also help stage a contact in which narratives may become imbued with the energies of nonnarrative modes in exploring senses of form that do not owe much to representation

and stability of perception. Therefore, one can speak of a pragmatic aspect in pattern-recognition/faculty, insofar as it involves the pattern seeker in its mode of existence, rather than leaving it sheltered behind its representations of reality or the stability of its ready-made perceptual equilibriums.

### Endnotes

- 1 Jameson offers his concept as a goal worth pursuing for work in aesthetics: he proposes making a cartography of social relations under capitalism, as characterized by a vast scale and representation-defying-intricacy. In the words of *Postmodernity or Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* cognitive mapping is designed to “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject of that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” and according to the alternative formulation of an eponymously titled article like “Cognitive Mapping,” “The project--cognitive mapping-- obviously stands or falls with the conception of some (unrepresentable, imaginary) global social totality that was to have been mapped”. On this problem Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle’s book *Cartography of the Absolute* offers a very useful update, with expansions in new directions.
- 2 By “concrete behavior,” we can understand context-bound, in the sense used by Kurt Goldstein in his clinical writings and disputed by Rudolf Arnheim: “most productive feats of abstraction are performed not by those who most brilliantly overcome, and indeed ignore contexts but by those whose boldness is matched by their respect for the contexts in which the similarities are found” (Arnheim 2015, 193).
- 3 Significantly, considering Brunner’s supercomputer Shalmeneser, we learn that “Peirce’s idea of abductive inference developed from his curiosity about whether or not a machine could think” (Grimstad, 2016 43).
- 4 My own sense of I-Ching as a time-honored exercise in pattern seeking is informed by Isabelle Stengers’ appeal in *In Catastrophic Times*: One day, perhaps, we will experience a certain shame and great sadness at having dismissed the age-old traditions – from the auguries of antiquity to those of seers, Tarot readers or cowrie shell diviners – as superstition. Then we will know how to respect their efficacy, independently of any belief, the manner in which they transform the relationship of those who practice them to their knowledges, in which they render them capable of an attention to the world and its scarcely perceptible signs, which open these knowledges up to their own unknowns. On that day, we will also have learned just how arrogant and careless we have been in regarding ourselves as not needing such artifices. (Stengers 2015, p. 149)
- 5 Another relevant instance of this espousal of a different causality and logic is found in what Joseph Needham called “coordinative thinking”--in contrast with “subordinative”-- to describe certain tendencies within historical Chinese thought: “This intuitive-associative system has its own causality and its own logic. It is not either superstition or primitive superstition, but a characteristic thought-form of its own. [...] In coordinative thinking, conceptions are not subsumed under one another, but placed side by side in a pattern, and things influence one another not by acts of mechanical causation, but by a kind of ‘inductance’ “ (Needham, 1995, 280-1). For a contemporary example of the anthropological reclamation of patterned modes of abstraction, Susanne Kùchler’s work on Micronesian textile culture is instructive, especially for the way she situates it in relation to a navigation of social relations: “Patchwork is a vehicle for navigating biographical relations and to plot life projects with as much surety as the navigation of the ocean, and it is its formalized aesthetic surfacing as pattern which seems to instruct, remind and inform” (Kùchler, 2017, 81).

**Research and Publication Ethics Statement:** This is a research article, containing original data, and it has not been previously published or submitted to any other outlet for publication. The author followed ethical principles and rules during the research process. In the study, informed consent was obtained from the volunteer participants and the privacy of the participants was protected.

**Araştırma ve yayın etiği beyanı:** Bu makale tamamıyla özgün bir araştırma olarak planlanmış, yürütülmüş ve sonuçları ile raporlaştırıldıktan sonra ilgili dergiye gönderilmiştir. Araştırma herhangi bir sempozyum, kongre vb. sunulmamış ya da başka bir dergiye değerlendirilmek üzere gönderilmemiştir.

**Contribution rates of authors to the article:** The authors in this article contributed to the 100% level of preparation of the study, data collection, and interpretation of the results and writing of the article.

**Yazarların makaleye katkı oranları:** Bu makaledeki yazarlar %100 düzeyinde çalışmanın hazırlanması, veri toplanması, sonuçların yorumlanması ve makalenin yazılması aşamalarına katkı sağlamıştır.

**Ethics committee approval:** The present study does not require any ethics committee approval.

**Etik komite onayı:** Çalışmada etik kurul iznine gerek yoktur.

**Financial support:** The study received no financial support from any institution or project.

**Finansal destek:** Çalışmada finansal destek alınmamıştır.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Çıkar çatışması:** Çalışmada potansiyel çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

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