William Gibson, the founding figure of cyberpunk fiction, has turned ethical. Moving beyond the early hagiography of information-flows, cyborg minds and human-machine assemblages in works like *Neuromancer* (1984), Gibson now probes the other roles, consequences and necessities of information. *Pattern Recognition* (2003, hereafter *PT*), at one level, is a praise-song for viral marketing and the hyper-connected consumer lifestyle of the digital age. Yet, at another level, as I shall demonstrate in this essay, it also explores the worrying linkages between the materiality of bodies and the supposed ‘immateriality’ of information. Gibson moves, the essay argues, from info-flows of consumer signage to the corpo-realization of info-flows and finally the traumatic materialism of info-flows.

**Info-flows and Consumer Signage**

Gibson’s novel deals with a specific kind of information flow—advertising and signage—about objects, if not the objects themselves. That is, it is not only material products and consumer goods but the incessant flow of images of products and goods that constitute the
‘aestheticised’ postmodern lifestyle (Featherstone 68). The Gibsonian world exemplifies this endless proliferation of signs and images which produces, in Featherstone’s reading, a ‘de-auraticization of art, and an aesthetics of desire, sensation and immediacy’ (69). Advertising is of course at the centre of this process of inducing desire for, as Jean Baudrillard puts it:

advertising is not simply an adjunct to the system of objects; it cannot be detached therefrom, nor can it be restricted to its ‘proper’ function … Advertising is now an irremovable aspect of the system of objects precisely by virtue of its disproportionateness. (178)

Bigend echoes Baudrillard when he says: ‘far more creativity, today, goes into the marketing of products than into the products themselves’ (67). And this marketing is about signage that generates the desire, sensation and immediacy, an excessive flow of signs that generates its own aesthetic, what I have elsewhere identified as Gibson’s sublime (Nayar).

Cayce Pollard’s first walk in London offers her ‘a mountainside of Tommy [Hilfiger] coming down her head’ (17). Her thoughts on encountering this excessive signage are pure Baudrillardian:

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 ... But Tommy surely is the null point ... 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 ... but suspects ... that this in fact is what accounts for his long ubiquity. (17–18)

Gibson is here speaking of the Baudrillardian simulacra, the endless flow of signs that constitute a dream-world, but also a reality. Thus, as Cayce walks through London she remembers the streets for the brands
there: a Laura Ashley here, a Dean and Dulca store there (18–19). To negotiate the streets is to traverse a terrain of signs more than goods, icons rather than objects. London for Cayce is more a collection of ubiquitous, derivative but no less powerful signage than a museum or store. In other words, what we see is a personalised geography in terms of a spatialised memory of signs and brands. The experience is repeated in Japan where, when Cayce stands at her hotel window in Tokyo, she sees a skyline that is exclusively signage:

A remarkably virtual-looking skyline, a floating jumble of electric Lego … Logos of corporations she doesn’t even recognise … She remembers this now from previous visits, and also the way certain labels are mysteriously recontextualised here … (127)

In Moscow she sees, simply, ‘huge advertising banners … slung across the street, and billboards top most buildings’ (270), and a McDonald’s (269). Cities here lose their historical and cultural specificity as ubiquitous, globally recognizable signs take over the landscape and due to their embeddedness in info-flows. Hence Cayce thinks of these cities as ‘mirror-worlds.’

The absence of signage, primarily of brands, trademarks and logos means that identification is ruled out. In what is an ironic comment on the aestheticised postmodern lifestyle, Gibson records Cayce’s reactions to the footage (the mysterious, pared down footage that is uploaded from an unknown source and is now followed by fans worldwide):

They [the couple in the footage] are dressed as they always have 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 … The architecture of padding in a woman’s coat should yield possible periods, particularly decades,
but there has been no agreement ... The one hundred and thirty-four previously discovered fragments ... have yielded no period ... (23–4)

Gibson, I propose, offers a counter-flow to this incessant sign-flow in the account of the footage. In a world where people’s cognitive abilities are conditioned by their exposure to signs and brands the footage makes little, or maximum, sense because it lacks identifiable signage. It mesmerises and fascinates because the brands and their temporal frames in the segments cannot be decoded. Thus, the info-flow of consumer culture is countered by an equally powerful flow, but one whose icons, signs and brands generate dreamscapes that are characterised, as Cayce terms it, by ‘timelessness’ (23). She refers to the footage as ‘ghostnarratives,’ with ‘shadowy and determined lives of their own’ (24). There is no ‘particular narrative direction’ either (24). And it is this atemporal, post-geographic, beyond-branding footage that itself becomes a cult consumer product. A non-brandable sign becomes a brand.

