School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts

Rubik

&

'We Have No Future': The Science-Fictionalised Present

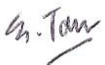**Elizabeth Tan**

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DECLARATION

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the research question: How can narrative strategies drawn from contemporary science fiction and postmodern fiction be utilised to articulate current anxieties about the technologised subject? The research investigation has two outcomes: the exegesis, *'We Have No Future': The Science-Fictionalised Present*, and the fiction, *Rubik*. The research identifies a number of key cultural concerns of postmodernity: the ascendancy of technology, information overload, the disruption of ontological hygiene, the proliferation of vast overarching systems, and the mediatisation of reality. These developments have provoked particular cultural anxieties, which I characterise broadly as the human subject's fear of obsolescence, and which are made manifest in the figure of 'the technologised subject'. The term 'technologised subject', as used in the exegesis, gestures to a conception of the human not just as an entity which is co-constituted by technology, but also the human as a commodity, and the human as a trademark, image, or representation. Thus, obsolescence signifies a loss of agency, relevance, uniqueness, and competence.

These conjunctural anxieties are exemplified in texts which are ambiguously situated between the narrative forms of postmodern fiction and science fiction. These texts attest to the persistent intrusion of iconography more readily associated with 'the future' into our present day, as well as the postmodern tendency to apprehend contemporary reality as an always-already mediated 'text' to be read, leading Veronica Hollinger to characterise our present as 'the science-fictionalised present'. My creative engagement with postmodern anxieties and my experimentation with narrative strategies derived from three exemplary texts come to fruition in *Rubik*, a collection of interrelated short stories featuring protagonists who struggle against the threat of obsolescence. In *Rubik*, I explore the science-fictionalised present as an unstable world in which reality and fiction continually intersect, and in which technology announces itself as both familiar (belonging firmly in the present) and estranging (belonging to 'the future').

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INTRODUCTION

This exegesis and collection of short fiction answers the following research question: How can narrative strategies drawn from contemporary science fiction and postmodern fiction be utilised to articulate current anxieties about the technologised subject?

In engaging with this question, this exegesis identifies a number of key cultural concerns of postmodernity, such as the increasing technologisation of society, the proliferation of vast overarching systems that dwarf the human subject, the ascendancy and excess of information and data, the disruption of ontological hygiene, and the mediatisation of reality. These developments have provoked particular cultural anxieties, which this exegesis characterises broadly as the human subject's fear of obsolescence. Obsolescence signifies a loss of control, relevance, uniqueness, and competence.

Science fiction and postmodern fiction are two closely related narrative forms that react to the set of concerns outlined above. Science fiction, although largely developed in a period of scientific positivism (and thus often associated with the tenets of modernity) and popularly held to extrapolate or predict the future, has become increasingly relevant as a discourse for describing the current postmodern conjuncture, symptomatised by contemporary examples of science fiction that withdraw from representing the future and utilise settings that resemble the present day. The term 'postmodern', as Tim Woods indicates, is a term used to designate both the contemporary cultural context (postmodernity) and the stylistic characteristics and representational strategies of texts that emerge from or engage with this context (postmodernism) (10); thus, when Brian McHale notes that the 1980s marked the intensification of a feedback loop between science fiction and postmodernist fiction (314), he confirms that the two narrative forms have many overlapping representational strategies and concerns. The texts examined in this exegesis – William Gibson's 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition*, Christopher Nolan's 2010 film *Inception*, and Don DeLillo's 1984 novel *White Noise* – are participants in this feedback loop, employing, to varying degrees, strategies derived from science fiction in order to engage with postmodern anxieties, complicating the boundary between postmodern fiction and science fiction.

The representational strategies that I found productive for my creative work can be broadly categorised under two headings. The first, defamiliarisation and naturalisation, describes the general purview of science fiction: to disrupt the taken-for-grantedness of cultural practices and artefacts (defamiliarisation), or to reduce phenomena that do not belong to our empirical reality into something ordinary within the world of the text (naturalisation). As both techniques necessitate a break in perception, the line between defamiliarisation and naturalisation is not clearly demarcated; this exegesis argues that, in this postmodern context, a reader (of a text or of our contemporary mediatised reality) may 'toggle' between the two perceptual modes, so that reality is never stable.

The second heading I have used to organise my representational strategies, the concept of 'intolerable' space, refers to settings and atmospheres which produce paranoia, and their attendant impact on characterisation. Scott Bukatman's usage of 'intolerable', which he derives from Fredric Jameson, signifies a loss of mastery and the threat of obsolescence. Dirt and disobedience, collisions, closed space, 'behind-the-curve' characters and dream logic are all strategies associated with intolerable space.

On the whole, I would characterise my project's creative trajectory as one that continually sought alternatives to what I have broadly termed 'gloss'. Gloss characterises Gibson's attention to surface detail in *Pattern Recognition* and the hard, fixed, and smooth spaces of *Inception*; it describes the characters of both texts – experts who are adept, mobile, competent, and 'ahead-of-the-curve'. Gloss signifies the well-managed, controlled, new. Gloss is often used as a stand-in for technology and the late-capitalist regime – it establishes their omnipresence even in objects that are not explicitly technologised. Gloss can be used to create an estranging effect, but, as this exegesis argues, *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception* only disturb the gloss up to a point: ultimately, these texts uphold a fantasy of technological proficiency, in which a degree of mastery over intolerable space is still possible. *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, whose depiction of a science-fictionalised present prefigures Gibson's in *Pattern Recognition* by nearly twenty years, provided possible counterpoints to gloss with its object world of dirt and disobedience, and characters who, despite their intellect, are plagued by uncertainty, struggle with social protocols, and remain 'behind the curve'.

Chapter 1: The Science-Fictionalised Present, takes its title from Veronica Hollinger's essay 'Stories about the Future', in which she describes contemporary reality as 'the science-fictionalised present' (453). Through a close reading of Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, a science-fiction novel set in the present day, I outline the compatibility of science fiction's representational strategies with the postmodern conjuncture and explore narrative strategies which I have named conspicuous tools, conspicuous reduction, unresolved or ambiguous patterns, and hard gloss. I also explore Gibson's representation of an ahead-of-the-curve protagonist who is positioned as a 'reader' of her present.

Chapter 2: Intolerable Spaces, explores Bukatman's argument that science fiction is 'grounded in the new "intolerable spaces" of technological culture: the narrative exists to permit that space to exist, but in a manner now susceptible to human perception, comprehension, and intervention' ('Cybernetic' 52). Through a close reading of Nolan's *Inception*, a film which makes the human visible through a lens of technology, I investigate the difficulty of transcending the demands of real space when writing science fiction, and explore narrative strategies such as closed space, collisions, dream logic, and deceptive landscapes and objects.

Chapter 3: The Technologised Subject, engages with the eventual name I would give to the figure at the centre of (or struggling to occupy the centre of) my fiction. The 'technologised subject' gestures to a particular construction of the human as tool/machine/system, as commodity, and as message/signifier/trademark/image. Through a close reading of DeLillo's *White Noise*, a text written in an historical conjuncture which saw the 'modernist association of technology with machines' overturned by an emerging association of technology with 'the networked, communicating computer' (Heise 140), I explore narrative strategies which I have named 'lively' systems, dirt and disobedience, an even more constricted closed space, and behind-the-curve characters.

CHAPTER 1: THE SCIENCE-FICTIONALISED PRESENT

> Cayce pops out into a pale light slanting in through much glass. Fewer
> lunching shoppers than she remembers. But no clothing on this floor, save on
> people's backs and in their glossy carrier bags. The swelling can subside,
> here.
>
> She pauses by a meat counter, eyeing roasts illuminated like newly minted
> media faces, and probably of a biological purity she herself could never hope
> to attain: animals raised on a diet more stringent than the one propounded in
> interviews by Stonestreet's wife.
>
> At the bar, a few Euromales of the dark-suited sort stand smoking their
> eternal cigarettes.
>
> She bellies up, catching the barman's eye.
>
> '*Time Out*?' he inquires, frowning slightly. Brutally cropped, he regards
> her from the depths of massive, mask-like Italian spectacles. The black-
> framed glasses remind her of emoticons, those snippets of playschool
> emotional code cobbled up from keyboard symbols to produce sideways
> cartoon faces. You could do his glasses with an eight, hyphen for his nose,
> the mouth a left slash.
>
> —William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (19)

Science Fiction, the Future, and Postmodernity

In her essay 'Stories about the Future: From Patterns of Expectation to Pattern
Recognition', Veronica Hollinger characterises contemporary Western society as 'the
science-fictionalised present' (453). She describes 'the sheer extravagance of
contemporary technoscience', citing examples of scientific breakthroughs such as
cloning, xenotransplantation, and space exploration, which has led to 'the implosion
of science fiction and science fact' ('Stories' 453). This 'sheer extravagance',
however, is not confined to distant state-of-the-art laboratories and space stations: as
Hollinger has noted elsewhere ('Future/Present: The End of Science Fiction'),
science fiction intrudes into everyday lived experience, and our present age is
increasingly 'configured by late capitalism, the circulation of simulacra, and the
cyborging of the human body' (219).

Hollinger describes, using science fiction as her interface, the conditions of postmodernity in the West. Postmodernity is a term generally designating the mid-twentieth to the early twenty-first century, a period largely characterised by 'a decline of faith in the keystones of the Enlightenment – belief in the infinite progress of knowledge, belief in infinite moral and social advancement, belief in teleology' (Woods 11), particularly in light of World War II's atrocities. Postmodernity is also characterised by the dispersion of power from nation states to corporations, under the auspices of postindustrial capitalism, and the rapid development, accessibility, and normalisation of technology, particularly, according to Ursula K. Heise, 'computer technology and biotechnology' (137). Although postmodernity's name denotes it as being literally 'after the modern', suggesting a succession of, or reaction to or against, modernity and Enlightenment principles, postmodernity and modernity cannot be cleanly demarcated; as Tim Woods notes, modernism and postmodernism 'often [practise] *exactly the same aesthetic characteristics*' (8). Simply put, postmodernity is both a reaction to modernity and modernity's continuation. The texts examined in this exegesis are suspicious of modernity even as they attempt to conserve some of modernity's assumptions about the rational human subject and human agency – in particular, 'the modernist conviction that human beings stand apart, and should remain apart, from other forms of existence' (Heise 144).

Hollinger's use of science fiction to represent the contemporary moment implies that postmodernity is underpinned chiefly by a contentious relationship with 'the real'. The concept of a present which is 'science-*fictionalised*' speaks to the mediatisation of reality in postmodernity – reality is *re*-presented, necessarily read or perceived through a mediating frame. Woods says, 'In many ways, media culture has become virtually synonymous with "the postmodern condition"' (194), and James W. Markham and Crispin Maslog tellingly open their essay 'Images and the Mass Media' by declaring that we live in an 'age of images and image-makers' (519). Together, Woods, Markham, and Maslog attest to the omnipresence of cultural texts and images, fostered by information and communications technology, which always implicate the subject in a constructed reality. Jean Baudrillard is perhaps the foremost commentator on the ascension of the image in postmodernity, to the point of disputing the existence of a 'real' at all: 'Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a

territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal' (1).

Postmodernity is marked increasingly by a pressure to be media literate – to not only be able to read images but to be an effective *image-maker* (or, more accurately, an effective image-manipulator). Many scholars characterise postmodernity as an age of 'information overload' (Cavallaro 11; Huyssen 7; McCaffery 10; O'Donnell 190) – an overwhelming excess of data – largely fostered by technology and image culture. Heise says that the advent of digital technology has incited concerns that it is 'difficult to distinguish accurate from inaccurate information' (140) and to know 'which information derive[s] from reliable sources and represent[s] authenticated knowledge, and which [does] not' (141). This excess has made the task of effectively reading and mastering the proliferation of images – of finding the right 'frames' by which to mediate, interpret, and manage reality – ever more difficult. Another implication of information overload is that it has produced a landscape of surveillance. If we are, according to Jerry Aline Flieger, 'watched everywhere, monitored and transcribed by a ubiquitous information bank' (87), the contemporary landscape exerts even more pressure on the postmodern subject to be media literate so as to resist co-option from nebulous forces. If information is '*the* most important commodity in postmodern society' (Heise 141), a command over information is vital to maintaining one's agency.

When Hollinger calls our present *science-fictionalised* she suggests that images that were previously only visible in works of science fiction can now be used to apprehend the present – that is, the imagery of science fiction specifically coincides with our present reality. 'In general,' Gerald Alva Miller Jr. writes, 'science fiction has been defined by a certain kind of futurity or alterity' (100). Science fiction's repertoire of 'future' images, whether utopian or dystopian, is very often facilitated by the technology represented (and naturalised) in the narrative's fictional world. Technology and science, as icons of modern progress, are persistently associated with the future. Tom Gunning says that each new technology we encounter in daily life signals an 'address to a previously unimagined future' which 'can never completely disappear' (56), even as those technologies become as much a part of the everyday fabric of postmodern life as those fantastic technologies in the imagined futures of science fiction. Technology always persists, Gunning argues, in hailing the future.

The prevalence of technology in postmodernity threatens what Elaine L. Graham (in a gesture to the work of Donna Haraway) calls 'ontological hygiene' (33). The distinction between 'agent and object, external and internal, organic and artificial' (Graham 33) becomes increasingly troubled in an era of technoscientific innovations that allow (to use examples from my own fiction) cornea transplantation, the surgical excision of a parasitic twin, the mass production of food, and correspondence with a spambot. Of particular concern in postmodernity is the challenge that technology issues to the ontological hygiene of the category of *human*, for technology has 'reconfigured our relationship to ourselves, each other and to the tools and materials we use' (Goody 1).

In Baudrillard's estimation, reality itself evades ontological hygiene. If the difference between what is 'territory' and what is 'map' – the difference between an object and its representation, between an event and its simulation – is unstable, the project of knowing and navigating reality is futile and frightening. Technology and media culture have facilitated the dissolution of the boundary between territory and map: 'ideal home exhibitions, the human figures of fashion models, or a computer simulation of how to handle a particular scenario. In all of these instances, the model determines the real, and hyperreality increasingly erases everyday life', and, furthermore, these simulations set 'the benchmark for the real itself' (Woods 27). The postmodern subject frequently finds itself to be an image rather than an image-maker, the one who is mapped rather than the one doing the mapping, dwarfed within a vast overarching system of representation.

The attempt of the postmodern subject to nonetheless locate itself in this overarching system constitutes what Fredric Jameson calls 'cognitive mapping'. Cognitive mapping is an effort 'to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole' (*Postmodernism* 51), so that one can 'regain a capacity to act and struggle' (*Postmodernism* 54). In Jameson's analysis, this 'unrepresentable totality' is very often the system of late capitalism itself, which has pervaded every facet of society. As Woods explains, '"Cognitive mapping" is a reorientation of our experience of time and space in an era where the opportunity to place ourselves into a definable time–space location […] has become systematically challenged by the culture of global capitalism, which, for example, replicates the same chain stores, fast-food outlets, theme pubs and shopping malls […] across the

land' (37). Jameson also suggests that cognitive mapping attempts to represent 'the gap between the local positioning of the subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated' (qtd. in Willman 31). Thus, one purpose of cognitive mapping is to overcome a perceived loss of agency, a loss arising not only from 'the condition in capitalism of being severed from one's own productive activity' known as alienation (Woods 28), but also that loss of agency and power that arises from the overwhelming noise of information overload, which might also be said to 'sever' the subject from its own meaning-making activity.

Hollinger's use of the term 'science-fictionalised present' underscores the role of science fiction in enabling a cognitive mapping of postmodernity – a cognitive mapping which attempts to understand the human subject in relation to anxieties surrounding image culture, ontological hygiene, late capitalism, information overload, and the proliferation of technology, which are all products of postmodernity. As Larry McCaffery argues, postmodern science fiction 'seeks to empower us by providing a cognitive mapping that can help situate us in a brave new postmodern world that systematically distorts our sense of who or where we are, of what is "real" at all, of what is most valuable about human life' (16). To Hollinger, science fiction is not only a genre, but a discourse which is increasingly mobilised to describe and map the present day, rather than extrapolating into the future:

> These days science fiction is everywhere, as a discourse of choice through which to describe a present which perceives itself as both technological and apocalyptic. In fact, this is a present which perceives itself *as already extending into the future*. The implication here is that, when faced with the immediacy of millennial/apocalyptic events, science fiction's future orientation becomes blocked and science fiction becomes a *present*-tense kind of literature. That is, it begins to function in the popular imagination more and more as a metaphorical discourse through which to describe/construct the present, rather than as an extrapolative exercise through which to imagine the future. In fact, as millennial thinking catches up with science fiction, the future becomes nothing more than a kind of displaced version of the present. ('Future/Present' 217–18)

Thus what Hollinger investigates is not only the relevance of science fiction (as a discourse) in describing and cognitively mapping the current postmodern conjuncture, but the challenge of science fiction (as a narrative form and genre) in

representing 'the future' when it is pre-empted by a present already deeply infused with technoscientific culture and a sense of the futuristic. As Hollinger says, 'Science fiction is "the literature of change," but change is exactly what now defines the present. It no longer guarantees the future as the site of meaningful difference' ('Stories' 453). Contemporary science fiction's withdrawal from representing 'the future' is symptomatised in Judith Berman's essay 'Science Fiction without the Future', in which Berman, taking a sample of works from *Asimov's* and *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, detects a persistently pessimistic and fearful undertone in contemporary science fiction. These works, Berman argues, exude 'techno-anxiety' (7) or 'avert their gaze […] from both present and future' (6) in favour of nostalgically recycling the iconography of pre-millennial 'Golden Age' science fiction. Berman is principally concerned that contemporary science fiction's fear of the present and the future will render the genre irrelevant to new readers, as the 'changes that frighten older people – [younger readers] *don't perceive as change*' (6). While Berman does not object to science fiction that fails to '*look forward to the future* in both senses of the phrase', she '[wishes] for greater sophistication – for *purposive* exploration of all this devotion to the past, as well as of the anxiety generated by the present. Science fiction can't just follow those elements in the larger culture that feel soothed by contemplation of simpler times' (7). Berman summarises what she observes to be the contemporary trend of science fiction: 'Golden Age sf: hope for the future of technology. Millennial sf: fear of the present, fear of technology?' (6)

William Gibson's 2003 novel, *Pattern Recognition*, has emerged as an example of Hollinger's '*present*-tense kind of literature', and one which may qualify for Berman's 'purposive exploration' of present anxieties. Gibson's protagonist Cayce Pollard has a pathological sensitivity to branding: encountering trademarks such as Tommy Hilfiger and the Michelin Man causes Cayce to feel nauseous; exposure to Mickey Mouse as a child once produced a rash. This allergy, however, affords Cayce a heightened intuition – corporations hire Cayce to determine whether a new brand or logo will be successful; whole marketing campaigns are launched or abandoned at Cayce's say-so. Cayce's talent is the most prominent (and some argue,[1] the *only*) speculative/extrapolative element of *Pattern Recognition*, a novel which is otherwise

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[1] For example, see Jaak Tomberg (282 n3).

preoccupied with 'the endless endtimes of the future-present' (Hollinger, 'Stories' 452). The novel is set in 2002, and its plot does not extrapolate beyond the technological and scientific parameters of that era, taking contemporary urban locations in London, Moscow, Tokyo, and briefly New York as settings. And yet the novel's tone is unmistakably science-fictional; passages like the one that opens this chapter possess a futuristic gleam. It seems to utilise, to quote Simon Spiegel, 'an *aesthetics of technology*' or a 'techno-scientific look' (372). The novel's tropes of shady corporations, surveillance, paranoia, conspiracy, and simulacra further entangle *Pattern Recognition* with the preoccupations of much contemporary science fiction, as well as the postmodern anxieties outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

Pattern Recognition embodies science fiction's contentious relationship with the future, underscored by an oft-quoted passage in which Hubertus Bigend, the head of international marketing company Blue Ant and Cayce's latest employer, says:

> '[…] [W]e have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration. For us, […] things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile.' (57)

John Clute suggests that while this passage might be understood simply as a remark on the rapid and confusing pace of twenty-first-century life, the passage also announces contemporary science fiction's 'present-tense' orientation. That is, the kind of science fiction written in the 'Golden Age' of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Hollinger, 'Future/Present' 225) – which Clute calls 'First SF' – is no longer possible because of the instability of the present. One might paraphrase Bigend and say that contemporary science fiction writers do not have a future in the same way that First SF writers could imagine a future. After the passing of the millennium – the year 2000 for so long 'a marker for a future that seemed too far away to ever arrive' (Barr ix) – those Golden Age futures of flying cars and spaceships seem retrograde and nostalgic, even absurd. These futures become, as Berman might say, more like soothing images of 'simpler times'.

Even though there are many exceptions – stories that are set in an alternative past or present, for example – there still persists, in the popular imagination, an expectation for science fiction to be futuristic. At the beginning of my project,

whenever I would explain – however reductively – that my aim was to write a science fiction narrative set in the present day, a common response I encountered was: 'But how is that possible?' In his essay 'The Future of Prediction: Speculating on William Gibson's Meta-Science-Fiction', Robert Briggs raises the term 'prediction' as the distinguishing feature between science fiction and literature in general, calling prediction 'the privileged marker of SF's relations to and with "the future" as distinct from its relations to and with "the present"' (4). Authors such as William Gibson and Ursula Le Guin have contended that their science fiction has always been about the present, with Le Guin famously stating that 'SF is not predictive; it is descriptive' (qtd. in Briggs 2). Thus Briggs refers to this tension as the 'prediction/allegory dichotomy', and further suggests that the discipline of science fiction studies has been engaged in an 'ongoing *negation* or *denial* of any predictive dimension to SF' (4). Briggs gestures to the critical reception of *Pattern Recognition* – hailed by *Science Fiction Studies* as 'artistically ambitious' (qtd. in Briggs 2) despite, as Briggs repeatedly underscores, the novel's present-day setting – as an example of this ongoing negation or denial. Both Hollinger and Briggs are responding to a line of critical thought that Jameson develops in 'Progress Versus Utopia: Or, Can We Imagine the Future?' According to Jameson, science fiction's 'deepest vocation is over and over again to demonstrate and to dramatise our incapacity to imagine the future' (153), and, rather than giving the reader '"images" of the future', science fiction's task is to 'defamiliarise and restructure our experience of our own *present*' (151). Science fiction thus realises the 'present' as a 'past' of a possible 'future'.