In the Gibsonian world, the hyperreal of signs is countered by the equally powerful flow of signs, of the curiously non-indexical, non-identifiable signs of the footage. It is the anonymity of the footage’s moments (they are very brief, some lasting only about fifty seconds) that renders it so intense. I have already noted that Cayce’s negotiation of London is premised on the recognition of the signage on the streets. I advance one more argument here. A city mapped in terms of signs, recognised for its geography of logos and trademarks, is striated space. The footage, in contrast, which intersects with the lives of its followers like Cayce, is smooth space (I am invoking here the distinction from Deleuze and Guattari). Striated spaces in London are homogenised and organised, for Cayce, around brands and logos. Signs systematise this space. The footage is non-formal, with little visual clues as to period, geography or sequence, as noted above, thus making the world of cyberspace (here represented by the footage disseminated by the www) a smooth space.
The two spaces of course intersect, given the nature of existence in the late twentieth century, for cyberspace, or the footage, is not ‘outside’ us, it constitutes us, as Cayce admits:

It is a way now, approximately, of being at home. The forum ['F:F:F,' of fans of the footage] has become one of the most consistent places in her life, like a familiar café that exists somehow outside of geography and beyond time zones. (4)

The smooth, non-formal space of the footage will not be interpreted, will not be appropriated and will not be sequenced into a linear narrative (striated spaces, Deleuze and Guattari tell us, are created out of the anxiety of nomadism and free-flows, and often confront the amorphous smooth space, seeking to control it). The flow of the footage, its consumption across the world (its fans hail from widely different countries) suggests a post-geographic condition:

The forum will be going crazy, the first posts depending on time zones, history of proliferation, where the segment surfaced. It will prove impossible to trace, either uploaded via a temporary e-mail address, often from a borrowed IP, sometimes via a temporary cell phone number, or through some anonymiser. (21)

Later, examining the footage for possible patterns, Cayce and others see geographic maps emerging: ‘she has no reason to believe this is the representation of any island, actual or imaginary. It might be a T-shaped segment extracted from some larger map …’ (170). It is merely signage, atemporal and post-geographic, and thus akin to postmodern geographic states. Postmodern cities, as David Clarke’s work persuasively argues, are capitalist cities but which are given over to, and defined by hyper-consumption, and especially the circulation and consumption of signs. What Gibson does is to first offer us this post-geography, linked only by signs, logos and images that have little to do with the immediate locale/locality. The footage
too is part of this postmodernization of locality, a creation of a smooth space as opposed to a striated, ordered one.

The creation of a forum to interpret the footage is the attempt to regulate its dissemination (the release of the footage, as we discover towards the end, is also regulated, but its consumption cannot be, given the nature of digital cultures today). The flaming that occurs on the forum’s website about what the footage means suggests the anxiety over its meanings (46). Thus Bigend speculates: ‘[they are uploaded] very carefully, intending to provide the illusion of randomness’ (64). Fans and computer specialists detect ‘a geography of sorts, and possibly … a formal order’ (170).

**Info-flows and their Corpo-realization**

However, at no point in time can we see these signs as only simulacra or dreamscapes. These signs constitute the material, the visceral and the real. It is geography, matter and the real. This intersection of the hyperreal world of signs with concrete reality is what we can think of as the materialization of immaterial info-flows. This materialization of signage is what Cayce works at and for. In Gibson, I propose, we can see a corpo-realization (a portmanteau term to suggest the centrality of the corporeal in ‘realizing,’ ‘making real,’ but also of ‘recognition’) of the immaterial where the materialization of info-flows demands a *body*. This posthuman condition, which Katherine Hayles describes as ‘an envisioning of the human as information-processing machines with fundamental similarities to other kinds of information-processing machines, especially intelligent computers’ (246), is characterizable as an assemblage, of the organic body with the flows of information around it.