While Briggs ultimately goes on to suggest that the prediction/allegory dichotomy is an oversimplification of science fiction's problematic relationship with the present and the future, what is striking about his essay is the implication that privileging science fiction's allegorical function over its predictive function somehow degrades the genre or compromises its integrity – indeed, Briggs writes that science-fiction author Bruce Sterling 'responded with vehemence to the implication that SF can be *reduced to the status of allegory*, seeing that move as "part of an ongoing attempt to reduce SF to a sub-branch of mainstream literature"' (17 n14, emphasis added). Science fiction's apparent status as a genre perpetually under threat is highlighted in Hollinger's opening to 'Future/Present': 'Science fiction is (once again) undergoing an identity crisis; or, to put it more extremely, science fiction is (once again) coming

to an end' (215). Hollinger repeatedly insists that the tenuous boundary between science fiction and contemporary reality is 'not news' ('Stories' 453), and indeed, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr.'s description of the present day as 'a form of exteriorised science fiction' ('Futuristic Flu' 31) has an affinity with Hollinger's 'science-fictionalised present'. Even Briggs suggests that the notion of science fiction as a cultural discourse, not just a literary discourse, 'is hardly revolutionary today' (11). Yet, it seems that there still lingers a significant investment in science fiction's perceived status as fiction that engages with the future. My intention in this thesis is not to deny that science fiction can be and is often predictive, or to declare that science fiction is now 'impossible', or to cast predictions for the generic future of science fiction. Rather, my intention is to identify how texts such as *Pattern Recognition*, through their engagement with the ruptures of taken-for-granted categories – science fiction and contemporary fiction, future and present, prediction and allegory, familiarity and alterity – are able to effectively voice anxieties surrounding contemporary technology and media culture, or, broadly, the 'invasive weirdness' (Gibson, *Pattern* 226) of postmodernity. Thus, texts such as *Pattern Recognition* have suggested narrative strategies for my own fiction, strategies which I would broadly characterise as 'defamiliarising' or 'estranging'.

Ruptures in Familiarity

In 1972, Darko Suvin characterised science fiction as 'the *literature of cognitive estrangement*' (372), a formulation that would become enormously influential in science fiction studies. While Suvin's definition of science fiction has been problematised variously as too broad, inconsistent, or overly prescriptive (Kincaid n. pag.; Latham 100; Parrinder 37; Spiegel 369), the notion of 'estrangement' has nonetheless offered a productive approach to identifying the stylistic devices that might characterise a work as science fiction. According to Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., Suvin's 'estrangement' draws on two related concepts: the Russian Formalist concept of *ostranenie* – translated by Csicsery-Ronay Jr. as 'de-famliarisation' – and Bertolt Brecht's notion of *Verfremdungseffekt*, or 'alienation effect' ('Marxist Theory' 118). Simon Spiegel defines *ostranenie* – paraphrasing Viktor Shklovsky, who developed the concept – as 'the breaking up of established habits of reception' (369), explaining: 'To *truly see* things again we must overcome our "blind" perception, and this is only possible when they are made strange again' (369). Brecht

offers a similar definition of estrangement: 'A representation which estranges is one which allows us to recognise its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar' (qtd. in Suvin 374). Spiegel elaborates that Brecht's *V-Effekt* is a 'specific didactic effect' which 'leads to the realisation that things do not have to be the way they are, that any current state of things is not a natural given but a product of historical processes' (370). Spiegel is keen to point out that while Suvin utilises estrangement as a classificatory mechanism to separate science fiction from non-science fiction works – in particular, separating science fiction from other kinds of 'non-naturalistic fiction' (Suvin 373) such as fantasy and myth – Shklovsky and Brecht employ estrangement as 'a stylistic device that describes *how* fiction is being communicated' (Spiegel 370). Indeed, to Shklovsky in particular, estrangement is 'the essential task of any kind of art' (Spiegel 369) – that is, estrangement could be said to be the strategy of fiction in general, and not a strategy unique to science fiction. Spiegel further argues that science fiction not only represents the familiar as something strange, but also depicts strange things as 'compatible with our world' (376) – that is, the task of science fiction is not only to defamiliarise but also to naturalise and normalise strangeness, reducing it to the mundane.

The passage from *Pattern Recognition* that opens this chapter demonstrates the way in which defamiliarisation and naturalisation collaborate: the barman's face, clad in Italian spectacles, is likened to an emoticon – 'You could do his glasses with an eight, hyphen for his nose, the mouth a left slash' (19). This has a defamiliarising effect because the keyboard symbols materialise outside of their habituated context of the computer screen, manifesting in physical reality. But Gibson also *naturalises* the emoticon as an apt signifier of emotions; in fact, in this metaphor, the emoticon is a *better* signifier for emotion than the actual face itself: emoticons were made to represent *our* likeness, but here become the original to which the real is compared. A broader kind of naturalisation is also taking place, furthermore, in Gibson's representation of Cayce's trademark sensitivity as compatible with our world – in the moments immediately preceding the quoted passage, Cayce is escaping from a Tommy Hilfiger display that has triggered her allergy. With a universe in which material reality and cyberspace collide in a barman's emoticon-like expression, Gibson has cultivated a context in which Cayce's sensitivity to trademarks appears natural, legitimate, and believable; this is a world in which the apparently 'empty'

signs and logos of consumer culture can take on a life of their own, can cause violent effects.

This oscillation between defamiliarisation and naturalisation – the sense of alienation from something that should be familiar and ordinary; the acceptance of the strange or science-fictional as normal and everyday – also describes the kind of perceptual 'toggling' performed by inhabitants of the science-fictionalised present. In her introduction to *Envisioning the Future: Science Fiction and the Next Millennium*, Marleen S. Barr characterises post-millennial life as possessing a kind of doubleness. On one hand, the present seems infused with science fiction – Barr suggests the events of 9/11 as one instance when 'science fiction imagery became reality' (xi). According to Alex Link, 9/11 demonstrated 'the neutrality of objects' (215) – we witnessed mundane technological objects, commercial aeroplanes, repurposed (and thus *defamiliarised*) as weapons. Perhaps what also made 9/11 appear like a spectre from the science fiction imagination was how quickly mass media assimilated the event into image, a point driven home in *Pattern Recognition*'s lone excursion to New York, a flashback to the day of the attacks on the World Trade Center, in which Cayce watches the impact of the second plane simultaneously on television and through a high-rise window. However, Barr concedes: 'Yet, even in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks […] the new millennium reminds us of the mundane, non-science fictional nature of daily life' (xi). This disappointment with the new millennium – that it has somehow fallen short of our expectations of what 'the future' should look like – is best conveyed in the title of Barr's introduction: 'What Happened to the Flying Cars?' While we might lack flying cars in our science-fictionalised present, events such as 9/11 remind us that we live in 'an urban landscape now pregnant with repressed threat' (Link 215) – familiarity is prone to catastrophic ruptures.

The notion of ruptures in habitual use and perception is central to Tom Gunning's essay, 'Renewing Old Technologies: Astonishment, Second Nature, and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century'. Gunning posits that when a new technology enters culture it is received with astonishment, but this astonishment gradually fades into acceptance – the technology's newness recedes and it becomes part of the background; we become habituated to technology's presence. When we ask, 'What happened to the flying cars?' we convey the taken-for-grantedness of our current technological landscape. For Gunning, however, this process by which a new technology becomes second nature is not simple and linear – technology does not

stay mundane forever once it is learned and habitualised: instead, 'habit can suddenly, even catastrophically, transform back into a shock of recognition' (46). Gunning argues that this 'shock of recognition' can be triggered by a rupture in perception, citing Shklovsky's technique of defamiliarisation, and also through a rupture in the routine use of the technological object itself. Paraphrasing Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time*, Gunning says, '[I]t is in the nature of a tool not to assert itself, but rather to withdraw in favour of the project it is supposed to accomplish. When a tool works, we pay it no attention; it seems to disappear. However, if the tool breaks down, if in some way it doesn't function, it suddenly becomes conspicuous' (45). Thus, wonder in technology can also be renewed through breakdowns and interruptions of habitual use: as Gunning says, 'The interruption makes the project itself explicit' (45). Gunning also points out that cultural practices – such as reading on train journeys and watching movies on planes – increase habituation to technology by camouflaging the potential for disaster and breakdown. Interruption of these other practices, too, can make the project explicit, and, in Wolfgang Schivelbusch's words, '[reawaken] the memory of the forgotten danger and potential violence – the repressed material returns with a vengeance' (qtd. in Gunning 46). Gunning ultimately suggests that the reception of technology is not a clear-cut cycle of amazement proceeding to habituation proceeding to renewed amazement. The act of watching a movie on a plane does not make the journey any *safer*, it just disguises the danger – the potential for violence and destruction is *always there*. Thus Gunning says that 'the uncanny seems to permeate the whole cycle' (46).

Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny, 'that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar' (76), in its implication of a rupture between familiarity and unfamiliarity, has some affinity with science fiction's estrangement and naturalisation. Tyson Lewis and Daniel Cho define the uncanny as 'an experience of the unfamiliar in something that should otherwise be quite familiar' (69). Gunning's essay underscores the persistent uncanniness inspired *specifically* by technology – no matter how accustomed to our technologised environment we might become, there still remains the repressed awareness of its strangeness. Any fracture in the tenuous layer of familiarity and acceptance – the 'psychic buffer zone' that allows us to go about our everyday lives – has the potential

to '[create] a disaster within our second nature' (Gunning 46). Gunning refers to second nature

> in both the colloquial meaning of that term – an accustomed familiarity – ('it's second nature to me now'), and in the more complex meaning the term acquired in the works of Lukács and the Frankfurt school, of a reified human-made environment which confronts mankind as an alien reality. (40)

We have built up and around ourselves a new environment, a second nature, which is not only an accustomed familiarity but, from the represented point-of-view of protagonists like Cayce Pollard, an alien reality. Technology hovers like a spectre in almost every facet of this second nature, from gleaming skyscrapers, to vivid green lawns, to the 'nationally specific flavour of petro-carbons' (268) that greets Cayce in every country she visits in *Pattern Recognition*. It is this specific engagement with the environment – a heightened awareness of technology's omnipresence and omniscience – that first marked Gibson's style as science-fictional to me.

I would like to conclude this chapter with a close reading of *Pattern Recognition*, identifying strategies and motifs – namely, conspicuous tools, conspicuous reduction, unresolved or ambiguous coincidences and patterns, and hard gloss – that were integral to forming my own repertoire of techniques for writing *Rubik*. These techniques might be broadly organised under the overarching strategy of defamiliarisation/naturalisation that I have just discussed, techniques which are undertaken with a keen awareness that, in our science-fictionalised present, familiarity and habit are tenuous, prone to ruptures, and the uncanny always finds a way to persist. Central to Gibson's utilisation of defamiliarisation and naturalisation is the construction of Cayce's point-of-view. The novel is written from a limited third-person perspective, in which Cayce is the focaliser, and the implementation of the strategies I have outlined above depends upon the representation of a protagonist who is keen enough to notice (and analyse) certain ruptures of uncanniness, but who may be anaesthetised to noticing other potential ruptures, sometimes even toggling between awareness and unawareness. Therefore, Gibson's representation of Cayce Pollard suggested a productive narrative strategy – a protagonist who is a competent image-reader and mapper of postmodernity, who is granted a considerable degree of agency and privilege within postmodernity, but who is also occasionally unaware of, and complicit with, the ways in which she herself is mapped.

Close Reading: *Pattern Recognition*

In *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce is obsessed with an anonymous film that is uploaded in random segments on the Internet. The footage has spawned a subculture; followers of the footage are known as 'footageheads' and the segments are attentively analysed and debated in Internet message boards such as Fetish:Footage:Forum (F:F:F), to which Cayce is a popular contributor. Cayce is hired by Hubertus Bigend to find the maker of the footage, and she eventually discovers that the maker is Nora Volkova, and the film is distributed by her twin sister, Stella. Stella and Nora are the orphaned nieces of a powerful Russian businessman. In the explosion that killed the twins' parents, a T-shaped firing pin of a Claymore mine was flung into Nora's skull, and remains permanently wedged there. It is after this traumatic event that Nora begins creating the footage. In a poignant scene of the novel, Cayce watches Nora create a new segment:

> 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 only truly present when focused on this screen.

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

The wound at the centre of *Pattern Recognition* is 9/11. In a chapter titled 'Singularity', Cayce 'unforgets' (134) the day of the attacks on the World Trade Center.[2] She recalls how watching the twin towers burn was 'like watching one of her own dreams on television. Some vast and deeply personal insult to any ordinary notion of interiority', '[a]n experience outside culture' (137). This is also the day that Cayce's father, Win Pollard, a security expert with some connections to American intelligence, disappears – due for a meeting within the vicinity of the attacks, he was never confirmed to have actually arrived, and Cayce is haunted by the uncertainty of his fate. Hollinger says that the event of 9/11 'accounts for the pervasive tone of low-level post-apocalypticism that is so much a part of the novel's texture' ('Stories' 463). Indeed, for Cayce and thus for the novel, 9/11 represents a singular moment of uncanniness, irrevocable estrangement. It is the site of an ultimate rupture, a rupture that, like the wound that bisects Nora's skull, can only be imperfectly smoothed over.

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[2] Jason Haslam says that 'the description of 9/11 in the novel […] focuses […] on the New York attacks rather than the Pentagon attack or the Pennsylvania crash' (95). I am aware that the event known as 9/11 encompassed more than the violence that occurred at the World Trade Center, and in focusing my analysis, as Gibson's novel does, on the World Trade Center attacks, I do not wish to suggest that this is the only event that comprises 9/11.

It is in the wake of the wound of 9/11 that Gibson is able to defamiliarise – makes conspicuous, makes strange – aspects of postmodernity that are often nearly invisible.

9/11 represents an instance when everyday tools have broken down and have suddenly become conspicuous. In particular, the disaster caused the uncanniness of aeroplanes and air travel to re-emerge violently and remain persistently in the foreground, disrupting the utopian faith in technology championed by modernity and Golden Age science fiction. Although Cayce spends much of *Pattern Recognition* in transit – jetting to London, Japan, Moscow, and Paris during the course of the plot – she can no longer travel naively, without some awareness of her fragile safety. The elaborate 'psychic buffer zone' (Gunning 46) erected to distance oneself from the memory of technological threat and danger is made explicit in Gibson's prose, as in this passage, in which Cayce settles in on a first-class British Airways flight, where anything that she might need to attend to her comfort is always within arm's reach:

> She fiddles with the matte alloy buttons on her armrest, converting her bed
> into a lounger. It feels good when it moves: powerful motors devoted to her
> comfort. She settles back in her black sweats (having declined the offer of a
> BA romper suit) and pulls the tartan blanket across her legs, iBook on her
> stomach. Adjusts the snaky fiber-optic reading lamp, with its head like a
> policeman's flashlight. (122)

Cayce's friend Parkaboy, another F:F:F contributor, confesses in an email to Cayce that since 9/11 he has been reluctant to fly, and yet, thanks to 'the sheer level of cosseting' of Air France, 'I haven't until now been very aware of actually doing any [flying]' (310). Indeed, the characters in *Pattern Recognition* are incessantly mobile, undertaking many miles of travel without being 'very aware of actually doing any'. Gibson frequently draws attention to the unnatural silence and velocity of technologised movement: Cayce sits in 'the crepuscular calm of a Tokyo taxi' (126) and later enters a Hitachi elevator with an '[e]erily smooth ascent, the speed of it pulling blood from her head' (126). Characters seem swaddled in technology, transported across the world in clean womb-like vessels. Although these scenes are often lovingly described, the novel just as often represents the psychic buffer zone as an absurd amount of coddling, lulling passengers into sinister docility:

> The [airline] cabin is like some optimally comfy cube-farm, a cluster of
> automated, supremely ergonomic workstation enclosures. It feels as though,

with just a little more engineering, they could simultaneously tube-feed you
and tidily exhaust the resulting wastes. (120)

The reader, via Cayce's point-of-view, becomes so acclimated to the rituals that
constitute the psychic buffer zone that Gibson can begin a new section with, simply,
'She wakes to the offer of a hot washcloth' (172), and the reader is instantly able to
extrapolate that Cayce is on a plane. It is no wonder that Cayce spends most of the
novel in that paradoxical, over-rested state of exhaustion known as jet lag. Cayce's
friend Damien has a theory that jet lag is actually the delay of the soul, catching up to
one's travelling body: 'Souls can't move that quickly, and are left behind, and must
be awaited, upon arrival, like lost luggage' (1). Certainly, Gibson's descriptions of
travel, with their overemphasis on silence and comfort, seem to insinuate that there is
some perception being numbed, withheld like the soul, but Cayce and the reader
cannot help but be aware of some threat outside the periphery, a threat which cannot
be satisfactorily cancelled out after 9/11. The psychic buffer zone of air travel is no
longer consistently *neutral* to Cayce – she can perceive the air cabin as both a
comforting place of rest and a sinister cube farm; the psychic buffer zone is both
familiar and strange. Travel, and thus technology, is simultaneously conspicuous and
inconspicuous to Cayce. Gibson's construction of a protagonist who toggles in and
out of awareness of these psychic buffer zones, which attempt to (but cannot quite)
anaesthetise her to the prevailing uncanniness of technology, was a suggestive
strategy for my own fiction.

But the physical tools of technology are not the only features of postmodernity
which Gibson makes conspicuous in *Pattern Recognition*, nor are they the only
things that become conspicuous (or, perhaps more accurately, *return* to being
conspicuous) for Cayce in the wake of 9/11. Gunning says, 'Certain associations
evoke the technological uncanny. Challenges to basic categories of experience – such
as the locomotive's "annihilation of space and time," or the telephone's blurring of
the categories of presence and absence – elicit uncanny reactions' (48). Cayce's
'soul-delay' arguably represents a kind of anxiety over the annihilation of space and
time, a breach of ontological hygiene. Throughout the novel Cayce crosses borders
and time-zones, until she resorts to referring to her own time, 'Cayce Pollard Central
Standard' (220), which indicates when 'sleep is not yet worth attempting' (220) or
'[announces] from some deep organic level that it is time to be unconscious' (279).
Similarly, Parkaboy reports suffering from 'virtual jet lag' (145) when he struggles to

keep up with his day job in the US after many nights of intense online negotiations with a Japanese footagehead. Air travel and global communications challenge the apparently objective category of 'time', revealing that time is an arbitrary concept agreed upon by consensus. But Gibson represents Cayce as a protagonist who grapples with many increasingly conspicuous challenges to taken-for-granted categories – even the very notion of 'difference', the lines between categories. In *Pattern Recognition*, the uncanny often emanates not directly from technology but from technology's concomitant forces of globalisation, marketing, and late capitalism. Although Cayce benefits from Bigend and Blue Ant's inexhaustible resources, she feels guilty about her complicity in their work, 'in whatever it is that gradually makes London and New York feel more like each other, that dissolves the membranes between mirror-worlds' (194). Throughout the novel, Cayce employs the term 'mirror-world' to describe the little differences between countries, and makes a point of observing them – the prongs on electrical appliances (2), the different weight and balance of telephone sets (2–3), the variety and colour of sugars (21). In London, Cayce notices a 'red double-decker […], registering less as mirror-world than as some Disney prop for Londonland' (52), attesting to the way in which even a cultural artefact in its proper context can appear like a simulacrum – so effectively does marketing reify cultures into symbols. Despite her desperate holding on to difference, even Cayce cannot resist deriving comfort from the sameness imposed by globalisation, at one point in the novel having a meeting at Starbucks since the 'décor somehow fosters emotional neutrality, a levelling of affect' (207). With Cayce, Gibson models a type of character for whom the dissolution of differences and basic categories of experience is conspicuous, a dissolution expedited by postmodernity and, specifically, technology and the capitalist regime – and yet, Cayce is simultaneously aware of her complicity and dependence on the system which furthers the dissolution, and concedes the impossibility of rejecting it entirely.

The erasure, oversimplification, or codification of history is a persistent theme in *Pattern Recognition*, and I have termed Gibson's strategy of drawing attention to these oversimplifications – which are much like the dissolution of differences discussed above – 'conspicuous reduction'. Just as the rupture of 9/11 made air travel technology conspicuous, so too does Gibson use 9/11, via Cayce, to alert the reader to postmodernity's penchant for the reduction of territory into map. Hollinger says that the novel depicts 9/11 as 'an apocalyptic event that cuts us off from the historical

past' ('Stories' 462); for Jason Haslam, it is 'an event outside of causal relations in the political and historical senses, an endlessly iterated tragedy that appeared on a blank canvas and that is, therefore, a repetitive site of trauma' (95). In the chapter 'Singularity', the attacks on the World Trade Center exist almost entirely as an always-already flattened image, a media spectacle – not only is the event immediately broadcast on television but Cayce, failing to detect an anomaly in the routine white noise of New York, initially dismisses the sound of the first plane's impact as staged – 'They must be making a film' (135). The image of 9/11 subsumes Cayce's own recollection of the event, either remembering it on her behalf and insisting on what she *must have* seen ('though she will know she must have seen people jumping, falling, there will be no memory of it' [137]) or contradicting her perception of what happened ('[a]nd what she will retain is that the exploding fuel burns with a tinge of green that she will never hear or see described' [137]). It is perhaps for this reason that Cayce, in her 'unforgetting' of 9/11, fixates not on the details of the attacks themselves but on a 'micro-event' (135) that happened moments before the impact of the first plane, when she watched a petal fall from a dried rose in a SoHo shop display window. As Alex Wetmore says, '[E]ven extremely public events cannot be rendered, in their full complexity, into discourse' (77). Cayce returns again and again to the image of the rose petal falling, a private image separate from public discourse. The falling rose petal is an image that stands outside of, and cannot be slotted into, the oversimplified historical narrative of 9/11.