Info-flows are materially produced through a mix of human and non-human actors where the possibility of action is embodied as both territory and ‘bodily’ locations. These bodily locations are ‘knowing locations’ (John Law and Kevin Hetherington, cited in Flusty 151), sites at which data is gathered, analysed and acted upon, points of
passage or junctions from where knowledge, sociality and global flows emanate (Flusty 151). This is the ‘materialization’ or, more accurately, ‘corpo-realization’ of info-flows that is the next move in Gibson’s novel.

Cayce’s father had identified a condition—apophenia—abio-medical, psycho-cognitive condition of being able to see patterns in randomness, resulting in ‘spontaneous perceptions of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things’ (115). Apophenic Cayce can immerse herself into the endless flow of signs in order to detect emerging patterns. She works, therefore, as a ‘coolhunter.’ She says: ‘manufacturers use me to keep track of street fashion … What I do is pattern recognition. I try to recognise a pattern before anybody else does’ (86). There is a simultaneity of two processes at work in this info-flow around Cayce.

The first process is the materialization of information. Cayce lives inside the flow of signs (or information), and yet remains outside it. She detects patterns within the flow of signs because she recognises the meanings of these signs. She surveys and predicts brands and logos. Cayce can read, literally, the signs (logos, trademarks) of the future in the ebb and flow of signage around her. That is, she uncovers a pattern within the apparent free-flowing and randomised bits of info around her. It is Cayce’s mind, taking in and processing the info through her senses, that signals future trends. Thus we can argue that Cayce gives form to abstract trends, materialises signs, logos and ‘cool.’ In similar fashion the signs and future trends remain ‘immaterial’ in the sense they are still abstract. What Cayce does is explained this way: ‘I point a commodifier at it. It gets productised. Turned into units. Marketed’ (86). The trend or fashion is the renewed flow of info through the Cayce-junction—the cumulative and tangible result of non-human (immaterial) info and human actors coming together.

The process of materialization of information requires a body, specifically, Cayce’s material, corporeal body. It is through Cayce’s sensory appropriation and interpretation of the abstract signage that logos and products are made. That is, it is entirely Cayce’s
interpretation that converts the sign into a marketable commodity, an object. Consumer products do not demand mere signage, they demand a corpo-realization. For this to happen, ironically, Cayce has to be steeped in the signage. Signage is everted, it envelops her, even as she exists somewhere between the materiality of her body and the ‘immaterial’ signage. In a sense, then, the Cayce body is dematerialised when it becomes a part of the signage and rematerialised when her body becomes the means of actualizing the sign. Pattern recognition, then, is the intersection of the human body with the flow of information.

A second instantiation of this intersection is the process of viral marketing. Magda, who works at viral marketing, describes her job this way: ‘[I] go to clubs and wine bars and chat people up. While I’m at it, I mention a client’s product, of course favourably. I try to attract attention while I’m doing it’ (84). The listeners at this conversation go away and don’t necessarily buy the product but what they do is ‘recycle the information. They use it to try to impress the next person they meet’ (85). What Gibson is presenting here is a very different marketing mode, one which relies on WOM (word-of-mouth) transmission of information. People remain the nodes in this transmission. They are the conduits through which information flows. The product is constituted as a set of signs transmitted through bodies hired to do the job.

Now that we have established that Gibson’s novel aligns the corporeal with the sign-flow, the flows of immaterial information with the material, it remains for us to explore a distinctive instance of this intersection in the novel.

**Traumatic Materialism and Info-flows**

Immaterial info-flows that create smooth space demand bodies, embodiment and corpo-realization. What Gibson does is to take the body as the site of this intersection of material and immaterial, but shows the body as traumatised by this intersection, what I term
the traumatic materialism of info-flows. There are three crucial intersections of data and flesh in *PT*.