Phillip E. Wegner reminds us that Cayce does not exhibit an allergic reaction to national icons except for those of Nazi Germany – as Gibson writes in *Pattern Recognition*, 'The national symbols of her homeland don't trigger her, or so far haven't. And over the past year, in New York, she's been deeply grateful for this. An allergy to flags or eagles would have reduced her to shut-in status' (264). In his analysis of this passage, Wegner draws attention to 'the dark potential hinted at in the phrase "or so far haven't"' (197). Link remarks that Cayce tends to react to brands that 'if not actively engaged in the colonisation of the local, share an intimate codependency with twentieth-century warfare' (216), while Haslam suggests that Cayce's allergy 'seems to be caused by the way in which global capitalist branding separates the logo from any form of material connection to its product in a *mise en abyme* of product referentiality' (93). That 'dark potential' which Wegner detects – that Cayce's allergy has *so far* not been triggered by flags and eagles, but may be

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triggered in the future – suggests that the national icons of the USA might soon succumb to the violently nationalistic connotations and 'scary excess of design talent' (Gibson 263) that Cayce perceives in the icons of Nazi Germany. Wegner, Link, and Haslam are among a multitude of commentators who have noted Gibson's juxtaposition of 9/11 and the processes of global marketing. Just as 'the logo functions here as a sign that conceals violence and facilitates repression in the global economy by standing in for and reducing the complexities of the culture it represents' (Link 215), so too does the official narrative of 9/11, like a logo, stand in for and reduce the complexities of the event it represents – appropriated by US-American nationalist discourse to justify the War on Terror, and, as Lynne S. Arnault writes, dichotomising the world into 'good guys' and 'bad guys' (174). In its endless media iterations, in its repeated invocations in nationalist rhetoric, 9/11 becomes like 'the void that is Tommy Hilfiger' (Haslam 98), a brand to which Cayce is most reactive – 'the null point, the black hole […] beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul' (Gibson 18). It is no wonder that Cayce, in the aftermath of 9/11, is finally moved to cry only when she realises, while putting up posters of her missing father, that she 'had never […] seen one face pasted over another' (186). The victims of 9/11 are not interchangeable, not just faceless numbers subsumed into a narrative of heroic sacrifice for American freedom and democracy. The victims are victims, 'to be mounted in the yearbook of the city's loss' (186). Gibson constructs Cayce as a protagonist who clings to memories that, like the falling rose petal, complicate or exist outside of the oversimplified national narrative of 9/11. More broadly, when taking my own fiction into consideration, Gibson offered a useful exemplar for a protagonist who is sensitive to, and attempts to resist, official narratives that serve to reduce complexity. Much like the tools made conspicuous through ruptures and breakdowns in habitual use, the erasures and oversimplifications facilitated by media culture and capitalism in postmodernity re-emerge as conspicuous to Cayce in the wake of 9/11.

To be clear, Gibson's novel does not suggest that 9/11 was *caused by* capitalism and globalisation, nor does it make a simplistic comparison between the USA and Nazi Germany. As Link maintains:

> […] *Pattern Recognition* makes no explicit claim to any kind of fundamental or deliberate causal connection between brand culture, the latest evolution of

corporate culture into the global, and the twentieth-century history of warfare. […] Rather than make any open claims about the connection between the attacks and the expansion of American global capital, the novel simply juxtaposes images of violence and of the expansion of capital over and over again, positing the recognisable pattern as a newly urgent question while refraining from claims of any kind of direct causality. (216)

A key narrative strategy of the novel is to establish patterns which may or may not be meaningful. As Cayce is increasingly plagued by surveillance, break-ins, and incursions on her privacy during the course of her search for Nora and Stella, she worries that she is succumbing to apophenia, 'the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things' (115). The term 'pattern recognition' is raised several times in the novel – to describe Cayce's work as a coolhunter, spotting the next profitable trend before it emerges; to describe the footageheads' quest to make sense of the disparate segments of footage; and in Bigend's speech about the disappearance of the future and the volatility of 'now': 'We have only risk management. The spinning of a given moment's scenarios. Pattern recognition' (57). Gibson has written a novel rife with patterns and coincidences which may not be linked or imply any kind of causality. While the events of the novel do end up coming together in a relatively neat resolution – most of Cayce's paranoid suspicions are eventually seen to have been justified and almost all of the plot's loose ends are spelled out in the novel's third-to-last chapter 'A Toast to Mr Pollard' – the potential for a narrative in which patterns and coincidences do not resolve is hinted at through Nora's footage. In theorising the meaning and origins of the footage, F:F:F is divided into two general schools of thought: the Completists, who believe that the footage belongs to an already completed work; and the Progressivists, who believe that the footage is a work-in-progress, with each segment released as it is finished. Wetmore claims that neither the Progressivists nor the Completists turn out to be correct as they both assume that the footage will, at some point, be absorbed into a coherent narrative structure. 'Drawing on the work of Lev Manovich, it seems more likely that […] the fragments […] correspond instead to the alternative logic of the database' (78), Wetmore says, and then, quotes Manovich: 'As a cultural form, the database represents the world as a list of items, and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events)' (78). While Gibson's novel ultimately cannot

resist the impulse of pattern recognition, the novel still possesses some 'database'-like characteristics, in which the reader can perceive coincidences, patterns, and recurring motifs in the data without any explicit, intentional connection or easily apprehended meaning. For example, Link notes one interesting coincidence: 'the North and South Twin Towers, with T-shaped airplanes lodged in their structures, are clearly echoed in the makers of the footage, twin "two hers" whose initials are N and S, one of whom has been traumatised by a T-shaped object' (210). Cayce's repeated encounters with popstar Billy Prion throughout the novel – Cayce sights him in a cafe in London, on the plane to Tokyo, and in advertisements for a product called Bikkle – are another example. Whether or not these sorts of coincidences produce an intended message, they contribute to a subtext of motifs or patterns in the novel, an accumulation of coincidences and juxtapositions that can have a claustrophobia-inducing effect. As I developed my fiction, it became helpful to think of my stories as neither discrete units nor a continuous narrative, but as taking the form of a database, a list of observations – albeit one that does not strictly conform to Manovich's definition – with interconnections between the stories formed not just by the continuation of particular narratives but by the recurrence of motifs. In this way, the stories became more like unresolved patterns, struggling to move forward in linear time, revisiting and retracking old ground, stuck in something like Hollinger's 'endless end-times of the future-present'.

   The distinction between what can be called a defamiliarising *strategy* of Gibson's text and a *theme* or *motif* observable to the characters within the world of the novel is a difficult one: Hollinger's notion of the science-fictionalised present, after all, casts us as readers of our present, just as Cayce is a reader of *her* (and Gibson's) present. The creation of unresolved and ambiguous coincidences and patterns in *Pattern Recognition* manifests both at the level of style (a strategy enacted by Gibson) and at the level of plot (recurring motifs within the novel's diegesis). As Wegner says, 'Gibson's novel is at once centrally about and an example of the literary practice he names here pattern recognition' (187). Gibson has thus written a protagonist who must perform the same duties as the reader: Cayce is trying to assimilate facts and coincidences into a pattern or narrative that she can understand; in fact, pattern recognition is literally her vocation. The characters in my fiction, like Cayce, are overwhelmed by systems of representation, an excess of data, and accordingly, they perceive (and read) their world as a kind of fiction and attempt to extrapolate their

position within it. Cayce's initial dismissal of the impact of the first plane – 'They must be making a film' (135) – is telling in this regard. Hardly anything is accepted as *just is*, but rather as a construction or conspiracy. In this way, the characters attempt to shore up their autonomy, casting themselves in the centre of a narrative – even if they *are* the target of a conspiracy over which they have no control, at least they can exercise *some* control by figuring out the conspiracy. Cayce herself acknowledges the egocentricism of paranoia and conspiratorial thinking as she speculates whether Billy Prion's presence on her flight to Tokyo is meaningful: 'Only, she decides, if she thinks of herself as the centre, the focal point of something she doesn't, can't, understand. […] Paranoia […] was fundamentally egocentric, and every conspiracy theory served in some way to aggrandise the believer' (124). Like Cayce, the protagonists in my fiction are keen image-readers (and, like Nora, some protagonists are additionally image-makers or image-manipulators) – they are positioned, because of their profession or past traumas, as *readers* who both look for and are circumscribed by patterns within their science-fictionalised present. They both *read* and *are read*.

Just as patterns and coincidences are both a stylistic decision on Gibson's part and a recurring motif within the plot, conspicuous reduction reoccurs throughout *Pattern Recognition* and in many areas of Cayce's life. Cayce is dimly aware that her affluence and privilege is founded upon a concealed structure of ugliness. As she passes over a dirty canal in Camden, close to Damien's immaculate apartment, Cayce is reminded of a childhood trip to Disneyland, when 'Pirates of the Caribbean had broken down and they'd been rescued by staff wearing hip-waders over their pirate costumes, to be led through a doorway into a worn, concrete-walled, oil-stained subterranean realm of machinery and cables, inhabited by glum mechanics' (110). The dirty Camden canal remains one of the rare images of decay and waste in the novel; like a Gothic heroine, Cayce surveys the rubbish in the water – a discarded grey condom, a can of lager, something unidentifiable caught in builder's plastic – and 'shudders and turns away' (110). These encounters with unclean, 'behind-the-scenes' areas are deeply unsettling for Cayce. Perhaps they are forced reminders of her complicity in the capitalist regime, reminders that can otherwise be confined to brief flashes, such as when, while evaluating a logo, she '[b]riefly […] imagines the countless Asian workers who might, should she say yes, spend years of their lives applying versions of this symbol to an endless and unyielding flood of footwear'

(12). Even Cayce's beloved footage, as she eventually discovers, depends on a rendering farm made up of white-collar prisoners. Link, quoting Freud, points out that another definition of the uncanny is 'when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolises' (215), and perhaps what is unsettling for Cayce is that an oversimplified image of reality – one that conceals the labour or suffering of others, one that conceals waste and excess, one that conceals history – now functions as the official reality. Just as 'the city seemed to have acquired a very specific amnesia with regard to [the whereabouts of Win Pollard]' (187), so too does late capitalism require consumers to operate with a very specific amnesia, to forget the discomforting truth about the origins of products, so that they may be resold 'simulacra of simulacra of simulacra' (17) every season. The theme of historical erasure appears again when, following a meeting with Blue Ant in which Dorotea Benedetti burns a hole in Cayce's very rare Buzz Rickson's jacket, Cayce uses Blue Ant to procure an identical jacket while she is in Tokyo. As she wears her new jacket, 'she reaches to touch the place where the tape should be, but it isn't there. No hole. History erased via the substitution of an identical object' (194). But like 9/11, the memory of what is behind the theme park ride – of what is in the canal near Damien's apartment, of what is behind the logo, of what labour is driving the footage – cannot be satisfactorily erased. Cayce will always be compelled to reach for the invisible hole in her jacket.

As argued above, Gibson's writing operates with a heightened awareness of technology's omniscience and omnipresence. In *Pattern Recognition*, benign objects, clothing, surfaces, and buildings are described with an attentive consciousness of their costly, manufactured nature; just about everything belongs to a context of technologised global production. Thus Cayce signs the back of a Blue Ant credit card with 'an expensive German rollerpoint' (117); at Damian's apartment, she 'runs tap water through a German filter, into an Italian electric kettle' to make a mug of 'some imported Californian tea substitute' (3); her seat on a British Airways flight resembles 'a coracle of Hexcel and teak-finish laminate' (120). Lee Konstantinou has labelled Gibson's style of writing as '[s]ocio-economic science fiction, part of a growing subgenre that not only critiques economic and marketing theories but also uses these theories as the basis for exercises in worldbuilding' (qtd. in Miller Jr. 103). With all the 'hyped-up name-dropping' (Jameson, 'Fear and Loathing' 108) that occurs in *Pattern Recognition* – the incessant mention of brand names and

department stores, surfaces which are never simply plastic or wood but 'acrylic' (302) or 'lacquered, unstained apple-ply' (1) – Gibson establishes our contemporary late-capitalist environment as a kind of estranging, alien world. It is a world of surfaces described with an almost hyper-verisimilitudinous relish, so that, despite their commonness, they appear uncanny, belonging to a second nature. Hollinger notes how 'cyberpunk landscape[s] [tend] to be choked with the debris of both language and objects; as a sign-system, it is overdetermined by a proliferation of surface detail which emphasises the "outside" over the "inside"' ('Cybernetic' 212). This proliferation of surface detail gives *Pattern Recognition* what I have come to think of as 'hard gloss' – spaces seem perpetually new and sleek, like an expensive catalogue. This hard gloss aesthetic is evident in the passages of the airline cabin, with the 'matte-alloy buttons' on Cayce's armrest, and even in the passage which opens this chapter, with the 'roasts illuminated like newly minted media faces' and the barista's 'massive, mask-like Italian spectacles'. Hard gloss, however, like Cayce's replacement Buzz Rickson's, cannot completely erase the memory of trauma or the exploitative processes of production. This is a hard gloss that imperfectly conceals what is underneath; hard gloss seems, instead, to announce to the protagonist that something is *being* concealed, oversimplified.

Many of the spaces and surfaces in *Pattern Recognition* are so coated in gloss, so fixed in a seeming permanent state of newness, that Cayce speculates, while passing a roadworks site in Tokyo, that she has 'never actually seen soil emerge from any incision they might make in the street' (130). But what is crucial to Gibson's hard gloss aesthetic is that, in *Pattern Recognition*, the human characters tend to mimic that same hard glossiness they perceive in the environment around them. For example, Cayce emerges from a salon after having her hair cut and styled, 'some paradoxical state between sleek and tousled. Anime hair, rendered hi-rez' (141). Furthermore, much has been made about the nickname that Damien gives Cayce's monochromatic, minimalistic items of clothing – Cayce Pollard Units, or CPUs, the same acronym given to the Central Processing Unit in a computer (Link 212; Miller Jr. 111–12). Cayce's CPUs 'are either black, white, or grey, and ideally seem to have come into this world without human intervention' (8). Damien himself, according to Cayce, possesses 'some carefully insulated module of immaturity in him' (2), further invoking the language of computers and assembly-line production. Cayce and the other characters are constructed as technologised subjects; they are as much a part of

second nature as the glossy commodities arrayed in Damien's apartment. Miller Jr. suggests that Cayce's talent for determining a logo's success 'demonstrates the manner in which the human becomes like a computer: by means of Cayce's internalisation of the commodity system and its attendant system of advertising, Cayce becomes capable of *processing* trademarks, logos, and brand names' – like a computer, Cayce can 'intuitively perform the massive endeavours' of human teams of market-researchers and designers in an instant (111). Perhaps one might wonder if blood would emerge from any incision made in Cayce, Damien, or any character in *Pattern Recognition*. Gibson's narrative strategy of representing Cayce according to computer terminology is not only demonstrative of the way in which technology has 'reconfigured' (Goody 1) the human, but the naturalised conception of technology as sleek, efficient, adept, capable. Cayce is, to employ the Heideggerian concept, a tool that works.

Gibson's strategy of ascribing human characters with those hard, glossy characteristics of commodities, appliances, and surfaces was a promising starting point for constructing and developing my own characters. Such a strategy complicates the ontological hygiene of the human, characterising the human as co-constituted by technology – improvable, modifiable, fit for the future. However, as I progressed with my fiction, I discovered that my characters tended not to be as close to the cutting edge as Cayce: they were often, to use marketing terminology, laggards rather than early adopters. They did not possess Cayce's capacity for prediction or her proficiency for finding information and deploying the resources at her disposal. In the first chapter of *Pattern Recognition*, Gibson describes Cayce and Damien: 'Both have been very good at what they've done, neither seeming to have the least idea why' (2). Cayce and many of the characters in *Pattern Recognition* appeared to me, somehow, to be *too* good at what they do – they are *too* competent at navigating postmodernity, *too* adept at cognitive mapping. Gibson says that Cayce's success as a coolhunter is her 'being willing to ask the next question. She's met the very Mexican who first wore his baseball cap backward, asking the next question' (32), but, unlike many of the characters in my fiction, Cayce *knows* what questions to ask at all; she understands the protocols of interacting with baristas, artefact collectors, marketers, hotel concierges, flight attendants, designers, and so on, so that she can leverage information and have her needs met. Cayce is part of a world in which she is meant to belong; *Pattern Recognition* is ultimately a record of Cayce's successful

marshalling of information and technology to bolster her agency. I began to designate Cayce as belonging to a class of characters I called 'ahead-of-the-curve', in contrast to the 'behind-the-curve' characters that typically occupied my fiction. If technology persists, as Gunning suggests, in hailing our present as an imagined future, then Cayce's construction according to the language of technology might also implicate her in a utopian future; she is a kind of 'soothing image' of technology. The novel ultimately conserves an idea of the human as something that can be managed and known – that can, with the right resources and knowhow, be more often the mapper than the one who is mapped.

Conclusion

The conception of the present as 'science-fictionalised', as well as the oscillation between defamiliarisation/estrangement and naturalisation performed by science-fiction texts, has been vital to the development of my fiction. As Donna Haraway says, '[T]he boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion' (191), and, like the process of viewing an optical illusion, I wanted the characters in my fiction to continually toggle between being habituated to their reality and being uncertain/estranged in relation to it. The characters grapple with continuous ruptures to familiarity and must find ways to bear the persistence of the uncanny and the proliferation of potentially meaningless patterns and data. Although *Pattern Recognition* provided the crucial impetus for my project, I found myself resisting the depiction of the globalised, hyper-capitalist totality of postmodernity – an environment which Gibson so adeptly represents in *Pattern Recognition*. My characters inhabited a smaller world than Cayce; while Cayce jetsetted about the world, deftly travelling from air cabin to hotel room, my characters were experiencing the uncanny much closer to home. They not only inhabited a smaller world than Cayce, but were themselves smaller. As my fiction became increasingly concerned with the impossibility of cognitive mapping and the fear of obsolescence, I found that Gibson's hard gloss aesthetic was not always an appropriate narrative device.

CHAPTER 2: INTOLERABLE SPACES

> One initially strange thing about *Inception* is how *undreamlike* the dreams in the film are.
>
> —Mark Fisher, 'The Lost Unconscious: Delusions and Dreams in
> *Inception*' (40)

Introduction

Veronica Hollinger says that we live in a present 'which perceives itself *as already extending into the future*' ('Future/Present' 217), but also that the future is 'no longer […] the site of meaningful difference' ('Stories' 453). In these statements, Hollinger evokes Fredric Jameson's claim in 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' that 'our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present' (20), which Jameson considers one of the chief characteristics of postmodernity. The reduction of temporality to an endless present is a process that Jameson believes is assisted by multinational capitalism and media culture, whose function 'is to relegate such recent historical experiences as rapidly as possible into the past' ('Postmodernism' 20) and expedite the 'replacement of the historical by the nostalgic' ('Progress' 150). As argued in Chapter 1, Jameson's project of cognitive mapping is one response to the difficulty that Hollinger describes of extrapolating a meaningfully different future from the social confusion of the present. Cognitive mapping is an attempt to situate oneself in relation to the unrepresentable totality of late capitalism; it 'seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system' (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 54).

In *Pattern Recognition*, Gibson offers a vision of the present which is configured not only by technology but also by commodity culture; in that sense, it is not so different to the near-futures of the science-fiction narratives for which Gibson is best known. M. Keith Booker says, '[I]n what may be one of Gibson's most important contributions to the genre of science fiction, technology in his work always costs *money*. Technological marvels occur readily in Gibson's world, but only if someone […] is available to foot the bill' (69). While the purported 'realism' of Gibson's work draws both 'praise […] for its believability as a projection from the present' and criticism 'for failing to imagine conditions that differ substantially from those

already in place' (Booker 72), it nonetheless speaks to the limits of extrapolation – in particular, the difficulty of imagining a culture without capitalism, as late capitalism overrides any sense of disjunction between present and future. The novum of *Pattern Recognition* – defined by William Stephenson as 'a thing not found in the world of the reader' which 'is never just an incidental object but lays down the unfamiliar norms on which the narrative world is based and establishes the SF text's distance from the reader's reality' (225) – is Cayce's allergy to brands and trademarks, but the distance between *Pattern Recognition* and the reader's reality is minimal: Cayce's allergy is symptomatic of the saturation of signs and logos in our contemporary late-capitalist context; although her allergy is not strictly part of our empirical reality, its existence is not necessarily based on unfamiliar norms.

Pattern Recognition, in undertaking a cognitive mapping of the present, was instructive for my creative practice because it locates the terror of contemporary reality in the omnipotence of technology and commodity culture, an omnipotence that is at its most terrifying when situated in benign, taken-for-granted objects, and that is most apparent when our elaborate psychic buffer zones are exposed or disrupted. *Pattern Recognition* compounds this omnipotence through the recurrence of motifs and coincidences, an accumulation of 'patterns' which create an oppressive, paranoid environment – one which is possibly scripted by a narrative that the protagonist unsuccessfully tries to glean, even as she is aware that she is engaging in 'faulty pattern recognition'. While in the previous chapter I characterised this omnipotence as the persistence of the uncanny, Scott Bukatman, by way of Jameson, offers another term that has purchase – 'intolerable spaces'. While Jameson uses the term to describe 'the stucco dwellings, cracked sidewalks, tarnished sunlight, and roadsters' which make up 'the daily life of capitalism' of Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled detective stories ('Progress' 152), Bukatman uses it to refer to the inaccessible spaces created by the computer terminal, which are made of data and operate at a scale that is cognitively incompatible with human perception. In such spaces, the human is obsolete; the space is not designed for humans to inhabit or perceive. The 'intolerableness' of intolerable spaces refers not just to this lack of perception but a loss of dominance and control. Yet, according to Bukatman, science fiction brings these spaces into visibility, restoring the human to a position of mastery.

Cyberpunk is one genre that engages with intolerable spaces. Rob Kitchin and James Kneale define cyberpunk as 'a subgenre of SF which takes information technology as its novum, using it to explore the ways in which manifestations of these new technologies might transform (and are transforming) our societies' (22). Cyberpunk, as Alex Wetmore writes, 'departs from traditional science fiction, which tends to sustain and even reinforce the distinction between human and machine, by espousing a posthumanist perspective that focuses on the means by which information technologies transgress the physical and conceptual boundaries of the human' (71). Referencing the work of Donna Haraway and Veronica Hollinger, Wetmore suggests that cyberpunk is 'interested in the potential for cybernetic technologies to deconstruct the liberal humanist subject and to produce empowered, posthuman identities that overcome the limitations of "biology as destiny"' (72). Thus cyberpunk not only envisions the intolerable spaces of the electronic realm that Bukatman describes, but also explores the impact of technology on the human subject in ways that are at turns celebratory (exploring the possibilities of increased autonomy and agency by merging with technology), cautionary (there are often consequences for merging too closely), and downright anxious (technology decentres the human and creates an intolerable loss of privilege). According to Larry McCaffery, cyberpunk supplies a form of cognitive mapping by attempting 'to find a suitable means for displaying the powerful and troubling technological logic that underlies the postmodern condition' (qtd. in Cavallaro 14). The 'punk' of cyberpunk promises an engagement with marginal identities; the genre 'positions itself as countercultural rather than as politically hegemonic' (McCallum 356) and cyberpunk protagonists are often loners or outsiders who are 'potentially alienated not just from society but from their own minds and bodies' (Nazare 386). With its preoccupation with what Jameson calls dirty realism, 'the traces of mass, anonymous living and using' (*Seeds* 158), cyberpunk had useful implications for my fiction, which is similarly concerned with the anonymous lives and users for whom technology is both mundane and threatening. Although *Pattern Recognition* is arguably a cyberpunk text, it posed limitations for my research because of its tendency towards 'gloss' rather than 'dirt', towards a centre comprised of well-resourced ahead-of-the-curve characters – the Bigends and Pollards – rather than the margins, towards

domesticating the intolerable both in Gibson's construction of a glossy surface reality but also with its reassuring narrative closure.[3]

Christopher Nolan's 2010 feature film *Inception* emerges from the same milieu as *Pattern Recognition*, sharing the latter's utilisation of gloss and ahead-of-the-curve characters, and an inability to imagine a cultural reality without capitalism; but, with a plot that evades narrative closure and leaves some ambiguity surrounding the reliability of its protagonist's world, *Inception* goes a little further in engaging with the intolerable. The novum of *Inception* is technology that enables people to share dreams. The dream-sharing technology was first developed as part of a military training program, but its applications have now expanded to the corporate realm: CEOs can hire 'extractors' to plunder secrets from their rivals' minds, or they can have their own minds secured against such an attack. One extractor is the fugitive Dom Cobb, who is hired by Saito, the head of a powerful corporation, to plant an idea into the mind of Robert Fischer, the heir to a competing global energy conglomerate. The process of *planting* an idea rather than stealing it, known as inception, is notoriously difficult to perform successfully, because the idea needs to seem self-generated, necessitating that Cobb and his team go deep within the subject's mind, creating dreams within dreams within dreams, in order to plant the most basic version of the idea into Robert Fischer's subconscious. 'You need the simplest version of the idea in order for it to grow naturally in your subject's mind,' as Eames, a member of Cobb's team, explains.

Like Cayce's allergy in *Pattern Recognition*, *Inception*'s novum is naturalised within a present-day setting – except for the dream-sharing technology, the world of *Inception* is very much like ours. Like *Pattern Recognition*, *Inception* represents our world as one in which characters are incessantly mobile, the unique and unusual skills of freelancing professionals are co-opted by capitalist forces, and transitory places – the hotel, the airline cabin – are potent sites of anxiety. The catalysing moment for this chapter was a series of scenes in which Arthur, Cobb's point man, stylishly dispatches some pursuing assailants inside a dream, which calls for sequences of spectacular fight choreography in a rotating hallway, and later on in

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[3] Even the apparently unresolved mystery of Cayce's missing father might be drawn into a cultural narrative that makes sense, with the former Cold War operative's disappearance symbolising 'the watershed moment when the postmodern episteme that had been gestating for decades was finally revealed to have achieved absolute ascendancy over the older, modern, sociocultural paradigm' (Miller Jr. 104).

zero gravity. As Cobb explains earlier in the film, the people who populate dreams are just projections of the subject's unconscious – so when Arthur shoots or strangles his opponents, not only are his actions without repercussions, but his opponents do not correlate to anybody in reality – the projections are just dream filler, making this and many of the film's fight scenes a kind of guilt-free engagement with violence. Nobody actually dies; the projections are just like the endlessly respawning monsters encountered in fantasy video games that are killed for experience or money.

Mark Fisher's comment on the film, which is the epigraph of this chapter, is an observation which has gripped me through my repeated viewings of *Inception*, the development of my fiction, and the formulation of my thesis. The dreams in *Inception* appear undreamlike because they confirm, firstly, the triumph of capitalism over all spheres of life in postmodernity; and secondly, the inescapability of real space in representing the intolerable – two limitations that also appear in cyberpunk. While the genre is often hailed for '[challenging] modernist modes of thought' and destabilising 'the privileged central position occupied by humans' (Kitchin and Kneale 22), such scholars as Claire Sponsler and E.L. McCallum, through their examinations of seminal cyberpunk works like William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, have persuasively argued that cyberpunk narratives are not immune to reinscribing familiar geographies of power and reinforcing human-centric notions of subjectivity and temporality. In these texts, the lauded ability of information technology to transcend distance, geography, and nationality does not diminish the importance of real space, and the technologised protagonists still maintain a familiar, comforting level of humanness. As McCallum writes:

> If some recognisable representation of real space persists in a genre whose emphasis on postmodern aesthetics and cyberspace networks makes it most likely to be able to dispense with the dimension of real space altogether, this persistence should give us pause to consider why this other world's landscape and its subjects look so much like ours. (351)

What Sponsler, McCallum, Hollinger, Bukatman, and Fisher ultimately convey in their analyses is that it is the impulse of narrative to turn what is intolerable into something tolerable, and that, even within genres ostensibly engaged with extrapolation and boundary transgression, it is difficult to imagine a narrative 'that does not simply play out forces now dominant in our society' (Sponsler 642). These 'forces' are not just those in our culture – the postmodern, late-capitalist conjuncture

that produces texts such as *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception*, and the tendency of these narratives to privilege Western (and often male) perspectives – but also the demands of real space itself. As McCallum argues, real space is necessary, firstly, to provide the language to describe intolerable spaces; secondly, to make those spaces visible and able to be mastered; thirdly, to motivate characters; and lastly, to mobilise plot. *Inception*, like the texts in McCallum's analysis, also falls prey to these demands, suggesting cyberpunk's dependence on real space and embodied perception in making sense of the intolerable spaces produced by technology.

However, *Inception* was a fruitful text for me to explore for other reasons. Firstly, by constructing the human mind using technological metaphors, *Inception* reveals that, while technology is indeed capable of producing intolerable anxiety, technology is, perhaps paradoxically, also capable of exercising a comforting, domesticating effect. *Inception* imposes rules and protocols on the unknowable space of the human mind that liken it to a computer, thereby enabling technology to become the metaphor for the human. In this sense the film provides a fantasy of technology as docile, obedient, and understandable, as long as it is used by the right people. Secondly, *Inception* consolidated and expanded the significance and utility of what I began to call 'closed space' in my fiction – this was a small, static, video game-like world within which characters circulated endlessly and futilely, encountering one another constantly, but never quite reaching an 'outside'. *Inception* offered a more literal closed space than *Pattern Recognition*. Thirdly, through its tenuous representation of *the real world*,[4] *Inception* reinforces the notion of reality as an intolerable and untrustworthy space. 'Dream logic' encroaches upon physical reality in small increments, and, furthermore, the objects and landscapes of *Inception*'s *real world* are deceptive, seeming to conspire against Cobb and thwarting the certainty of his mastery over intolerable spaces. While *Pattern Recognition* contains flashes of a similar kind of hostility from benign objects that exacerbates Cayce's paranoia, in *Inception*, these ruptures run deeper, threatening the very ontological stability of Cobb's *real world*. Reality is an intolerable, indeterminate space, and the objects that Cobb uses to verify reality are untrustworthy; and yet, by the film's end, he rejects

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[4] Following the convention established in *Inception and Philosophy: Because It's Never Just a Dream*, a volume of essays about *Inception* edited by David Kyle Johnson, I use the italicised *real world* to refer to the film's outermost level of reality in which Cobb plans the inception of Robert Fischer. 'By the use of the italicised phrase, the authors will not assume that *the real world* actually is the real world' (Johnson 2).

reality as the baseline for meaningfulness; he diverts his gaze from the spinning top, his index of reality, to his children. Just as Jameson's cognitive mapping is a project that accounts for its own futility, so too does Cobb continue to refer to his unreliable totem – he cannot, after all, resist spinning the top one last time. He concedes, as I would come to concede in my own fiction, that there are no other materials besides what we have to construct a version of reality that makes sense.

The Intolerable Spaces of *Inception*

In his essay 'The Cybernetic (City) State: Terminal Space Becomes Phenomenal', Bukatman argues that the computer terminal has created a kind of parallel space, separate from our experiential reality, which operates, according to Jeremy Rifkin, 'below the threshold of human consciousness […] in a time realm that we will never be able to experience' (qtd. in Bukatman 45–46). That is, the electronic realm has supplanted the human by taking responsibility for certain decisions and tasks, but these are executed at a scale that the human mind cannot perceive or comprehend. Bukatman suggests that science fiction is 'grounded in the new "intolerable spaces" of technological culture: the narrative exists to permit that space to exist, but in a manner now susceptible to human perception, comprehension, and intervention' ('Cybernetic' 52). Often, these intolerable spaces are rendered visible and manageable by inserting a human figure into the field to experience and intervene on our behalf (Bukatman, 'Cybernetic' 47). Gibson's *Neuromancer* is such a narrative: the hacker Case enters and navigates through the global computer network that is cyberspace, allowing the reader to have a sense of perceiving a hitherto imperceptible space – one that is made up of data. Thus, rather than depicting terminal spaces as new and incomprehensible, science fiction can instead function as a way to bring the electronic realm under our control again, re-centring the human as the locus of action and drama, making those spaces 'tolerable'.

Inception is one of a cluster of texts that constructs the human mind as an intolerable space similar to that created by a computer terminal. In her analysis of Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, a film which imagines the possibility of the excision of memories about a broken relationship, José van Dijck observes that earlier conceptions of the human mind as a library or archive – from which one can retrieve stored, static memories – have given way, in the current conjuncture, to 'connectionist metaphors' such as 'the networked computer' (353).

Here, the information stored in the human mind is not seen as stable and unchanging as in a library; rather, this metaphor represents memory as continually changing data – 'Memories are effectively rewritten each time they are activated: instead of recalling a memory that has been "stored" some time ago, the brain is forging it all over again in a new associative context' (van Dijck 354). Just as the act of remembering in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* has Joel re-performing each soon-to-be erased memory of his former girlfriend Clementine, so too does Cobb re-perform his memories in *Inception*, most notably in the scene in which Cobb and Ariadne use an elevator to revisit, participate in, and witness different memories that Cobb regrets. Although these depictions are closer to what van Dijck believes is a more accurate conception of memory as like a symphony orchestra, in which the act of remembering is performance, and no two performances are alike, *Inception* ultimately demonstrates that the space created by the computer terminal still remains a persistent paradigm in representing the human mind in fiction. The title of Christof Koch's review of *Inception*, 'A Smart Vision of Brain Hacking', consolidates this connection: it is not a coincidence that Cobb twice compares an idea to a virus, and that, effectively, the central mission of the film is to install an idea into the mind of Robert Fischer. The recurrent image of the dreamers 'hooked up' or 'jacked in' to the dream machine recalls both *Neuromancer* and, as William Anselmi and Sheena Wilson point out, the Wachowskis' 1999 cyberpunk film *The Matrix*. Information in the dream space, as in a computer, is processed more quickly – as Arthur explains to Ariadne, an hour in the dream space is equivalent to only five minutes in *the real world*. Furthermore, when Cobb breaks into Saito's mind to steal his corporation's expansion plans, the information is depicted as A4 sheets of typewritten pages – the brain's information is data that can literally be 'read' in the dream space.

Thus, science fiction's ability to imagine a distinct future is often limited by the persistence of a cultural sense that perception is impossible to separate from our embodied selves. Even as Case from *Neuromancer* loathes physical reality – the body is often contemptuously referred to as 'meat' – and yearns for the disembodied freedom of cyberspace, Gibson must still describe cyberspace according to human limitations of perception and can only make it visible at all by using spatial metaphors. McCallum says that 'one might expect that the physical world would carry little importance' in cybernarratives, but instead, '[r]eal space is a surprisingly important axis for the unfolding of cyberpunk narratives, and spatial metaphors are

inescapably part of the virtual worlds they depict' (350). Although *Inception*'s dream space is purportedly a space in which anything is possible, it is still governed by the logic of physical reality. For example, Cobb explains to Ariadne that people's private information often manifests in the dream space as being hidden inside a secure place, like a bank vault, so, in order to steal people's secrets, one can simply break into the vault. The dream thus functions as a kind of user interface for human memory; the mind can be navigated like real space, and furthermore, problems can be *solved* as if they exist in real space. McCallum observes, 'Travel through reality is crucial to plots that time and again require the characters to go somewhere physically to achieve a narrative aim' (351), and, specifically of *Neuromancer*, 'each assignment requires the accomplishment of a task in real space, […] be it stealing hardware or inserting a key and saying the secret password to a particular terminal' (360–61). The mastery of real space is similarly vital in *Inception*: the dreamers must all be *physically* linked to the same machine in order to share the same dream, which is why the two jobs performed in the film take place on a train and a plane: so the unsuspecting marks – Saito and Fischer respectively – can be surreptitiously attached to the dream machine during the long journey. Furthermore, both Saito and Cobb are motivated to perform the inception because they wish to secure their command over real space: Saito wants to prevent Fischer's company from controlling the majority of the world's energy supply, and Cobb wants to return to the USA to live with his children again. Real space matters – not only to make intolerable spaces describable and visible, but also to supply characters with motives and to mobilise the plot.

Bukatman says that 'virtual reality speaks to the desire to *see* the space of the computer […] and to further figure it as a space one can *move through* and thereby comprehend' ('Terminal' 200). Employing nearly identical terminology, Gibson has stated that *Neuromancer*'s cyberspace was partly inspired by the sensation felt by gamers of there being a 'space behind the screen' (Greenland 7). *Inception* speaks to the desire to see the space behind the 'screen' of the human; Nolan brings the intolerable space of the human mind into visibility by constructing it according to technological metaphors and utilising the protocols of computer programs and video game narratives. The film therefore reveals that the electronic realm is no longer the unknowable space that must be made visible through fiction; instead, we have become so familiar with and habituated to technology that electronic discourse is as much an index of reality as real space is an index of the electronic realm. In the case

of *Inception*, electronic discourse domesticates the unknowable and intolerable space of the human mind. The film infuses dreaming with a kind of technological neutrality, an interface that is consistent for all users. The viewer is offered a comforting subject position, in which technology is obedient and compliant, and enacting mastery of the technology allows one to police the body. The dream-sharing technology consists both of a wired connection between participants and the addition of a powerful sedative formulated by Yusuf, the team's chemist, which, for the Fischer job, is taken orally. The physical body and brain thus becomes part of the dream-sharing technology – the hardware linking Cobb and his team to the dream-interface. Thomas Apperley says that video games are 'understood intertextually' (20), referring not only to the communities that surround games but also to the way in which different games often have similar properties and controls which make them intuitive to the gamer – Apperley gives the example of car-racing games in which the A-button is most often the accelerator. To return to Mark Fisher's claim that the dreams in *Inception* seem undreamlike, one possible reason for this – which Fisher later alludes to in his essay (45) – is because the film standardises the sleeping human body, and the heterogeneous private spaces of dreaming, in a similar way to video games. It posits that all dreaming is experienced in the same way by different people, governed by consistent mechanics – for example, dying is a quick escape from a dream, and real time can be unproblematically calculated into dream time. Ariadne, the newcomer to the team, acts as the audience's proxy – she is drilled in all of these mechanics, until the ceaseless instructional dialogue resembles a game tutorial. When writing my fiction, I wished to engage with the causality dilemma created by our intimate familiarity with technology – where, like the manner in which the barista's emoticon-like spectacles are described in *Pattern Recognition*, the codes of technology come to script lived experience, providing the baseline for reality, instead of the other way around. Cobb's declaration that an idea is like a virus is demonstrative of Sponsler's claim that 'the human and the technological overlap nearly endlessly' (631): the film characterises the human as a computer, the same way the term 'virus' once characterised the computer as a biological organism. While Anselmi and Wilson write that '[i]t is now nature that has become the metaphor for technology,' the relationship seems to be more like Sponsler's endless overlapping: metaphor and referent continually swap places and bleed together, neither clearly preceding the other, creating a breach in ontological hygiene.

Just as the ascendancy of technology has reconfigured conceptions of the human, the ascendancy of the electronic realm has, according to Bukatman, reconfigured real space. In 'The Cybernetic (City) State', Bukatman observes aesthetic developments in artistic practice that have been replicated by the city, a kind of 'new monumentalism' which 'reject[s] any mimesis of the natural world, and instead enact[s] the demise of past and future in favour of timeless, spaceless, and finally inertial present' (44). The new monumentalism of the city is 'grand and empty' (Smithson qtd. in Bukatman 45), characterised by 'an absence of movement which implies a denial of space and time' (Bukatman 44). Bukatman thus declares that we live in 'the age of entropy' (44), with the city standing as a hollow monument to the 'new arena of action which has usurped the urban function' (45) – the electronic realm. Both Bukatman and McCallum point out that Gibson's cyberspace in *Neuromancer* is repeatedly visualised as a city. It is no coincidence that *Inception* employs a similar aesthetic: it simulates the entropic, grand, empty space of the city, most notably on the second dream level, which takes place in an upscale hotel – an uncanny, hollow, non-functioning interior without an exterior, in which projections circulate on their fake day-to-day business. Jameson emblematically described this kind of space in his analysis of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, which he believes 'aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city' ('Postmodernism' 12), where humans are made passive observers and movers fulfilling the trajectories or 'virtual narratives' ('Postmodernism' 13) determined by the building. Another contributing factor to the undreamlikeness of *Inception*'s dreams is that all the dream worlds in *Inception* are designed by characters who are vocationally architects – the dream spaces are replications and permutations of architecture in *the real world*. These designed spaces lack the instability and tenuousness of actual dream spaces, the 'paradoxical Escheresque topologies' (M. Fisher 42), and are instead perceived and experienced identically by all the different dreamers. The levels are necessarily designed as mazes to maximise the amount of time before the subject's projections locate and attack the invading dreamer, and to give the dreamers places to hide from the projections. The architect can also disguise the limits of the dream with 'closed loops' such as infinite staircases. The kind of setting represented by the dreams in *Inception*, which I have come to call 'closed

space',[5] became increasingly instructive for my fiction – the spaces, with their pre-rendered, static feel, created a kind of self-contained video-game 'small world', a claustrophobia-inducing environment in which the same characters cannot help but frequently cross paths.

James Kneale says that accidental and coincidental encounters – the kind of encounters encouraged by a small setting like closed space – are common in 'caper' stories (179), which he defines as narratives which are 'characterised by periodic action and are driven by searches for specific people and things, pushing the characters along specific itineraries' (176). Kneale calls these accidental, coincidental, and often unlikely encounters 'collisions'. The central caper of *Inception* depends on the characters being in close proximity – the better for Cobb's team to feed Saito's idea to Robert Fischer's unconscious. But *Inception*'s collisions do not only occur in the dream world. While Cobb is assembling his team for the Fischer job, he travels to Mombasa to visit Eames, only to find himself chased by henchmen from Cobol Engineering, his employers for the botched extraction job that opens the film. As he runs through the streets, the henchmen seem to constantly proliferate, popping up in Cobb's path. Eventually Cobb arrives in an alleyway between two buildings that seems to become narrower and narrower, until he eventually squeezes through to the street where Saito's car conveniently pulls up to secure Cobb's escape. This sequence is reminiscent of a scene in *Pattern Recognition* when, while in Tokyo, Cayce is accosted by two of Dorotea's henchmen, who try to assault her, only for Cayce to break free and then stumble into Boone Chu, who whisks her away on a motorcycle. Although for some audiences, such collisions seem to test the credibility of the plot, I am interested in how such an abundance of coincidences instead reinforces the sensation of a maze-like, paranoia-inducing environment. If both the dream world and *the real world* are 'mazes' which push characters into constant collisions, who is setting it up? What plot is being served?

Bukatman argues that science fiction attempts to compensate for the obsolescence of the human in the electronic realm – it attempts to restore humans to a dominant position in the field, to make those spaces 'tolerable'. This could really be said to be the function of all narratives in general – to impose order, to affirm mastery over

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[5] 'Closed space' is also a term used in the anime *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* to describe pockets of 'sealed reality' created by the titular protagonist, spaces which have some affinity with video-game spaces and *Inception*'s dream spaces.

something. In *Terminal Identity*, Bukatman distinguishes between two kinds of interfaces, one that 'incorporates some form of *direct sensory engagement* (games and theme parks, for example)' and another which 'operates through an action of *narrativisation* (literature)', and that these 'two distinct modes of subject address […] often occur in tandem' (195). The dream-interface is both direct sensory engagement and an act of narrativisation – in order to implant the three increasingly specific ideas in each level of Robert Fischer's mind ('I will not follow in my father's footsteps' / 'I will create something for myself' / 'My father doesn't want me to be him'), Cobb and his team not only need to create a convincing sensory environment: they also need to create narratives to mobilise these ideas. The 'plot' of the first dream level is the kidnapping of Robert Fischer and his godfather, Peter Browning; in the second, Fischer discovering that Browning was aiding the kidnappers; and in the third, infiltrating a snow fortress which holds Fischer's dying father. Thus Fischer is inducted into a video game–like virtual reality, one which incorporates both sensory engagement and a narrative through which Fischer guides his dream self, progressing through the 'levels' to reach the final dungeon. Fischer's unconscious is, to borrow Bukatman's wording, 'transformed into a *narrative* space' ('Cybernetic' 45). It is through the narrative of the first level that Cobb and his team can hint at Browning's duplicity, so that in the second level Fischer internalises and confirms his suspicions of Browning as if he arrived at the conclusion himself. Fischer becomes accessible and manipulable *through* narrative; to use a technological metaphor, narrative is the user interface which allows Fischer to be read, understood, and altered.

Just as Gibson constructs Cayce as a competent image-reader, Nolan constructs Cobb as one who understands the importance and power of narrative. When he warns Saito about the full implications of inception, he says: 'The seed that we plant in this man's mind will grow into an idea; this idea will define him. It may come to change […] everything about him.' Cobb knows he is not just reprogramming Fischer, but re-authoring him. As Marjorie Worthington writes, the 'increasing encroachment of technology on the human subject reifies the conceptualisation of the human subject as a text ripe for editing, altering, even constructing through the narratives of technology' (110–11). The dream-sharing technology represents a promise of mastery, authorial control. Cobb says, 'It's the chance to build cathedrals, entire cities, things that never existed, things that *couldn't* exist in the real world.' It

promises not just spatial mastery but temporal mastery, for Cobb is able to live out an entire lifetime with his wife in his dreams, while only a few hours pass in *the real world*. The romantic potential of the dream technology is fleeting, however, for what we see primarily in the film is that dreaming has been co-opted by corporations such as Saito's. If Cobb can 'build cathedrals, entire cities', it is not for his own pleasure: it is in the service of some corporate aim. Saito is afraid that Fischer's company will soon 'control the energy supply of half the world. In effect, they become a new superpower. The world needs Robert Fischer to change his mind,' recalling Vivian Sobchack's remark that '[t]he multinationals seem to determine our lives from some sort of ethereal "other" or "outer" space' (108). Mark Fisher argues that *Inception*'s key premise – that inception is difficult to perform successfully because the mind, according to Arthur, 'can always trace the genesis of an idea' – is 'strangely quaint', asking: 'Isn't "inception" what so much late-capitalist cognitive labour is all about?' (45). This is corroborated in *Pattern Recognition* when Bigend says that his task as a marketer and advertiser is 'to make the public aware of something they don't quite yet know that they know – or have them feel that way. Because they'll move on that […]. They'll think they've thought of it first. It's about transferring information, but at the same time about a certain lack of specificity' (63). It seems that what the multinationals decide is best for the people is determined not from an ethereal 'outer' space but an 'inner' space, disguised as a self-generated idea, or the simplest version of an idea – a narrative that one feeds to oneself.