Let us take Cayce Pollard first. A ‘coolhunter’ who can detect patterns in street fashion and future trends, she is allergic to labels and logos of any kind:

What people take to for relentless minimalism is a side effect of too much exposure to the reactor-cores of fashion ... She is, literally, allergic to fashion. She can only tolerate things that could have been worn, to a general lack of comment, during any year between 1945 and 2000. She’s a design-free zone, a one-woman school of anti ... (8)

She navigates London’s ubiquitous and derivative signage but these still affect her viscerally when she wears them or comes into contact with them. She is immersed in signage and its ubiquitous flows, but she is ‘outside’ it as well because of her ‘talents ... allergies ... tame pathologies’ (65). Apophenic Cayce can intuitively detect patterns, materialise them through her sensorium, but her body cannot assimilate them at all. To be consumed, an object must first become a sign, says Baudrillard (218) but, as Gibson will demonstrate, the sign works when cognitively (i.e., through the corporeal sensorium) perceived.

Signage brings home to Cayce that she is a vulnerable body as well, hers is a body that has to stay devoid of signage. ‘She’s gone to Harvey Nichols and gotten sick,’ we are told (17). Michelin Man logos make her throw up and want to scream (97, 98). Through these panic reactions the Cayce body responds, materially, to immaterial signs. She is the traumatic materialism of the signifier. Gibson thus complicates the body-signage, material-immaterial binaries by showing how they merge, often to disastrous results.

It is the absence of any confirmatory information about her father’s fate that haunts Cayce. This marks the second intersection of information and the corporeal in its traumatic materialism. We are told of the quest for particular kinds of information—of the death of
Win Pollard—in the great flow of info around 9/11. Cayce’s mother, now part of a commune, finds this information in the general buzz around the event. She writes to Cayce about it:

These four ambient segments were accidentally recorded by a CCNY anthropology student making a verbal survey of missing-person posters and other signs ... We’ve found this particular tape to be remarkably rich ...[in voices, supposedly from the people who died on 9/11] ... and have recovered several dozen messages by a variety of methods ... Messages of this sort do not yield very easily to conventional studio techniques; those on the other side [i.e., the dead] are best able to modulate those aspects of a recording that we ordinarily think of as ‘noise’ ... (184)

Cayce’s mother is proposing a flow of info from the dead, in a language (signs) that we often dismiss as ‘noise.’

Win Pollard, Cayce’s father, had ‘left remarkably few full-face images’ and in the one that does exist he had been ‘mistaken for the younger William S. Burroughs’ (186). In the absence of information, Cayce is unable to mourn for him. If mourning requires a topos (Derrida 111), it also requires confirmation of death, in the form of information, or it would become ‘interminable mourning’ (111). Here the absence of information functions as a traumatic signifier of an event without a frame of reference, a limit or even a temporal location. 9/11 itself, as David Simpson has argued, is an event outside of space and time due to its iconic iterability, its trans-temporal state unrestricted by either the place of NYC or the day/date of September 11. For, as Derrida put it:

It is if I were content to say that what is terrible about ‘September 11,’ what remains ‘infinite’ in this wound, is that we do not know what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it ... We are talking about a trauma, and thus an event, whose temporality proceeds neither from the now that is present nor
from the present that is past but from an im-presentable present to come. (Borradori 94–97)

For Cayce, 9/11 is all around her, but this free-floating signifier does not cohere into a material condition—the material condition embodied in her father’s death. That he is only ‘missing’ suggests that there is no corporeal body to the info around/about him. The traumatic materialism of 9/11 here is the de-materialization of Win Pollard, his death a sign without a body and hence without personal signification for Cayce except as a loss.

The third instance of the linkage between material body and immaterial information is the case of the footage producer, Nora. The material body behind the info-flow that is the footage is hinted at early in the novel when people attribute it to the ‘virtual hand of some secretive and unknown genius’ (47).