Thus what we see in *Inception* is an anxiety over who controls the narrative – to control the technology is, in effect, to control the narrative; technology is an instrument of narrative. McCallum's question as to why 'this other world's landscape and its subjects look so much like ours' (351) is salient here: this 'other world' of *Inception*, like the world of *Pattern Recognition*, is hardly based on unfamiliar norms. As McCallum says, '[W]e cannot imagine this scale of technology without corporate power' (357). When Cobb's team encounters a group of dream addicts, who spend hours hooked up to the dream machine, Cobb remarks, 'After a while, it becomes the only way you *can* dream,' and, similarly, the film suggests that our 'dreams' – our stories, our narratives – are inevitably scripted by capitalism and the dominant narratives purveyed through cinema and media culture. They set the terms and limits of our extrapolation, and perhaps, even, our identities: the narratives we feed to ourselves. The cyberpunk texts in McCallum's analysis are 'at heart […]

organised by humanist, Western assumptions about ordering the world through individualist, rational subjectivity, striving for mastery from a single coherent, even transcendent, vantage point' (367), and perhaps one can make the same criticism of *Inception*, which homogenises dreaming into a generic enterprise, supposing that everybody's dreams are Hollywood-style action flicks. The conventional narratives sold at each level of Fischer's unconscious are mimicked by the orderly narrative sold to the film's audience members, who are granted a coherent, stable vantage point. As Mark Fisher points out, 'The four different reality levels remain distinct, just as the causality between them remains well-formed' (42). Fisher draws particular attention to the scene in which Ariadne causes a dream space, based on a Parisian streetscape, to fold in on itself: he writes that 'she's behaving more like the CGI engineer who's creating the scene than any dreamer. This is a display of technical prowess, devoid of any charge of the uncanny' (40). Fisher's critique might also apply to Arthur's zero-gravity fight sequence referenced at the beginning of this chapter – a sequence which, while spectacular, is too choreographed and technically proficient to appear dreamlike; the walls and the floor may change places, but it is still the same hallway that Ariadne designed. While Cobb marvels that the dream space is 'the chance to build cathedrals' I believe that the true pleasure of the dream space, the one the film ultimately sells, is the ability to be an action hero, to be part of a spectacle of explosions and gunfire and *Matrix*-like acrobatics without any of the consequences or moral guilt of the real world. Fisher writes, 'An unsympathetic viewer might think that the entirety of *Inception*'s complex ontological structure had been built to justify clichés of action cinema' (40). It is indeed striking how closely *Inception*'s dream spaces resemble Hollywood action films: the human mind is just a stylish upgrade of real space, where it is suggested that the only defence against invasion is to 'militarise' your unconscious as Fischer does – to populate your mind with gun-wielding soldiers. But it is only deferring the inevitable, for your imaginary police force is still constrained by reality's paradigms. They are outgunned and outsmarted by Cobb's team; they still succumb to the failings of 'meat'. *Inception* ultimately envisions yet another intolerable space which is domesticated by a Western, human-centric narrative.

This desire for the comforting domestication of an intolerable space is nowhere more apparent than in the film's attitude towards characters who demonstrate a deeper merging with technology. In her analysis of Gibson's cyberpunk oeuvre,

Sponsler argues that Gibson's protagonists 'fit the well-known mould of the free-willed, self-aware, humanist subject' (637). Protagonists such as Case from *Neuromancer*, Sponsler says, 'are the characters who are the least invaded by technology. Without exception, they are all resolutely "human," not least of all in their vulnerability' (637–38). Cobb is also a Gibsonian cyberpunk hero in this regard: his continued visions of his children constantly remind the audience of his vulnerability but also anchor him to *the real world*, keeping his mind tethered to his *real* body. Cobb is an autonomous, self-aware subject; he upholds that 'strangely quaint' (perhaps *modernist*) notion that the mind knows itself so well that it can always trace the genesis of an idea. Cobb's use of the dream technology never compromises his integrity as a liberal humanist subject in a way that would make him unrelatable to the assumed viewer, whose subjectivity, like that of Gibson's assumed reader, is 'reassuringly reaffirmed rather than threatened' (Sponsler 638). The film provides two sets of subjects who merge with the dream technology in what is deemed an 'unacceptable' way: the first is offered when Cobb, Eames, and Saito recruit Yusuf in Mombasa. Yusuf leads Cobb, Eames, and Saito to the locked basement below his laboratory, where twelve people are sleeping, all hooked up, sharing the same dream. According to Yusuf, the group comes to the basement for three or four hours at a time, translating to about forty hours in the dream space each day, a level of immersion which makes Cobb visibly uncomfortable. When Eames asks, 'They come here every day to sleep?' A man watching over the sleepers replies, 'No. They come to be woken up. The dream has become their reality. Who are you to say otherwise, sir?' Through Cobb's discomfort and recoiling, and the sleepers' position in the *basement* – the film persistently associates these lowest levels of buildings with repressed darkness, as in the scene of Ariadne and Cobb in the elevator of memories – the sleepers' merging with the dream technology is constructed as disturbing and 'Other'. 'Their' addiction is presented in opposition to Cobb's addiction; 'they' are meant to be where Cobb *could* end up if he is not careful enough. That the scene takes place in Mombasa is also significant: the basement sleepers are marked as Other both through their nationality and their perceived over-engagement with technology. A similar kind of racialised characterisation is also at play in *Pattern Recognition*, in which Cayce becomes aware of a group of Japanese footageheads known as Mystic, who discover that the footage is steganographically encoded. While in Tokyo, Cayce, with the help of Parkaboy and another F:F:F user,

deceives one member of Mystic, Taki, into handing over a code recovered from a segment of footage. Afterwards, feeling dimly guilty for what she has done to Taki, Cayce reads an email from Parkaboy: 'Darryl says that the highest level of play, for techno-obsessives, is always and purely about information itself, and he thinks that Mystic may have battened on the footage not in a footagehead way but simply for the sake of solving a puzzle that no one else had solved' (169). Even though Cayce, a white American woman, is herself constructed according to technological metaphors throughout the narrative, she is still able to retain her humanness via her emotional connection with the footage; hers is not a transgressive relationship with technology that alienates the reader. Meanwhile, the narrative suggests that the Japanese group Mystic cannot possibly be interested in the footage for emotional fulfilment – to them, the footage is just 'information'; their deep engagement with technology and their computer-like characterisation become the basis of their racialised dehumanisation.[6] The fear of merging too closely with technology is, in these texts, conflated with marginalised 'Other' bodies. Cayce is the comforting Western human (inter)face for the reader, and Cobb, the masculine Western console cowboy a la Case from *Neuromancer*, is the familiar human (inter)face for the viewer in *Inception* – they both represent 'acceptable', well-managed technological merging. Both *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception* reinscribe the same notions of who may qualify as 'human' – and who may occupy the centre of the narrative – as our social reality in the West.

    Inception provides another warning lesson on merging too closely with technology in Mal, Cobb's deceased wife. Like the Dixie Flatline construct in *Neuromancer*, Mal persists after death: she lives on as a projection in Cobb's dreams. Mal is deemed a faulty technologised subject because, like the basement sleepers, she came to prioritise dreaming over reality. As Cobb tells Ariadne, he and Mal were exploring the concept of a dream within a dream, and eventually ended up building a life for themselves in Limbo, the lowest level of dreaming. Mal had 'locked

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[6] In her analysis of *Neuromancer*, McCallum questions the difference in characterisation between the Dixie Flatline, a deceased human mind saved on a ROM who advises and converses with Case, and the Kuang, a Chinese program which Case uses when hacking the Tessier-Ashpool mainframe. McCallum writes: 'Given the odd ontological status of the Dixie Flatline, which is a human's mind recorded as a computer program, it is remarkable that the Kuang does not exhibit a subjectivity of its own; we must wonder whether the line between the Kuang and Dixie is not simply a racial distinction rather than an ontological one, given that the Kuang demonstrates a kind of cyberspace agency, a sense of knowing where to go and what to do that could be indicative of some form of consciousness' (363 n15).

something away, something deep inside her; a truth that she had once known, but chose to forget,' leading Cobb to implant a death wish in Mal's mind so that they could return to *the real world*. This idea, persisting in Mal's mind, leads her to commit suicide and frame Cobb for her death. Mal is 'the antagonist double and the grief object' combined in one character (M. Fisher 42), a 'demonic presence' and a '*femme fatale*' (Vukovic and Petkovic n. pag.). After death, she autonomously appears during Cobb's extraction jobs, sabotaging his missions and even attacking Ariadne and Robert Fischer. Cobb comes to realise towards the end of the narrative that his projection of Mal is 'just a shade' of his real wife. As Kresimir Vukovic and Rajko Petkovic note, Mal's name is derived from the Latin word *malum*, 'the origin of words that denote "evil" in Romance languages.' Coincidentally, malicious software is collapsed into the term '*mal*ware' in computer discourse, and Mal, likewise, is a corrupted memory that infects Cobb, preventing him from designing dream worlds, undermining his dominance and control. The film further constructs Mal's failure to distinguish between dream and reality as horrifying because she is unable to recognise her *real* children, insisting that they are only projections: her technological merging leads to her failure as a mother. Mal resists Cobb's attempts to domesticate intolerable space; she is an obstacle that Cobb, the male protagonist, must overcome, a final boss to 'defeat' (M. Fisher 38) in his quest to return to his children. Wetmore writes that Gibson's representation of Cayce 'as a woman and as having a more intimate, embodied relationship to technology […] re-inscribes certain myths about femininity. Cayce's bodily revulsion to the signs of capitalism sometimes appears as an argument that women are naturally outside the world of commerce' (79 n1). With her continued exhortations to Cobb to listen to what he 'feels' rather than what he 'knows' and her hostility towards Ariadne, who always reminds Cobb of what is *real*, Mal's characterisation also reinscribes certain feminine archetypes. All of the experienced dream thieves fear Limbo – their fear is that they could be lost in Limbo until their 'brains turn to scrambled egg' – but, as Cobb manages to keep his grip on what is *real* while in Limbo, returning both him and the lost Saito to *the real world* unscathed, Mal is the only character we see in the film who emerges from Limbo irreparably harmed. Mal, like the basement sleepers, is a cautionary tale to the other dream thieves; she is an emblem of what could go wrong. Her construction as a 'bad mother' further marks her technological merging as transgressive: she not only abandons her children, but her framing of Cobb for her

murder ensures that he, too, is separated from them. Cayce, incidentally, at *Pattern Recognition*'s end, is no longer sensitive to trademarks: she is mysteriously cured of her allergy and consequently loses her coolhunting talent. When Cayce has a cameo appearance in *Zero History*, the final book in Gibson's unofficial trilogy,[7] she is conspicuously maternal: 'The woman looked down at her iPhone, stroked the screen. "[…] Forgive me for keeping this on. I'm doing something with my kids. Difficult to keep in touch, with the time difference"' (335). Cayce is foregrounded as a mother – a 'good' mother, unlike Mal's 'bad' mother. Wetmore writes of Cayce's homonymic predecessor, *Neuromancer*'s Case: *'*Case pursues the liberal humanist ideals of material transcendence and total autonomy through new technologies, and as many feminist theorists have convincingly argued, these ideals that claim universality are actually primarily those of Western, White, middle-class men' (79 n1). In *Inception*, once again, transcendence and autonomy through technology belong firmly to the familiar figure of a Western, male, ahead-of-the-curve protagonist; Cobb, not Mal, is deemed fit to engage with the technological realm and care for their children. Rather than exploring the 'potential for cybernetic technologies to deconstruct the liberal humanist subject and to produce empowered, posthuman identities that overcome the limitations of "biology as destiny"' (Wetmore 72), *Inception* reinforces those limitations, conserving the modernist ideal of the human as a rational subject that remains separate from, above, and in command of technology.

Despite the film's nostalgic recycling and centring of the usual cyberpunk protagonist, *Inception* suggested useful narrative strategies for disrupting the ontological certainty of those who occupy the 'centre', casting doubt on whether they have truly mastered an intolerable space. In Limbo, *Inception*'s final dungeon, Mal taunts Cobb: 'So certain of your world. Of what's real. […] No creeping doubts? Not feeling persecuted, Dom? Chased around the globe by anonymous corporations and police forces, the way the projections persecute the dreamer? Admit it. You don't believe in one reality anymore.' Mal draws Cobb into imagining himself at the centre of a conspiracy – like a dreamer, like a video-game protagonist – where nothing exists beyond the pre-rendered scenery, and which ceases to exist without his presence. Conspiracy theories are seductive, Peter Knight says, because they

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[7] William Gibson's three novels following his 'Bridge Trilogy' are often referred to collectively as the 'Bigend Trilogy', comprising *Pattern Recognition* (2003), *Spook Country* (2007), and *Zero History* (2010). Hubertus Bigend appears in all three novels.

restore a sense of agency, causality and responsibility to what would otherwise seem the inexplicable play of forces over which we have no control. […] [T]hey offer a compensatory fantasy that at least things are still controllable by an all-powerful individual or group. (qtd. in Kneale 174)

Cobb could certainly be in the middle of a compensatory fantasy of sorts. Saito is a powerful businessman, with Bigend-like wealth and resources, but, inexplicably, he also has the power to prevent Cobb from facing charges for his wife's murder by making a single phone call. The Fischer job is a magical 'one last job' that tidily reunites Cobb with his children in the USA. With her exhortation to observe the apparently excessive extent of his persecution, Mal tries to call Cobb's attention to the unreality of his reality. Cayce Pollard, too, is concerned that she is embroiled in a conspiracy, which, like the conspiracy Cobb imagines against himself, is a kind of non-descript persecution:

However odd things seem, mustn't it be to exactly that extent of oddness that a life is one's own, and no one else's? Hers has never been without its share of oddness, but something in its recent texture seems to belong to someone else. She's never lived her life in such a way as to generate sliding doors and secret passages […]. She hasn't ever, previously, been a person to be burgled, followed, assaulted with intent to rob. […] Why now? What has she done wrong? (194–95)

It seems that Cayce and Cobb suffer from a very general *they're-out-to-get-me* paranoia that does not point to any specific source of persecution. It seems, instead, to emanate from guilt: for Cayce, the guilt of her complicity with Bigend, Blue Ant, and the forces that perpetuate the unequal distribution of capital; for Cobb, the guilt of having performed inception on his wife. The possibility of a narrative plot being the protagonist's conspiratorial fantasy – created to compensate for guilt or a perceived loss of control – was a suggestive strategy for my fiction. The compensatory narrative becomes a kind of 'dream logic', a way for the protagonist to make things right.

During the scene in which Cobb is pursued by Cobol henchmen through Mombasa, he runs into an alleyway that seems to shrink, closing in on him, impeding his escape. The walls, as in a nightmare, literally seem to close in on Cobb. Ruth Tallman has documented similar instances of ambiguity and not-quite-right-ness in *Inception*'s *real world*, such as when Mal appears on the ledge across from the

trashed hotel room where she and Cobb spent their anniversary (21). The logic of dreaming not only comes to script the compensatory narrative that Cobb is possibly telling himself, but also creeps into *the real world*, disrupting its logic. As numerous commentators have asked: wouldn't the authorities investigating Mal's death have noticed that she did not fall from the window of the trashed hotel room, but the room in the opposite building? And wouldn't there be records of Mal booking the other suite, exposing her plot to frame Cobb? I derive the term 'dream logic' from Bill Wyman, Max Garrone, and Andy Klein's analysis of David Lynch's 2001 film *Mulholland Drive*, another film about the compensatory narratives of dreams. In their essay, the authors use the term to refer to the way in which objects and characters from the protagonist Diane's unsatisfactory waking life turn up in odd places in her fantasy as a successful up-and-coming actress, Betty: the money that Diane pays to a hitman ends up in the dream-character Rita's purse; a woman Diane sees kissing her ex-lover materialises in the dream as a mediocre actress whom a director is forced to cast in his movie. They become, to use Wyman et al.'s words, 'props' which are 'repurposed' for Diane's compensatory narrative. If one were to subscribe to the theory that the whole plot of *Inception* is Cobb's paranoid fantasy, and his *real world* is not actually the real world, one can spot similar 'repurposed' elements throughout the film: the line 'I'm asking you to take a leap of faith' is spoken first by Mal and then by Saito; the champagne glass which Cobb treads on in the trashed hotel suite later materialises as Mal's weapon when she threatens Ariadne in the elevator scene. Many viewers have noted that Saito, Ariadne, Eames, Arthur, and Yusuf are only identified by first or last names and are 'reduced to functions' (Petkovic and Vukovic n. pag.) in Cobb's quest, possibly suggesting that they, too, could be characters that Cobb has plucked from his waking life and recast in his dream. In my fiction, I wanted to use dream logic to complicate the ontological hygiene of my characters' apparent reality – peculiarities in physical logic and repurposed images, props, and lines of dialogue that call attention to the potential falseness of the world, calling it out as an improperly mastered intolerable space.

Philip K. Dick has said, 'The ultimate in paranoia is not when everyone is against you but when every*thing* is against you' (qtd. in Freedman 15). The intolerable space of reality repels Cobb; it seems to work against him, challenging his control, and the dreamlike 'things' of *the real world*, also, are capable of emanating hostility. Just as *Pattern Recognition* addresses the betrayal of benign technology, primarily the

aeroplane-turned-weapon, *Inception* also has its share of deceptive, untrustworthy objects. One needs to look no further than the totems that the dreamers use to keep track of reality. Arthur's totem is a loaded die, and Ariadne's is a chess piece: as only the owner of the totem knows its particular weight and feel, only the owner can accurately recreate the totem within the dream space; thus, the dreamers use their totems to determine whether they are in their own dream or somebody else's. Other commentators have already highlighted the unreliability of Cobb's totem (M. Fisher 42; Johnson 2–3; Tallman 29 n2) – a spinning top which used to belong to Mal – which is supposed to keep on spinning indefinitely within a dream, a visual rather than tactile cue for the audience's benefit. Throughout the film Cobb spins the top to test the nature of his reality, and much of the film's ambiguity is fuelled by the closing appearance of the top, which Cobb spins for one last time just as he is reunited with his children – the screen cuts to black before the audience can see if it falls. 'To debate whether the top topples in the final scene or not is really a debate about whether Dom, or any of us, can ever return to his/our own reality, or whether that return is simply the return to another dream that has been constructed for us,' Anselmi and Wilson argue, and indeed, it seems that the premise of a false reality is now too simple: it has been made pedestrian by films such as *The Matrix*. The central anxiety, now, is *whose* reality – that is, are we in control of even our own delusions of reality? Although the majority of *Inception* is informed by tropes of Hollywood action cinema, it was these quiet indeterminacies and fissures posed by the deceptiveness of objects and landscapes – that continually refresh the notion of reality as an intolerable and untrustworthy space – which I felt were instructive for my own practice.

It might be productive to contrast *Inception*'s engagement with 'the real' with its predecessor-of-sorts *The Matrix*, a film which supposes that the world is only a computer simulation, the titular Matrix. In this film, there is ultimately a real world to which the protagonists flee after escaping the Matrix; although the Matrix provides comforting ignorance and a pleasurable escape from reality, the protagonists still privilege the real world as the truest and most meaningful. In *Inception*, the very existence of a real world is not only ambiguous but *inconsequential* – as Nolan has said in an interview with Robert Capps about *Inception*'s closing shot of Cobb's totem, 'The most important emotional thing about the top spinning at the end is that Cobb is not looking at it. He doesn't care.' Just as

the replicant Rachel from *Blade Runner* uses false photographs and implanted memories 'to produce her own narrative' and 'authenticate her present', even as they are simulations that '[fail] to authenticate her past' (Landsberg 185), Cobb, too, ultimately rejects the primacy of 'the real' in order to produce his own narrative. It does not matter if the reunion with his children at the film's end is 'only' a simulation; he rejects the conflation of reality with truth, authenticity, and meaningfulness. Continually throughout the film, various characters implore each other to 'take a leap of faith', and, of course, totems themselves are objects of faith (M. Fisher 42; Pop 217). If anything, *Inception* reminds us that our very relationship with the world is by necessity one of faith. To quote Leonard Shelby, the retrograde-amnesiac protagonist from another Nolan film, *Memento*: 'I have to believe in a world outside my own mind. I have to believe that my actions still have meaning, even if I can't remember them. I have to believe that when my eyes are closed, the world's still there.' As Richard Barrett notes, *Memento*, like *Inception*, features objects that the protagonist uses to keep track of reality: Leonard's system of photographs, maps, notes, and tattoos compensate for his fading memory, but it is a system which the film reveals to be as unreliable (and open to manipulation from others) as Cobb's spinning top. Yet the characters nonetheless place faith in their flawed totems – perhaps because there is nothing else, no other reference points. The characters can only assemble makeshift narratives for themselves from the clues available, can only 'dream' within the well-inscribed narratives of capitalism and media culture, and whether or not the narrative is 'real' does not make it meaningless. '[T]his "present"', as Jameson forlornly notes, '[…] is after all all we have' ('Progress' 151), and it seems fitting, then, that cyberpunk demonstrates a somewhat similar sense of resignation. Sponsler says, 'In part, cyberpunk's inconsistencies describe the difficulty of evading the pull of a continued desire for the transcendental signified, for the sense of human and cosmic purposefulness, for the meaningfulness that cause-and-effect plots and realistic characters so reliably convey' (642). *Inception* engages with the pull of narrative – whether it is Cobb's 'catharsis' or Jameson's 'cognitive mapping' – even if the narrative is ill-fitting, assembled from compromised totems.

Conclusion

Like *Pattern Recognition*, *Inception* is set in a world of jet-setting high-tech gloss, and once again, I did not always find that aesthetic appropriate or sustainable for my fiction. However, cyberpunk's engagement with intolerable spaces provided ample resonance for my fiction, encouraging me to consider not only how technological metaphors can make the human tolerable, but also how narrative acts as an interface for making reality tolerable. More possibilities were opened up for my fiction when I considered what else might constitute an 'intolerable space' – spaces which are not oriented by traditional perceptions of temporality but may nonetheless be transformed into narrative spaces, such as that of the music video and the production line. A 'small world' setting conducive to collisions and establishing an atmosphere of paranoia was also vital for my fiction. Furthermore, as *Inception* continues in the cyberpunk tradition of privileging and centring certain identities whilst marginalising others, the film prompted me to consider the ways in which dominant narratives inevitably feed my own narratives and the construction of my characters, covertly delineating which identities may occupy the 'centre'.

Michael S. Carolan says, paraphrasing Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'We *have* bodies and we *are* bodies' (82). These bodies – which we *have* and *are* – cannot help but be bound and scripted by the demands of real space. While *Inception* may well demonstrate the failure of cyberpunk to fully reject the descriptive and cultural armatures of real space, it has nonetheless suggested possibilities for my fiction. I did not want cyberpunk's failures to become mine to 'solve': instead, I wanted my fiction to operate with an acceptance and awareness that real space is inescapable, as well as introducing, as *Inception* does, tiny incursions or ruptures of dream logic, repurposed objects, faulty totems, which threaten my characters' certainty in reality and frustrate their attempts at cognitive mapping.

CHAPTER 3: THE TECHNOLOGISED SUBJECT

> In the morning I walked to the bank. I went to the automated teller machine
> to check my balance. I inserted my card, entered my secret code, tapped out
> my request. The figure on the screen roughly corresponded to my
> independent estimate, feebly arrived at after long searches through
> documents, tormented arithmetic. Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over
> me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The
> system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city.
> What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value,
> but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A
> deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The
> system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more
> disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The
> networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies.
>
> —Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (55)

Science Fiction and Postmodern Fiction: A Feedback Loop

The first chapter of this exegesis argued that contemporary reality is configured by
technoculture and late capitalism, such that the future is no longer meaningfully
different to the present. The effect of this, as Hollinger suggests, is the proliferation
of science-fiction narratives that do not extrapolate into the future, leading science
fiction to function not just as a genre but as a discourse to describe the present day.
This more recent function of science fiction is arguably a response to specific
historical conjunctures and the cultural anxieties they have produced. The first
chapter outlined some of these cultural anxieties: the mediatisation of reality, the
excess of information and data, the ascendancy of technology and image culture, the
disruption of ontological hygiene, and the proliferation of vast overarching systems.
The previous two chapters of this exegesis examined the science-fiction strategies of
two exemplary texts that engage with this conjunctural context, strategies which I
have broadly categorised under the headings of defamiliarisation/naturalisation and
intolerable spaces. While the object of study in this chapter, Don DeLillo's 1984
novel *White Noise*, is not generically classic science fiction, it has at its heart

anxieties about the effects of certain aspects of the postmodern context on the human subject, and thus contained suggestive strategies for my fiction.

In his introduction to *Storming the Reality Studio,* Larry McCaffery describes two developments that he believes are significant for postmodern culture, the first being the emergence of what he calls 'postmodern science fiction' (1), that is, science fiction's (and in particular cyberpunk's) evolution in response to postmodern culture; and the second being the accumulation of 'experimental, quasi-SF works created by a number of major "mainstream" literary innovators […] that [feature] themes, motifs, and other elements that would previously have been associated with SF' (2), within which McCaffery cites DeLillo as one exemplar. Brian McHale is another critic who has observed the 'cross-fertilisation' (311) of science fiction and postmodernist fiction, leading to what he calls science fiction that has been 'postmodernised' and postmodernism that has been 'science-fictionised', particularly throughout the 1960s and 1970s (314). McHale says that the 1980s saw the intensification of a 'feedback loop [operating] between SF and postmodernist fiction', in which 'we find postmodernist texts absorbing materials from already "postmodernised" SF, and SF texts incorporating models drawn from already "science-fictionised" postmodernism' (314). With the publication of *White Noise* occurring in the middle of the 1980s, it is perhaps not surprising that commentators often locate the novel ambiguously within or between these two genres (Cavallaro 11; McCaffery 10; Rapatzikou 3; Wegner 186).[8] *White Noise*, like the other science-fiction texts examined in this exegesis, represents cultural norms and habitual activities in defamiliarising ways (such as checking funds at an ATM, as in the epigraph of this chapter) while naturalising norms which are not part of our reality (such as the highly polished and theatrical speech of the novel's characters). *White Noise* thus joins *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception* in locating the terror of the science-fictionalised present in benign, everyday objects, where familiarity can rupture at any moment to reveal the uncanny. *White Noise* also represents the 'intolerable' effect of technology on the human subject: technology, in this novel, is made manifest in vast and complicated systems

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[8] *White Noise*'s generic complexity goes beyond the feedback loop of postmodernist fiction and science fiction: Laura Barrett, paraphrasing Douglas Keesey, calls *White Noise* 'a generic hybrid, a nexus of types of fiction – the domestic drama, the college satire, the apocalyptic melodrama, the crime novel, the social satire' (97). Barrett further notes that this 'trespassing of boundaries […] is typical of Postmodern fiction' (98) and argues that *White Noise*'s genre allusions and intertextuality 'is […] a recognition of our indebtedness to previous representations and a metaphor for the novel's thematic concern with origin and end' (99).

that conspire to make the human obsolete. The human itself, as in *Inception* and *Pattern Recognition*, is also constructed according to technological metaphors in *White Noise*, signalled most notably by the novel's recurring line, 'We are the sum total of our data' (232). DeLillo's work in general, in '[seeming] to anticipate and to comment on cultural trends and tendencies, the full significance of which emerge[s] only after his novels are published' (Duvall 1), has, perhaps, even managed to fulfil the predictive function often expected of science fiction.

At the same time, *White Noise* deeply engages with the postmodern context, a conjuncture which the 1980s brought into greater visibility. *White Noise* was published in the same year as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, whose vision of a society connected by the 'consensual hallucination' of cyberspace is not unlike the kind of 'consensual hallucination' which DeLillo represents in *White Noise*, that 'abstract network of representations' that affords inhabitants of postmodernity the sense of belonging to an 'illusory community' formed by a consensus of 'desires, emotions and fantasies' (Cavallaro x). The year 1984, too, was the site of George Orwell's iconic dystopian future; his 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* depicts a society which oversees the disappearance and manipulation of history, and whose citizens live under the ever-present gaze of images and screens. Furthermore, the publication of *White Noise* 'coincided with great academic interest in the ideas of Baudrillard and other theorists of postmodernism' (Knight 30). Peter Boxall observes that the novel 'gave a lucid and comic articulation to concepts that were becoming widely disseminated in 1980s American and European culture. For many of the contemporary readers and critics of *White Noise*, the novel appeared as a lock-step dramatisation of the theory of Jean Baudrillard' (114).

Perhaps most significantly, the iconography of science fiction and 'the future' was becoming increasingly commonplace in social reality at the time of *White Noise*'s publication, signalled chiefly by the widespread adoption of the personal computer by 'millions of non-experts' (Heise 139). Heise says that 'the networked, communicating computer', which began to emerge in the 1980s and would achieve greater popularity in the 1990s with the ascension of the Internet, '[transcended] the modernist association of technology with machines' (140). In *White Noise*, DeLillo anticipates this transformation of a modernist conception of technology as *machine* into a postmodernist conception of technology as *system*. Such a conception – additionally signalled by the '[t]he terms cyberspace, cyborg and cyberpunk

[coming] into prominence in the 1980s' (Featherstone and Burrows 2) – revived the relevance of Norbert Weiner's 1948 concept of 'cybernetics' to literary discourse. Cybernetics conceives 'both humans and machines as systems of control and communication' and 'explicitly suggests a collapse of distinctions between them' (Porush, 'Cybernetic' 374). *White Noise* thus participates in a shift from a conception of the human as 'an engineered body', whose main task is 'the transfer and conservation of energy', to a conception of the human as a 'communications network', whose main task is 'the accurate reproduction and exchange of signals in time and space' (Featherstone and Burrows 2).

Both *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception* represent their protagonists as imbricated in systems, whether it be the system of late capitalism or systems which are entirely more intimate – Cayce's technologised body of CPUs, or Cobb's mind as one in a network of dreamers. The characters of *White Noise* are also surrounded by, and are themselves, systems. Jack Gladney, the protagonist and narrator of *White Noise*, is a professor at the College-on-the-Hill; he and his wife Babette live with their brood of children, all from previous marriages, in the small North American town of Blacksmith. Their days are punctuated by euphoric trips to the shopping mall, preparing and eating food, and receiving visits from ex-spouses and children, almost always in the presence of a radio or television spouting non-sequitur commentary. Babette and Jack are haunted by the prospect of their own deaths, fears that are exacerbated by an Airborne Toxic Event which forces the evacuation of Blacksmith, and Babette's secret participation in the trial of a drug called Dylar, which is meant to suppress one's fear of death. Developed at an historical conjuncture in which the transition from modern *machine* to postmodern *system* was very conspicuous, and in which postmodern anxieties surrounding information overload, technology, ontological hygiene, and image culture were receiving prominent articulation in academic and literary discourse, *White Noise* suggested productive narrative strategies for my fiction. These strategies include the representation of 'lively' systems, the construction of an even more constricted closed space, an aesthetic of dirt and disobedience, and the development of 'behind-the-curve' characters who are obsessed with protocol and ceaseless functioning. What these strategies have in common is that they all reinforce a certain representation of paranoia, one which is more unsettling and all-encompassing than the paranoia of *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception*. In all three texts, paranoia is motivated primarily by what Timothy Melley

calls 'agency panic', which he defines as 'intense anxiety about an apparent loss of autonomy or self-control – the conviction that one's actions are being controlled by someone else, that one has been "constructed" by powerful external agents' (62). In *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception*, the characters are largely able to overcome these threats to their autonomy; their brilliance and capability as ahead-of-the-curve characters permits them to triumph. In *White Noise*, however, these threats overwhelm the characters; they do not make progress so much as succumb to obsolescence. Thus, *White Noise* catalysed the importance of two interrelated concepts that were central to my fiction: 'obsolescence' and 'the technologised subject'.

Paranoia, Obsolescence, and the Technologised Subject

Teresa Brennan has noted that we live in 'the age of paranoia' (qtd. in Flieger 87). The term 'paranoia' has a multitude of connotations – the previous chapters use the term to refer variously to Cobb's and Cayce's feelings of persecution and guilt, their sense of being constantly under surveillance, and their attempts to construct narratives that will make their intolerable realities bearable and manageable. Jerry Aline Flieger insists on the need to distinguish between paranoia 'as a clinical psychosis' and 'as an episteme, a (postmodern) mode of knowledge' (87). Daniel Freeman and Jason Freeman, by calling paranoia 'the exaggerated or unrealistic idea that others wish to harm us' (582), provide a possible definition of paranoia as clinical psychosis: this is the kind of persecutory or 'under surveillance' paranoia that forms as a response to a perceived threat of physical harm from people or organisations – for example, Cayce's suspicion that Blue Ant or Dorotea is spying on her. However, Linda Fisher, drawing from David Shapiro, argues:

> [T]he true motivation of paranoia is not the fear of some danger or personal harm, but the fear of being subjected to external control.
>
> That is, the behaviour of paranoid individuals stems from a condition Shapiro terms 'unstable autonomy': a fragile sense of self which leads them to be in 'a state of hyperalertness for threats to their autonomy' […]. (107–108)

Shapiro's concept of unstable autonomy is thus consistent with Melley's agency panic. Melley characterises agency panic as 'a nervousness or uncertainty about the causes of individual action', which 'sometimes manifests itself in a belief that the

world is full of "programmed" or "brainwashed" subjects, addicts, automatons, or "mass-produced" persons' or in 'characters who feel they are acting out parts in a script written by someone else' (62). From Cayce, who cannot stop her body from reacting to trademarks; to Cobb, who cannot prevent his projection of Mal from sabotaging his jobs; to Robert Fischer, who, unwittingly and literally, is carrying out a script written by somebody else, the loss of individual control is a persistent theme in *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception*. In *White Noise,* Jack's son Heinrich takes Shapiro's unstable autonomy even further by insisting that he does not know how to distinguish between a genuine thought or desire and what is 'some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire' in his brain (54–55). This anxiety of losing individual control evidently runs much deeper than the fear of being subjected to physical danger or harm: characters in these texts cannot seem to trust even *themselves*. Melley additionally characterises agency panic as 'a […] sense that controlling organisations are themselves agents – rational, motivated entities with the will and the means to carry out complex plans' (63). These entities are not limited to corporations or the CIA, but may include 'more diffuse structures' such as 'the general "world system" invoked by Jameson' (Melley 63) – the 'system' Jameson raises perhaps most notably in relation to cognitive mapping. 'In moments of agency panic,' Melley adds, 'individuals tend to attribute to these systems the qualities of motive, agency, and individuality they suspect have been depleted from themselves or others around them' (63). In ascribing the agency that previously belonged to individual subjects as now belonging to 'diffuse structures', and in locating the source of threats to autonomy in spectral, near-unspecifiable *systems*, the postmodern anxieties under investigation in this exegesis and in my fiction are very much compatible with Melley's construction of paranoia as agency panic.

Linda Fisher and Melley, like Flieger, link paranoia to the postmodern conjuncture and postmodernism. Flieger reminds us of Francois Lyotard's characterisation of postmodernism as 'the loss of belief in metanarrative' (89), and suggests that postmodernism 'may be read as consistent with a certain paranoid vision which refutes the accepted authoritative or consensual version of reality (the reality that normal people agree upon), even while sustaining an uncertain discourse (the paranoid's alternative version of events)' (89). Linda Fisher agrees, writing that paranoia and the postmodernist style 'manifests itself in an intense mistrust of given descriptions, theories, or states of consciousness, and a systematic suspicion and

deconstruction of anything that suggests authoritative, normative, totalising, or essentialist tendencies' (108). Melley, however, points out that theories 'continue to associate paranoia with modernism and not postmodernism' (68). This persistent theoretical connection of paranoia to modernism may be because the paranoid impulse is towards creating a totalising, knowable narrative, which is antithetical to postmodernism's apparent rejection of essentialism and grand narratives – as Patrick O'Donnell says, '[P]aranoia is a mode of perception that notes the connectedness between things in a hyperbolic metonymising of reality' (182). This is the 'pattern recognition' that Cayce tries to resist: the desire to create a comforting narrative of conspiracy. However, Jodi Dean argues: 'Rather than mapping totality, conspiracy's insinuations disrupt the presumption that there is a coherent, knowable reality that could be mapped' (93), and, '[t]oo humble to offer a totalising account, [conspiracy's] accumulated assertions *remind us that we don't know*' (92). Thus the paranoia that manifests in texts like *Pattern Recognition*, *Inception*, and *White Noise* seems to embody a tension between the modern inclination towards *knowing* – of attempting to assert one's agency by creating interconnections so as to perceive and comprehend a totality – and the postmodern suspicion that *knowing* is impossible, or what Melley calls 'the postmodern tendency to put "the real" in quotation marks' (67). Whether paranoia is a clinical psychosis or a knowledge-building system, it is arguably motivated in both instances by agency panic, an apparent loss of control which is exacerbated by the conditions of postmodernity.

Carl Freedman suggests that paranoia and science fiction share 'a privileged relationship' (19). Science fiction, like paranoia, embodies a tension between modern and postmodern sensibilities. The science-fiction narrative's creation and naturalisation of a novum, often one with a scientific basis, 'tends to require a rather thorough and totalising presentation' (Freedman 20) and 'privileges the logic of cause-and-effect narrative development' (Hollinger, 'Specular' 30), a product of the genre's advancement in an era of scientific positivism. However, with contemporary science fiction's increasing movement towards representing the 'paradoxical state of history in which the future already exists in the present' (Miller Jr. 104), it is called away from those modernistic impulses towards what Hollinger names 'an aesthetic and a world view whose central tenets are […] uncertainty and […] indeterminacy' ('Specular' 31). Science fiction, as Hollinger often says, was founded upon the assumption that the future would be different from the present; contemporary science

fiction disrupts this certainty. The notion of the present as 'science-*fictionalised*' implies a conception of reality as narrative, and again, the line between modern and postmodern sensibilities is blurred: a *fictionalised* present gestures to a modernist mode of perception that attempts to make meaningful connections between discrete phenomena, to make a bearable cause-and-effect narrative for the intolerable space of reality; however, it also gestures to the postmodernist awareness that 'reality itself is inevitably mediated' (Hollinger, 'Specular' 32). As the previous chapter explained, *Inception* demonstrates that narrative is an interface to the human – a way to make the human manageable – but it is also a way to preserve a conception of the human as an individual and autonomous subject. Melley says that agency panic 'attempts to conserve a long-standing model of personhood – a view of the individual as a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories' (64), and indicates 'a broad cultural refusal to modify a concept of self that is no longer wholly accurate or useful, but that still underpins a long-standing cultural fantasy of subjectivity' (65). It would seem that science fiction, operating at the conjuncture of modernity and postmodernity, would be the genre *par excellence* of agency panic, clinging to a modernistic conception of the human and of narrative, while simultaneously conceding that these models are 'no longer wholly accurate or useful'.

However, what the generically ambiguous *White Noise* was able to offer me was a greater sense of this concession. The previous chapters' close readings of *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception* concluded that both texts utilise an aesthetic of hard gloss and centralise well-resourced, ahead-of-the-curve characters in their narratives: the spaces and objects in both texts tend to be sleek and new; the protagonists, like the spaces they inhabit and the tools they use, are competent, adept. They are fluent with the protocols of their professions, and they provide a pleasing, familiar human interface for the reader/audience. In these texts, a conception of the human as an autonomous individual subject is more upheld than challenged. *White Noise* emerged as a fruitful exemplar text in the development of my fiction by offering alternatives to hard gloss and ahead-of-the-curve characters. Although the characters in *White Noise* speak in a knowing, highly polished, and theatrical manner, and thus may at first appear ahead-of-the-curve, almost all of them are terrified of being left out or left behind, a fear emblematised by Babette and Jack's ongoing debate over which one of them will die first. Their terror symbolises a fear of obsolescence –

obsolescence broadly signifying a loss of mastery, as in Bukatman's usage in his discussion on intolerable spaces, but in *White Noise* specifically signifying a cluster of anxieties associated with postmodernity, technology, and the impossible task of cognitive mapping: the fear of not picking the 'right' information from the excess of information available, the fear of not keeping up-to-date, the fear of no longer being needed by 'the system', the fear of being outdone by technology. *White Noise* thus offered another narrative instantiation of what I would come to call 'the technologised subject'.[9]

Nick Mansfield argues that, in the postmodern context, the word 'subject' (as opposed to 'self') insists on selfhood's relationship to social and cultural forces: 'One is always subject *to* or *of* something' (3). Melley believes that the burgeoning paranoia and popularity of conspiracy narratives in postmodernity can be 'understood as a response to the sense that, to quote one cultural critic, "our specialness – our humanness – has been taking it on the chin a lot lately." It stems largely from a sense of *diminished human agency*' (62). Elaine L. Graham implicates technology in this threat to human specialness, saying: 'Technologies call into question the ontological purity according to which Western society has defined what is normatively human' (5). The term 'technologised subject', in this exegesis, therefore gestures to the ways in which humans are subject to and subjects of technology, such that our uniqueness and agency as humans are perceived to be under threat.

As the previous chapter's discussion of *Inception* shows, human subjectivity is persistently understood and constructed through technological metaphors, substantiating Claire Sponsler's claim, 'So pervasive has technology become that it has altered human perception of the natural world, making that world describable and indeed even visible only within a frame provided by technology' (628). While the technological framing that Sponsler refers to is the sort exemplified by Gibson's famous opening line to *Neuromancer*, 'The sky above the port was the colour of television, tuned to a dead channel' (3), *Inception* directs that technological frame to the human, and offers us characters who are made visible, interpretable, and manageable through technology. In the epigraph that opens this chapter, in which

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[9] The term 'technologised subject' has been used previously, in slightly different contexts, by Alex Goody, Simon Cooper, Patricia K.L. Goon, Elizabeth M. Grierson, and Marjorie Worthington, among others.

Jack Gladney checks his bank balance at an ATM, Jack is framed or made visible by technology in a different way: the ATM – the technological object itself – authenticates his existence and confirms his place in 'the system'; the technology permits Jack to exist as a subject. This 'system' to which DeLillo refers, however, does not consist solely of technology, but is the product of the inseparable imbrication of technology and late capitalism. Jack is both a subject of technology – a collection of data that the ATM authenticates and confirms – and a late-capitalist subject; the technology authenticates and confirms 'not money' but Jack's standing within late-capitalist society.

The term 'the technologised subject', as used in this exegesis, is also informed by Michael S. Carolan's essay 'The Conspicuous Body: Capitalism, Consumerism, Class and Consumption'. Carolan invokes Thorstein Veblen's term 'conspicuous consumption', which refers to the way in which 'we consume, in part, to display to others our social power and status – to display […] that we are in control of the material world around us' (83). Carolan argues that 'we have recently entered a new epoch of conspicuous consumption. We are no longer content with merely surrounding ourselves with "nice things". Instead, we increasingly strive to *become the "nice thing" itself* – to literally embody conspicuous consumption' (84). Although Carolan is referring to bodily regimentation – how a toned, beautiful body exemplifies successful consumption – his notion of humans striving to become the 'nice thing' has three connotations that were significant for the formulation of the technologised subject in this project: firstly, Carolan casts the human as a technological being capable of modification and improvement, an entity that needs to be constantly upgraded in order to remain competitive and relevant; secondly, he casts the human as a unit of value – the human is both a consumer and an entity to be exchanged or used in production; thirdly, he casts the human as an emblem, a sign, a trademark – to borrow an expression from Italo Calvino's *T-Zero*, in becoming 'the nice thing', we undertake a 'transformation of ourselves into the message of ourselves' (qtd. in Porush, 'Cybernetic' 373).

If the human is subject to and a subject of technology – if the human is both surrounded by technology and 'nice things' that threaten agency but is also itself inscribed in technological and commoditised terms – it is arguably no surprise that the anxieties of Jack and others in *White Noise* manifest as a fear of being made obsolete. The strategies identified in my close reading of *White Noise* – 'lively'

systems, closed space, dirt and disobedience, and behind-the-curve characters – all gesture to the technologised subject's persistent fear of obsolescence, which, unlike in *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception*, is not satisfactorily assuaged. The manner in which characters react to and insulate themselves from the threat of obsolescence was integral to the construction of the technologised subject in my fiction: I have broadly characterised these responses as, firstly, taking refuge in protocol; and, secondly, engaging in ceaseless functioning. The former I have derived from the belief that underpins Babette's classes on posture, eating, and drinking, 'everything is correctible'; the latter I have derived from Heidegger's characterisation of the modern world as one where 'everything is functioning' and from what DeLillo has called 'dailiness'. Like Cobb and his totem in *Inception*, both of these coping mechanisms are flawed, and they ultimately fail the characters of *White Noise*; nevertheless, the characters concede that these are the only mechanisms available with which to make reality tolerable and bearable.