Nora, the maimed twin, is the one who produces the footage by editing three short films she had made when at college. Nora survives, more a vegetable than a human, with shrapnel in her brain. The entire account of the production of the footage reinforces the centrality of consciousness—embodied consciousness—to info-flows. The first comments made by Stella, the other twin, to Cayce gestures at the unbelievable but undeniable link between bodily trauma and digital art:

The last fragment [of the bomb that killed the twins’ parents]. It rests between the lobes, in some terrible way. It cannot be moved. Risk is too great ... But then she notices the screen ... When she looked at those images, she focused. When the images were taken away, she began to die again. (288–9)

Nora survives because she can edit her film, her eyes focus only on the screen. It is in the endless circulation of images—info-flows, signage—that she exists. She is the film she makes, in an extreme instance of eversion.
Out of the injury in her head comes the minimalist footage that captures the world’s imagination. Gibson builds on the link between bodily trauma and information later:

Her consciousness, Cayce understands, somehow bounded up by or bound to the T-shaped fragment in her brain … And from it, and from her other wounds, there now emerged, accompanied by the patient and regular clicking of her mouse, the footage … the headwaters of the digital Nile … It is here, in the languid yet precise moves of a woman’s pale hand. In the faint click of image-capture. In the eyes truly present when focused on this screen.

Only the wound, speaking wordlessly in the dark. (305)

It is the wound that speaks to the world. In this, the climactic moments of the tale, Gibson reinforces the (tragically) corporeal nature of information. Nora had wanted to be a film-maker. She now Photoshops the same films she has made years ago, paring them down relentlessly to their minimal images. It is for and because of this (digital) minimalism that she survives. The trauma of her injury creates the poetic visuals unfolding in short segments. Her consciousness, fragmented by shrapnel, achieves a flow of info, but a flow that is a-temporal, outside of history and geography (as noted earlier, the footage has no markers of period or location). She does not recognise people, cannot identify her loved ones, all she recognises is film image and the flow of info across her screen.³ She is rendered into the film, her consciousness is all film.

When the novel concludes we understand that the footage is not ‘outside’ or extrinsic to Nora, it is her-self, everted. The signage is her body’s apophenic pattern recognition: she internalises the signs, materialises and corpo-realises them. Images, in Gibson’s world of info-flows, are not outside realities (or even symbols) for interior states, they constitute the interior states of people. Individual selves are everted, sometimes with creases, sometimes not, into info-flows.
‘Traumatic materialism’ as I have termed the intersection of bodies and info-flows, is the eversion of selves and information.

Gibson’s critique of informational capitalism—the capitalism that thrives primarily on the spread, control and collection of information—thus brings about a materiality to the body of data. If in his early fiction he was enthused by the idea of ‘data made flesh’ (as he put it in *Neuromancer*, 16) now he worries about the intersection of data with flesh. From Cayce’s pathological reactions to logos to Nora’s embedded shrapnel that produces footage/info, Gibson engages with the data/flesh interaction. Info-flows, suggests Gibson, need bodies, bodies that cognitively register the info, channelise, subvert, or assimilate it. Information by itself, in *PT*, has little value: it has a human face and a human body. ‘Traumatic materialism’ is the condition where the endless, meaningless flow of information comes up short against the irreducible material human body. If in the postmodern city all we have is simulacra of simulacra, where the real cannot be really determined, then Gibson offers us the corporealised reality of pathology, injury and death as counters to the ceaseless flow of simulacra. Materiality, suggests Gibson, cannot be denied.

**Works Cited:**


Notes:

1. It is interesting that Gibson uses tapes rather than CDs or external memory sticks here. Win Pollard was mistaken for William Burroughs, as noted. And William Burroughs classic novel about info-flows was essentially about audio tapes (*The Nova Express*).  
2. ‘Everting’ was a term Gibson appropriated in *Spook Country* (2008) from marine biology and mathematics to describe a condition where the inside could be turned out without creases. He used it to describe the condition where cyberspace is no longer an external, ‘out there’ state, but one which envelops us.  
3. Of course, Nora’s sister, Stella, and her uncle want widespread dissemination of the footage. An entire team of convicts are pressed into service to ‘render’, polish and upload the footage. It becomes, in itself, an act of rebelling against Russia’s history when, as Stella tells Cayce, ‘whole universes of blood and imagination, built over lifetimes in rooms like these, never to be seen’ (306). There is the imminent threat of commercialization, warns Cayce (307).