Close Reading: *White Noise*

The first chapter of this exegesis discussed Tom Gunning's essay 'Renewing Old Technologies', in which Gunning explores Shklovsky's technique of defamiliarisation as a strategy of representation that breaks up habitual perception, causing one to be estranged from a familiar object and forced to view it afresh. This is the kind of strategy that DeLillo uses in the ATM passage, where the familiar task of checking one's bank balance is defamiliarised or made strange through Jack's disproportionate gratitude, the melodious and hypnotic language, and even the way that the ATM is referred to by its full name, automated teller machine, drawing attention to the fact that the machine is supplanting a human. This defamiliarisation makes the reader aware of the overwhelming scale of 'the system' – the ATMs, the banks, the networks, and so on, that allow finances to surmount geographical constraints and always be available to the late-capitalist subject. Gunning also explores Heidegger's suggestion in *Being and Time* that a tool that works seems to disappear, but a tool that breaks down or has its function interrupted becomes conspicuous. While the ATM passage does not contain an explicit technological breakdown, the deranged person escorted from the bank poses an interruption to the habitual operations of the bank; thus, the bank itself becomes conspicuous, both its security and the potential for incursions. It is notable, however, that Jack observes

the deranged person so fleetingly, almost casually. While Gunning is correct that interruptions of habit and sudden changes in function can force us to see technology afresh, what is ultimately unsettling about the ATM passage – and perhaps, what is ultimately, albeit dimly, unsettling to Jack – is that the system is *working too well*. It does not seem to require Jack in order to function. Jack, as DeLillo represents him, is teetering on the brink of obsolescence – the ATM remembers Jack's bank balance with more ease and certainty than Jack himself; he and the system are in accord only 'for now'; and the deranged person, efficiently expelled from the bank, could one day be him. To revisit Philip K. Dick's statement cited in Chapter 2: 'The ultimate in paranoia is not when everyone is against you but when every*thing* is against you' (qtd. in Freedman 15). The *things* of *White Noise* are difficult to name, but characters like Jack can sense *things* – the 'system' – conveying blessing, protection, and approval, and, at the same time, resonating with hostility or indifference.

Gunning reminds us that the uncanny is not just the resurfacing of the unfamiliar in what should be familiar, but also 'when more primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed' (Freud qtd. in Gunning 47). Gunning continues:

> new technologies evoke not only a short-lived wonder based on unfamiliarity which greater and constant exposure will overcome, but also a possibly less dramatic but more enduring sense of the uncanny, a feeling that they involve magical operations which greater familiarity or habituation might cover over, but not totally destroy. It crouches there beneath a rational cover, ready to spring out again. (47)

Here, Gunning interprets Freud's 'primitive beliefs' as referring to the perception of 'magical operations' working within technology. He articulates the way that technology, no matter how much is known or understood about it, still evades a permanent sense of domestication and habituation, persistently announcing itself as second nature. Technology remains 'magical' – it seems to work not because of something this-worldly, but through some other mysterious force that makes the technologies alive and autonomous. The 'magical' autonomous object is a recurrent trope in fiction – for example, it takes the form of the titular malevolent board game in Joe Johnston's feature film *Jumanji*. The horror of the autonomous object is best exemplified in the scene in which Alan, in the process of packing up the game, accidentally drops the dice on the board, causing his token to advance by itself. 'Oh

no,' Alan says, 'the game thinks I rolled.' And his companion Sarah responds: 'What do you mean, the game *thinks*?' Our technologies, machines, and systems sometimes appear similarly alive, malevolent, and dangerous. Sometimes they do not seem to need our help; they act without authorisation; they *think*. In the words of Donna Haraway, 'Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert' (194). Whether producing Bukatman's 'intolerable spaces' – in which the human is decentralised – or exhibiting a *Jumanji*-like autonomy, technology engenders agency panic, seeming to wield the power to override the human's will and push the human into obsolescence. As Simon Cooper says, '[P]aranoia might be an implicit recognition of how technology works subtly, *and behind our backs*, to reconstruct the mode of our being human' (1, emphasis added).

Jack's home contains a host of 'disturbingly lively' machines and 'nice things', from the smoke alarm that spontaneously 'went off in the hallway upstairs, either to let us know the battery had just died or because the house was on fire' (9); the garbage compactor, 'full of eerie feeling' (39); a refrigerator which 'throbbed massively' (120); the waste disposal unit in the sink which 'reduced parings, rinds and animal fats to tiny drainable fragments, with a motorised surge that made me retreat two paces' (120). In DeLillo's prose the strangeness of the science-fictionalised present is located in these domestic yet 'unhomely' objects. I borrow the term 'unhomely' from Lewis and Cho's essay 'Home is Where the Neurosis Is: A Topography of the Spatial Unconscious',[10] where, drawing upon the work of Theodor Adorno, the authors note how the modern home is filled with an aggressive and almost violent functionalism – car and refrigerator doors that snap and slam shut, sometimes all by themselves, for example, and machines and devices that require that their users also adopt violent movements (75). Lewis and Cho write that these 'mechanical, functional innards of the modern home revolt against the home itself' (75), thus creating, along with other dehumanising effects such as superficial and mass-produced interior decoration, an 'unhomely home'. As Heinrich says: 'Forget spills, fallouts, leakages. It's the things right around you in your own house that'll get you sooner or later' (202). Gibson also depicts 'lively' machines in *Pattern Recognition*; for example, Damien's computer 'sighs softly and makes subliminal

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[10] Lewis and Cho are also referencing the German word for the uncanny, *unheimlich*. This word is often given the literal English translation of 'un-secret' or 'un-homely' (Bartnæs 33).

sounds with its drive, like a vintage sports car downshifting on a distant freeway' (5). DeLillo, perhaps more explicitly than Gibson, represents characters as conferring a degree of *intentionality* to these unliving objects – behaviour reminiscent of Melley's agency panic, where 'systems' take on the motive, agency, and individuality that previously belonged only to humans. It is not that Gibson and DeLillo *humanise* or *personify* systems and objects; rather, systems and objects have their very own specific kind of liveliness and consciousness, a kind that threatens human specialness, seemingly seeking to supersede humans not through imitation but something else entirely; a conspiracy to make the human obsolete. The disturbing thing about a boardgame that *thinks*, after all, is that the human will not be able to outthink it.

This passage from *White Noise*, in which Jack and his family are engaged in one of their many supermarket expeditions, demonstrates the separation between the 'liveliness' of Gibson's 'nice things' and DeLillo's:

> Steffie took my hand and we walked past the fruit bins, an area that extended about forty-five yards along one wall. The bins were arranged diagonally and backed by mirrors that people accidentally punched when reaching for fruit in the upper rows. A voice on the loudspeaker said: 'Kleenex Softique, your truck's blocking the entrance.' Apples and lemons tumbled in twos and threes to the floor when someone took a fruit from certain places in the stacked array. There were six kinds of apples, there were exotic melons in several pastels. Everything seemed to be in season, sprayed, burnished, bright. People tore filmy bags off racks and tried to figure out which end opened. I realised the place was awash in noise. The toneless systems, the jangle and skid of carts, the loudspeaker and coffee-making machines, the cries of children. And over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar, as of some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension. (42–43)

The glossy object world in *Pattern Recognition*, although occasionally unsettling, is ultimately generally obedient – from Damien's complicated appliances to Cayce's British Airways recliner, 'nice things' mostly seem to work for Cayce. However, in *White Noise*, 'nice things' regularly and subtly rebel against their users for no apparent reason: the deceptive mirrors at the back of the fruit bins, the apples and lemons that unstack themselves, and the plastic bags that resist being opened. DeLillo's object world in *White Noise* is characterised less by gloss and more by dirt

and disobedience. In his essay 'Thing Theory', Bill Brown, drawing on the work of Leo Stein, describes 'the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power' (3). Situations in which 'you cut your finger on a sheet of paper' or 'get bopped on the head by a falling nut', Brown says, 'are occasions outside the scene of phenomenological attention that nonetheless teach you that you're "caught up in things" and that the "body is a thing among things"' (3–4). The disobedience of the 'nice things' in DeLillo's passage undermines the human's position of mastery – the 'nice things' of the supermarket are not subject to or subjects of humans; instead, humans defer to the authority and will of *things*. As Brown says: 'The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject–object relation' (4). DeLillo's novel is one in which the characters are not only continually grappling with their changing relationship to objects, but grappling with the persistence of the uncanny in familiar objects – in other words, grappling with the fact that the object was *always* strange and unhomely (the *thing* was never just a thing but 'a particular subject–object relation'; it had always been implicated as belonging to a system that challenges human autonomy). Technology and 'nice things' continually announce their disobedience, repelling the human from occupying its place in the system, asserting that the system does not require the human to function. The object world of *White Noise* is very much conspicuous in a Heideggerian sense, belonging to a wilful, intentional project. This characterisation of objects – 'nice things', technologies – as participants in a lively system, capable of intent, was a suggestive strategy for my fiction: my characters' agency panic is often exacerbated by a constant flux of (and re-awakening to) subject–object relations, an accumulation of reminders of their unstable autonomy.

If the technologised object world is represented as disobedient, and the human is simultaneously understood and characterised within a frame provided by technology, what might this imply about the human in the postmodern context? Heinrich persistently characterises the human according to a discourse reminiscent of cybernetics – the human, in Heinrich's formulation, is a system of communication and feedback. This is most explicit when Heinrich refuses to answer Jack's question of whether he would like to spend the summer in Montana:

> 'Who knows what I want to do? Who knows what anyone wants to do? How
> can you be sure about something like that? Isn't it all a question of brain

chemistry, signals going back and forth, electrical energy in the cortex? How do you know whether something is really what you want to do or just some kind of nerve impulse in the brain? Some minor little activity takes place somewhere in this unimportant place in one of the brain hemispheres and suddenly I want to go to Montana or I don't want to go to Montana. How do I know I really want to go and it isn't just some neurons firing or something? Maybe it's just an accidental flash in the medulla and suddenly there I am in Montana and I find out I really didn't want to go there in the first place. I can't control what happens in my brain, so how can I be sure what I want to do ten seconds from now, much less Montana next summer? It's all this activity in the brain and you don't know what's you as a person and what's some neuron that just happens to fire or just happens to misfire. […]' (54–55)

Heinrich characterises himself – the human body, brain, and nervous system – as a disobedient entity. In this passage, the metaphor for the human is not a machine, but a computer system, mirroring the conceptual shift of the 1980s. Heinrich anticipates what will become two recurring mantras in the novel: 'We are the sum total of our data', and 'we are the sum total of our chemical impulses' (232), implying that – like computers, and even like the board game *Jumanji* – humans are captives of their own programming. DeLillo conflates agency panic's uncertainty as to the cause of individual action with the uncertainty of the cause of *technological* action; in Heinrich's formulation, body, brain, and nervous system are all given the unruly, 'magical' autonomy often ascribed to technology. Part of Alan's distress in *Jumanji*, after all, stems from the fact that the game's interpretation of Alan's neutral action (dropping the dice on the board) as a *command* (a dice roll) is actually valid: the game makes a mistake at the same time it really *doesn't* make a mistake. We endure similar misunderstandings with everyday technology – we accidentally input commands into computers, we lock ourselves out of our own email or bank accounts, we cause a smartphone to change the orientation of the screen with an unintentional twitch. Heinrich's speech seems to imply that technology *and* humans are just like the 'automatons' of Melley's description of agency panic, bodies of mindless functioning. Heinrich's speech takes place directly before the ATM passage, creating a juxtaposition of two disquieting, invisible systems, in the face of which human agency is undermined, and the human is a system prone to glitches and error. All it might take is a misfired neuron for the ATM to fail to recognise and accept Jack. In

DeLillo's novel, the human announces itself as a conspicuous 'thing among things' – subject–object relations rupture not only for humans and the object world, but for humans and their own bodies. A construction of the human as a 'thing among things', such that the human is represented as estranged from its body, and its body or body part seems to exercise autonomy independent of the will of its 'host', was a fitting strategy for my fiction: such a construction calls into question the ontological purity of the human and interpolates the human as yet another 'thing' in a vast overarching system.

I have characterised *White Noise*'s aesthetic as one of 'dirt and disobedience' in contrast to the 'hard gloss' of *Pattern Recognition* and to a certain extent *Inception*. I have chosen the term 'dirt' not only to evoke a sense of clutter and disorganisation, but also to evoke Jameson's 'dirty realism', which, as Chapter 2 explained, refers to 'the collective as such, the traces of mass, anonymous living and using' (*Seeds* 158). Jameson adds that the 'space of dirty realism' is 'a collective built space, in which the opposition between inside and outside is annulled' (*Seeds* 155) and the city 'becomes one immense amorphous unrepresentable container' (*Seeds* 156). This suggests that spaces of dirty realism are 'spaces of in-betweenness' (Lewis and Cho 86); that is, reality is represented as 'dirty', liminal, susceptible to breaches in ontological hygiene. It is this aesthetic of 'dirt' that helps produce an even more constricted closed space for DeLillo's characters. While the closed spaces of *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception* are ones in which characters' constant travel between countries permits a sense of global scale,[11] the main characters in *White Noise* do not seem to ever travel far outside their hometown. The novel takes place almost entirely in Blacksmith, and other places tend to exist only as representations, such as in TV news reports or inside a scenic glass paperweight. Even during the evacuation of Blacksmith during the Airborne Toxic Event, which sees Jack's family waylaid in a traffic jam and then in an overcrowded camp, the characters cannot escape the inertia and claustrophobia of their daily lives. The constrictedness of the novel's world means that the same characters cross paths with more frequency and intensity than in *Pattern Recognition*; in particular, Jack's friend and colleague Murray Jay Siskind is encountered regularly on the college campus and at the supermarket. The lack of global scale permitted by the novel's single setting of Blacksmith is compounded by

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[11] Of course, in *Inception*, whether or not these other places are actually part of the real world is debatable.

what Boxall calls 'a narrative time with no co-ordinates, with no assigned beginning or end', a 'slack tide of a plotless narrative' (110). Boxall elaborates: 'Whenever we are welcomed into a new narrative scene, the narrator will tend to orient us with the vapid, displaced phrase "this was the day": "this was the day Wilder started crying" […]; "this was the week a policeman saw a body thrown from a UFO"' (110). While Boxall characterises this form of narration as being 'not contained within any […] narrative cage' (111), I would argue that this aimlessness is paradoxically confining: it seems to deny the presence of an 'outside', instead contributing to a construction of Blacksmith as a self-contained world of automatic and inconsequential functioning. As Boxall says, the continued markers of 'this was the day' show that 'a happening or an event […] is read and understood through the possibility of its happening again' (110). Like video-game characters, automatons, or the projections that fill the enclosed dream spaces of *Inception*, the residents of Blacksmith carry out their day-to-day activities without growth or change, travelling along programmed trajectories. They seem to inhabit a town which is more 'map' than 'territory', an effect made all the more apparent by the repeated appearances of SIMUVAC, an organisation that rehearses emergency responses to disasters and uses the Airborne Toxic Event as a simulation. While my fiction, unlike *White Noise*, does employ temporal markings, I wished to incorporate a sense of narrative 'slackness', of characters trapped in the endless present of their hometown, for whom 'other places' seem to exist only as abstract ideas. The 'dirty' aesthetic produces this constrictedness not only through clutter and physical closeness, but through a 'dirty' or corrupted sense of reality.

However, 'dirt' in the sense of clutter and over-proliferation is also integral to DeLillo's construction of closed space. In *White Noise*, DeLillo creates a crowded and claustrophobic social reality, in which 'lively' technological systems are not just comprised of glossy gadgets but extend to the labyrinthine supermarkets, fast food, pharmaceuticals, and, 'over it all, or under it all, a dull and unlocatable roar' – the ceaseless chatter of advertising and information. Linda Charnes, complementing Flieger's paranoid modality of postmodernity, conceives of paranoia not as 'an individual pathology in which someone imagines conspiracies or has delusions of persecution, but, rather, paranoia in the literal Greek sense as a form of "overknowing," of surplus knowledge that leads, paradoxically, not to discovery but to undecidability' (4–5). Charnes draws her understanding of paranoia from the noir detective story, in which the '*noir* detective [as opposed to the *classic* detective] is

less concerned with historical events – with what *happened* – than he is with ontologies – with the way things *are*' (5). Dean, also utilising the language of the detective story, says that the paranoid conspiracist's 'drive for evidence is […] complicated by the troubling possibility that the evidence isn't real. Put somewhat differently, conspiratorial doubt goes so far that it can't trust the very evidence it tries to accumulate. It doesn't know what the evidence is for, what exactly it proves' (97). Ours is a case of not having too few clues, but too many, and just what the clues 'prove' is ambiguous. In *White Noise*, Jack recalls that Murray 'says we are fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts. Facts threaten our happiness and security. The deeper we delve into the nature of things, the looser our structure may seem to become' (97). The characters in *White Noise* are constantly bombarded with 'facts' – instructions, opinions, advertisements, warnings – mostly in the form of TV and radio sound bites. Jack's home life is punctuated by these unremarked-upon interjections:

> After dinner, on my way upstairs, I heard the TV say: 'Let's sit half lotus and think about our spines.' (21)

> He was bent over a putt. Babette leaned on the refrigerator door with her arms folded, watching him. Upstairs a British voice said: 'There are forms of vertigo that do not include spinning.' (67)

> Without a word we replaced the radiator cover, bottle intact, and went back to Denise's room. The voice at the end of the bed said: 'Meanwhile here is a quick and attractive lemon garnish suitable for any sea food.' (205)

> [Babette] raised the comforter over her head. I could only stare at the hilly terrain. A man on talk radio said: 'I was getting mixed messages about my sexuality.' (230)

Eventually this omnipresent media voice is fulfilled by a human – 'A woman passing on the street said, "A decongestant, an antihistamine, a cough suppressant, a pain reliever"' (301) – and later on by the prose itself, as in Chapter 37, which ends with non-sequitur advice on how to choose a PIN. This clutter of hostile and often irrelevant facts increases the constrictedness of *White Noise*'s closed space: it is 'dirt' in the form of noise and mixed messages that creates an oppressive atmosphere of undecidability. Knowledge is a hostile, omnipotent presence in *White Noise*: it does not seem to accumulate into anything meaningful.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo establishes surplus knowledge both at the level of plot *and* at the level of style, so that the reader is burdened with a sense of overknowing. This is a similar strategy to Gibson's establishment of potentially meaningless patterns or coincidences throughout *Pattern Recognition*, but in *White Noise*, the effect is more conspicuous and oppressive. In his analysis of Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, O'Donnell notes that that a variety of characters depicted in the novel '[engage] in identical speech acts', creating the impression of 'a common, homogenous language issuing from a single communal body' (187). O'Donnell quotes a string of instances in *The Executioner's Song* of a multitude of characters using 'super' as a prefix – 'supernice', 'supergross', 'superpipeline', 'superintelligent' – and suggests that '[t]his collation of coincidental tic and expression into communal grammar is evidence of the "overvoice" of *The Executioner's Song*, and it reflects what I take to be the insertion of Mailer's intention – more pointedly, his paranoid authorial presence – into events that otherwise would appear to be random' (187). Just as *Inception* featured repetitious lines of dialogue spoken by different characters, disrupting the veracity of Cobb's *real world* by pointing to the presence of a single dreamer, *White Noise* also features characters who engage in identical speech acts, to unnerving effect: the line 'knowledge changes every day' is spoken first by Babette (198) and then echoed by a technician at Autumn Harvest Farms who delivers Jack's health test results (321); the dismissive phrase 'it's obvious' is uttered variously by Elliot Lasher (78), Winnie Richards (215), and Murray (324). *White Noise*'s overvoice or communal grammar is more generally evident in the characters' theatrical and unnatural dialogue: both children and adults speak in arch, mannered tones. Jack, in particular, has a fondness for speaking metafictionally, as if his life is a text – for example, when he confronts Babette about Dylar: 'It's time for a major dialogue. You know it, I know it. You'll tell me all about Dylar' (218). Heinrich's speech about neurons is by no means an anomaly in *White Noise*: characters like Babette, Murray, and Winnie, among others, deliver essay-like monologues throughout the novel. John Johnston calls these '"frontal" – almost "facing-the-camera" – declarations' (263), and as they accumulate in *White Noise*, they establish not just a claustrophobia-inducing communal grammar but something resembling the technological neutrality of *Inception*, where every human is understood according to a homogenous interface. While Gibson limited unnaturally long monologues of this sort to short bursts, such

as Bigend's 'we have no future' speech, the baseline for what constitutes everyday conversation in *White Noise* is extremely estranging to the reader – its artificiality points repeatedly to an 'authorial presence', to DeLillo himself.[12] Furthermore, the transference of the omnipresent media voice from the Gladney television and radio to the prose also constitutes a kind of overvoice – Jack's narration is punctuated by non-sequitur pronouncements, which often form a one-sentence paragraph:

> Darcron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex. (62)
>
> MasterCard, Visa, American Express. (119)
>
> Leaded, unleaded, super-unleaded. (229)
>
> Panasonic. (277)

O'Donnell says, 'The romanticised opposition to cultural domination, […] in which the individual perceives him- or herself to be part of a community of underground men and women opposed to the dominant culture, becomes, in novels of cultural paranoia, the disguised infiltration of that culture into every hidden corner of contemporary existence' (183). While Jack may imagine himself to be aware of and critical of his culture, often positioning himself as a distant commentator, the 'MasterCard, Visa, American Express'–style interruptions insist that even Jack is not immune to infiltration. *White Noise*, like *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception*, contains characters that position themselves as *readers*, and are subsumed by an excess of information just like the novel's readers.

This vivid sense of information overload is crucial to DeLillo's construction of behind-the-curve characters. As McCaffery points out, postmodern society is not only comprised of 'new "high-tech" products'; instead, 'even more significant than these "tangible products" has been the rapid proliferation of technologically mass-produced "products" that are essentially *reproductions* or *abstractions* – images, advertising, information, memories, styles, simulated experiences, and copies of original experiences' (4). The technologised subjects represented in *Pattern Recognition*, *Inception*, and *White Noise* are not only technologised in the sense of taking on the characteristics of high-tech, tangible products. As Michael Valdez Moses writes, 'For DeLillo's characters, contemporary American "reality" has

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[12] A more contemporary example of a text which naturalises the estranging theatrical and self-aware communal grammar of its characters is the 2014 Australian novella *No Limit* by Holly Childs. It is not surprising that Childs's novella has attracted comparison with *White Noise* (Watson n. pag.), due in part to its 'slack tide' plot, themes of technological anxiety and information overload, and apocalyptic setting.

become completely mediated and artificial; theirs is a culture of comprehensive and seemingly total representation' (64). The technologised subject is also the human as reproduction or abstraction, as 'nice thing', as a commodity not just of use value but exchange value, as a part of a system of total representation. John Frow says that *White Noise* is 'obsessed' with 'the construction of typicality' (177): the characters in the novel continuously endeavour to approximate the social 'types' and narratives that are represented in media culture. For example, a SIMUVAC representative instructs volunteers who pose as victims in an emergency simulation: 'And remember you're not here to scream or thrash about. We like a low-profile victim. This isn't New York or LA. Soft moans will suffice' (237). Jack's persona as the head of the department of Hitler studies is another example. The college chancellor implores Jack to gain weight, to '"grow out" into Hitler': 'If I could become more ugly, he seemed to be suggesting, it would help my career enormously' (19). He, along with the other department heads, must wear black academic robes on the college campus, which Jack pairs with dark sunglasses. Jack also invents an extra initial for himself, so he is known academically as J.A.K. Gladney. This all leads Jack to surmise that he is 'the false character that follows the name around' (20). In other words, Jack understands that he must become the message of himself, the 'nice thing', the sum total of his data.[13] In our contemporary world, social media sites such as Facebook also allow people to become messages of themselves; the cultivation of an online persona – maintained through likes, photos, and status updates – is how one might become the 'nice thing'. For many of the characters in *White Noise*, particularly Jack and Murray, to establish oneself as the 'nice thing' means to approximate a persona that is authoritative: to present as someone who has mastered the hostile facts, to be the one in-the-know. Thus the threat to the technologised subject's agency does not reside solely in 'disturbingly lively' machines and objects – there are many ways that one can be ejected from the system, and failing to maintain one's status as a 'nice thing' – to not pass as 'typical' – is one of them.

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[13] Caleb Milligan's recent analysis of *White Noise*, using the lens of Internet and game studies, further suggests that Jack is obsessed with playing the role of several 'types' or 'avatars' throughout the novel – 'professor, disaster victim, detective, and lone gunman' (1) – making DeLillo's novel a 'prophetic text about the way we digitally manifest our extended identities through online avatars' (4). While scholars often characterise Jack as a modernist overwhelmed by postmodern society, Milligan contends that Jack is instead 'a postmodern human simulacrum sampling different character types to avoid his lack of discernible self' (ii).

The behind-the-curve characters of *White Noise* understand this need to maintain their status as 'nice thing', a task that is incredibly difficult within a system of representation which overwhelms them. Just like the 'lively' technological systems that surround Jack, this system of representation is capable of being 'lively', independent. In *Pattern Recognition*, keyboard symbols corporealise in a barman's spectacles, and seemingly inert trademarks cause bodily reactions for Cayce; in *Inception*, the narrative or 'map' designed by the dream thieves becomes the territory that Robert Fischer must traverse like a video-game character, and the dream space itself is a place in which ideas and information are granted physical form. *White Noise* is replete with similar Baudrillardian instances of representations that become 'lively', for example, the Dylar medication's side-effect of '[causing] the user to confuse words with the things they referred to' (356) – pronouncements of 'hail of bullets' (358) and 'plunging aircraft' (356) cause one Dylar user to duck and crouch in terror. Through the constant presence of noise, chatter, and signs, the characters in *White Noise* are always aware of their place in a constructed reality, in which the ability to read and control data and information is paramount to securing one's agency. Andreas Huyssen implies that the information overload of the contemporary moment additionally signals a kind of memory crisis: the postmodern culture of 'self-musealisation' (24), intent on archiving and storing memories, may be paradoxically accompanied by a 'boom in forgetting' (27). That is, memory, externalised in objects and records, is simply a form of forgetting or delayed knowledge; it is an act of storing inert information for later consumption and contemplation (if 'later' ever arrives). As Porush says, 'It's what the library whispers to you across campus: "You don't need to know if you know where to get it"' ('Frothing' 253). Heinrich underscores this postmodern memory crisis when, in the evacuation shelter during the Airborne Toxic Event, he entertains a scenario in which a person from the present day travels back to the Stone Age. Heinrich insists that such a time-traveller would not be able to impart any 'great and modern' (172) insights to the people there:

> '[…] Can we make a refrigerator? Can we even explain how it works? What
> is electricity? What is light? We experience these things every day of our
> lives but what good does it do if we find ourselves hurled back in time and
> we can't even tell people the basic principles much less actually make

something that would improve conditions. Name one thing you could make. […]' (172)

Here, the act of knowing itself is defamiliarised for the reader – knowing *how* to use things is not tantamount to knowing how or why the thing works. Heinrich taunts Jack: 'Here it is practically the twenty-first century and you've read hundreds of books and magazines and seen a hundred TV shows about science and medicine. Could you tell those people one little crucial thing that might save a million and a half lives?' (173) Heinrich smugly concludes that 'nobody actually knows anything' (173). The realisation of these gaps in our knowledge might produce agency panic – the feeling, again, that humans are automatons, mindlessly functioning without true understanding or wisdom. DeLillo implies that knowledge in postmodernity is disembodied and does not necessarily reside in memory: it is a diffuse entity that is not actively 'remembered', that can seemingly exist without a host, 'some form of swarming life just outside the range of human apprehension' (43).

Thus DeLillo's behind-the-curve characters are driven by this fear of being caught out, of their status as 'nice thing' being challenged and undermined by the horrifying truth that nobody really knows anything – that the vast system of representation, knowledge, and information no longer requires (or perhaps never required) the human. A text that engages with this same sense of postmodern paranoia from information overload, and which is often mentioned in tandem with *White Noise*, is Thomas Pynchon's 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which the protagonist, Oedipa Maas, becomes enveloped in what could be a conspiracy or an elaborate hoax perpetuated by her deceased ex-lover. O'Donnell describes Maas as a paranoid figure:

> Within the realm of the obvious, saturated by information overload, the paranoid subject is disempowered by virtue of the all-encompassing plots and systems that surround her; paradoxically, she is empowered as one in a growing army capable of reading the signs of these plots and power relations, not to resist or escape them but to formulate an ironic, streetwise attitude toward them. One knows she is part of a series of orchestrated events over which she has no control, but knowing it confers a kind of legitimacy upon the knower: She can be manipulated but she can't be fooled about being manipulated; she is always prepared for the revelation of deeper plots, more layered conspiracies. (190)

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Although the characters in *White Noise* are not embroiled in an overt 'conspiracy' or 'plot' in the same manner as Oedipa Maas, they occupy a similar position of paradoxical empowerment and disempowerment. As their frequently self-referential communal grammar and essay-like monologues demonstrate, the characters are very 'capable of reading the signs' that surround them: they are highly literate, knowledgeable people, but knowing does not provide them with any particular comfort or advantage. Heinrich's assertion that nobody knows anything is a sentiment echoed later in the novel by Winnie Richards, a neurochemist at the College-on-the-Hill whom Jack consults about Babette's Dylar capsules. To Jack's continued insistence that Winnie is 'brilliant', she replies, 'We're all brilliant. Isn't that the understanding around here? You call me brilliant, I call you brilliant. It's a form of communal ego' (216). Jack and Winnie belong to an academy of 'brilliance', of people who have perfected the art of being the 'nice thing'. Winnie, Jack, and others may be adept at reading the signs and perceiving the threats to autonomy that surround them, but their brilliance is illusory, offering no real protection from the burden of overknowing. While in *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce's brilliance enables her to find the footage maker, and in *Inception*, Cobb's brilliance reunites him with his children, the characters in *White Noise* have no such payoff. Instead, as Murray claims, 'The deeper we delve into the nature of things, the looser our structure may seem to become' (97). This is underscored in a passage when Jack's internal philosophical debate over whether a nine-year-old girl can suffer a miscarriage spirals out of control and ends with the feeble question: 'What is a thing and how do we know it's not another thing?' (147). The more that Jack knows and delves into intellectual problems, the more he realises he does not know; reality comes apart at the seams and the distinction between 'things' becomes tenuous. In these moments, Jack's sense of being able to exercise mastery over the intolerable space of reality – to categorise and control it – is challenged. Jack's knowledge, his brilliance, leads only to undecidability. DeLillo's construction of behind-the-curve characters, whose 'brilliance' does not guarantee triumph, was compatible with the trajectories of many of my fiction's characters: although they are part of the 'growing army' of competent image-readers and image-makers, they are still unsure what to do with their knowledge, sifting through an accumulation of potentially meaningful and meaningless 'evidence' for a mystery they cannot define.

Throughout *White Noise*, Babette teaches a class of adults on posture – 'Basically she is teaching them how to stand, sit and walk' (31) – and later on begins to teach a class called Eating and Drinking. She explains:

> 'Knowledge changes every day. People like to have their beliefs reinforced. Don't lie down after eating a heavy meal. Don't drink liquor on an empty stomach. If you must swim, wait at least an hour after eating. The world is more complicated for adults than it is for children. We didn't grow up with all these shifting facts and attitudes. One day they just started appearing. So people need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority that a certain way to do something is the right way or the wrong way, at least for the time being. I'm the closest they could find, that's all.' (198)

Babette's class is a kind of stopgap measure to regain autonomy, to secure mastery over the proliferation of hostile facts. I have come to think of these measures as establishing 'protocol' – a safe way to behave, act, or manage hostile facts to forestall one's obsolescence. In *White Noise*, not understanding the protocol – the 'right way' to do things, or perhaps the 'typical' way – is the source of much anxiety for the characters, such as on the day that the youngest child in Jack's household, Wilder, spontaneously and continuously cries, leading Jack and Babette to schedule a doctor's appointment. Before they leave, they try to anticipate the doctor's queries and rehearse their answers: Jack explains, 'It seemed vital to agree on the answers even if we weren't sure they were correct. Doctors lose interest in people who contradict each other. This fear has long informed my relationship with doctors, that they would lose interest in me, instruct their receptionists to call other names before mine, take my dying for granted' (90). DeLillo evokes this anxiety later in the novel, when Jack overhears a fellow academic at the college, Alfonse Stompanato, insist that having social credibility and authority in New York requires one to have not a good lawyer or estate planner but an internist (someone who looks after internal organs).

> '[…] "Who's your internist?" someone will say in a challenging tone. The question implies that if your internist's name is unfamiliar, you are certain to die of a mushroom-shaped tumour on your pancreas. You are meant to feel inferior and doomed not just because your inner organs may be trickling blood but because you don't know who to see about it, how to make contacts, how to make your way in the world. Never mind the military–industrial

complex. The real power is wielded every day, in these little challenges and intimidations, by people just like us.' (250)

Indeed, Jack is assaulted regularly with 'little challenges and intimidations' that remind him that he is ill-equipped to make his way in the world. That these challenges often come from the fourteen-year-old Heinrich is especially unnerving for Jack: just as the 1980s saw computer technology utilised by 'millions of non-experts', knowledge in *White Noise* is no longer the privileged domain of institutions and experts, but is potentially apprehensible to anyone, and Jack can find himself under attack at any time from a 'little fistful of data' (136). As foreshadowed by the recurring chimes of 'it's obvious' from the novel's overvoice, characters (especially adults) continually feel shame for not knowing, for failing to understand protocol, for failing to grasp what others take to be 'obvious'. Jack understands the need to appeal to people who are 'in the know', from the family doctor to the SIMUVAC representative at the evacuation camp who pronounces that Jack will die – 'I wanted this man on my side. He had access to data. I was prepared to be servile and fawning' (162). The anxiety that the doctor will 'call other names before mine' and that failing to find a respectable internist will lead to one's doom both speak to a fear of obsolescence – a fear, perhaps, of being found out as a poor reader or cognitive mapper. The daily lives of the characters in my own fiction are pitted with 'little challenges and intimidations' – their ability to apprehend the unspoken protocol of making one's way in the world is continually tested. These tests issue forth not necessarily from large, powerful threats, or not even from 'people just like us', but from the anxieties of everyday living – the 'lively' system of unspoken protocols which determines what may pass as 'typical'.

In the following passage, Babette explains to Jack the underpinning of her classes in posture, eating, and drinking, which is basically an appeal to finding protocol:

'You know how I am. I think everything is correctible. Given the right attitude and the proper effort, a person can change a harmful condition by reducing it to its simplest parts. You can make lists, invent categories, devise charts and graphs. This is how I am able to teach my students how to stand, sit and walk, even though I know you think these subjects are too obvious and nebulous and generalised to be reduced to component parts. I'm not a very ingenious person but I know how to break things down, how to separate and classify. We can analyse posture, we can analyse eating, drinking and even

breathing. How else do you understand the world, is my way of looking at it.'
(220)

Michael Valdez Moses also highlights this passage in his essay 'Lust Removed from Nature'. To Moses, Babette is espousing a 'technological understanding of the world' (67), in which the world is apprehended 'as a form of mechanics' (68). Within a framework that holds everything to be 'correctible', Moses writes, '[t]here are no given or natural activities, only technical procedures by which consciousness learns to master its environment, an environment that includes the body. Babette's classes […] are a comic version of the world rendered as pure *techne* (originally meaning in Greek the art of making or doing)' (68). Babette joins Heinrich in constructing herself as a technologised subject, but while Heinrich uses a cybernetic construction of his subjectivity to deny the certainty of his autonomy, Babette is more hopeful. She draws on a conception of technology similar to *Inception*'s, in which technology allows one to manage the human. If she can utilise the right protocols, if she can re-program or 'correct' herself to no longer fear death, she can survive the little challenges and intimidations, assert her mastery over the world, and evade obsolescence. Babette's attempts to 'correct' herself, however, fail; observing the protocol does not protect her from the fear of death, and the drug trial for Dylar is unsuccessful. Babette finds herself, when in conversation with Jack, not just still terrified of death but vying to even occupy a space in the conversation: as Jack repeatedly tries to centralise himself in the narrative by ruminating on how Babette has deceived him, Babette must continually remind him: 'This is not a story about your disappointment at my silence. The theme of this story is my pain and my attempts to end it' (221). Babette, up until this point, has been consistently characterised by Jack as an ample, motherly, unsecretive woman, who 'lack[s] the guile for conspiracies of the body' (6). Perhaps her affair with the Dylar chemist Mr Gray/Willie Mink is Babette's eventual attempt to override her social programming – indeed, Jack seems more distressed and betrayed by Babette performing against her 'type' than the actual affair. However, Babette has simply exchanged one protocol for another, for her affair with Mink conforms to a typical narrative of infidelity, conducted in 'a grubby little motel room' with a 'TV up near the ceiling' (223). Caleb Milligan says that 'Jack does not see the others he shares his reality with as fully realised people, but shallow representations' (33). It would appear that Babette

will always find herself 'mapped' by Jack – a shallow representation at the margins who exists seemingly only to define the centre.

Jack, too, discovers that following the protocol does not protect him. While he insists that '[s]ociety is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters', and that no one 'ever see[s] a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods' (133), the Airborne Toxic Event makes Jack realise that his persona as an academic – which he performed perfectly – does not render him immune to the television-like disaster that has befallen him. It is no surprise that, upon discovering from the SIMUVAC representative that he is likely to die from exposure to the Airborne Toxic Event, Jack says, 'I wanted my academic gown and dark glasses' (165). Cayce and Cobb, like Jack, are haunted by a singularly wounding event that challenges their sense of immunity, particularly as white, affluent, American subjects – for Cayce, 9/11; for Cobb, the death of his wife and his exile from the USA. Cayce's and Cobb's command of protocols allows them to reassert their mastery over the intolerable space of their post-disaster realities. They even reclaim mastery over their own bodies and minds: Cayce is no longer allergic to brands and trademarks; Cobb has exorcised Mal from his unconscious. Their narratives ultimately support the 'long-standing cultural fantasy' of the autonomous individual. After the Airborne Toxic Event, Jack, on the other hand, simply re-enters the 'slack tide' of his regular existence. He observes bizarre events with the same casualness that he registered the deranged person escorted from the bank: 'The time of spiders arrived' (295); 'The time of dangling insects arrived' (312). Even Jack's attempt to kill Willie Mink does not help him escape the slack tide. As Jack drives through a toll bridge without paying and is not stopped when the alarm sounds, he reflects: 'This must be how people escape the pull of the earth, the gravitational leaf-flutter that brings us hourly closer to dying. Simply stop obeying. Steal instead of buy, shoot instead of talk' (348). Jack decides to abandon protocol, to stop obeying, but like Babette he ends up simply exchanging one protocol for another, as his plan to kill Mink becomes a series of technical procedures that he obsessively repeats to himself:

> Here is my plan. […] [L]ocate Mr. Gray under his real name or an alias, shoot him three times in the viscera for maximum pain, clear the weapon of prints […]. (349)

> My plan was this. Swivel my head to look into rooms, put him at ease, wait for an unguarded moment, blast him in the gut three times for maximum efficiency of pain […]. (353)

> My plan was elegant. Advance gradually, gain his confidence, take out the Zumwalt, fire three bullets at his midsection for maximum visceral agony, clear the weapon of prints […]. (355)

Jack's exuberant catharsis – when he injures Mink, and then decides to save him – is shortlived, for in the last chapter we return once again to the slack tide: 'This was the day Wilder got on his plastic tricycle, rode it around the block, turned right onto a dead end street and pedalled noisily to the dead end' (370). It is business as usual: the Blacksmith residents gather to watch the sunset; the family visits the supermarket. With Jack, DeLillo models an ineffectual, struggling protagonist who is denied the kind of grand catharsis achieved by Cobb and Cayce. Although Jack tries to conserve an outdated mode of autonomy even as he 'formulate[s] an ironic, streetwise attitude' to the contemporary environment that threatens him – leading Stacey Olster to call him 'a modernist in postmodernist clothing' (89) – the narrative of *White Noise* disrupts the cultural fantasy that mastery over intolerable space is possible. In this sense, DeLillo's novel spoke a little more closely than *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception* to my own experience of the 'invasive weirdness' of postmodernity, and his representation of the failure of protocol was congruent with the experiences of many of the protagonists in my fiction.

What is left, after protocol fails? In his essay 'Whole Families Shopping At Night!', Thomas J. Ferraro draws attention to the pleasure of reading the countless passages of Jack and his family going shopping. In these scenes, Ferraro says, 'the comedy is playful and inclusive rather than belittling' (31). In *White Noise*, DeLillo demonstrates a kind of tenderness and even empathy in these endless accounts of shopping excursions. One such breathless excursion takes place, as Ferraro points out, after Jack suffers an embarrassing encounter with one of his colleagues, Eric Massingdale, who says that Jack looks 'harmless' and 'indistinct' (98) without his imposing academic clothing, underscoring his nothingness when he is not the 'nice thing' of J.A.K. Gladney. 'The encounter put me in the mood to shop,' Jack says, turning to the mall to regain his lost sense of mastery:

> My family gloried in the event. I was one of them, shopping, at last. […] We moved from store to store, rejecting not only items in certain departments, not

only entire departments but whole stores, mammoth corporations that did not strike our fancy for one reason or another. There was always another store, three floors, eight floors, basement full of cheese graters and paring knives. I shopped with reckless abandon. I shopped for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking and touching, inspecting merchandise I had no intention of buying, then buying it. […] I began to grow in value and self-regard. I filled myself out, found new aspects of myself, located a person I'd forgotten existed. Brightness settled around me. […] I traded money for goods. The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit. […] A band played live Muzak. Voices rose ten storeys from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery, mixing with noises from the tiers, with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction. (99–100)

Ferraro says that 'DeLillo examines not so much the individuating force of consumer culture as its communalising power. What he sees is how consumerism produces what we might call an aura of connectedness among individuals: an illusion of kinship' (20). Jack is one with his family, 'shopping, at last'. Even though this 'aura of connectedness' is often hostile – the chimes of 'it's obvious' that remind Jack that he could be ejected from the system at any time – there is nonetheless still comfort to be found in the aura, reassurance in every transaction, in being in accord with the system even 'for now'. To illustrate 'the meaningless momentum of the modern world', Cooper quotes Heidegger: '[e]verything is functioning. This is exactly what is so uncanny, that everything is functioning and that the functioning drives us more and more to even further functioning' (24). In an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo also refers to this 'meaningless momentum', but gives it a different name, 'dailiness':

I would call it a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments. In *White Noise*, in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred. […] [T]here is something there that we tend to

miss … something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just

beyond our vision. (qtd. in Ferraro 30)

Ferraro describes dailiness as 'a kind of magic' (30), recalling Gunning's observations about the 'magical operations' of technology. Even though this magic is 'frightening', as DeLillo says, it can also be 'holy or sacred', even comforting. On one of his many long walks with Murray, Jack observes an incident in which Murray 'went into small embarrassed raptures over diagonal parking', a charming arrangement that Jack says 'was not only practical but avoided confrontation, the sexual assault motif of front-to-back parking in teeming city streets' (295). He concludes that 'Murray says it is possible to be homesick for a place even when you are there' (295). It is pleasure enough to be part of the ceaseless functioning, the false aura. One can indeed be 'homesick', nostalgic and yearning, for something that is functioning perfectly – like the ATM that authenticates and confirms Jack's existence, the ceaseless functioning of the system can inspire '[w]aves of relief and gratitude' (55). Similarly, I wished for my fiction to depict the ceaseless functioning of contemporary existence as not only frightening, but something both heartbreaking and reassuring. When Babette confesses her fear of death to Jack, he says:

'How strange it is. We have these deep terrible lingering fears about

ourselves and the people we love. Yet we walk around, talk to people, eat and

drink. We manage to function. The feelings are deep and real. Shouldn't they

paralyse us? How is it we can survive them, at least for a while? We drive a

car, we teach a class. How is it no one sees how deeply afraid we were, last

night, this morning? Is it something we all hide from each other, by mutual

consent? Or do we share the same secret without knowing it? Wear the same

disguise.' (228)

The answer DeLillo seems to offer in *White Noise* resides in the functioning itself – in the talking, eating, driving; in quotidian activities. While DeLillo defamiliarises technology and systems often to alienate the reader and expose the latent hostility of things, he also uses defamiliarisation to reveal the solace of mundane things – the diagonal parking, the sprayed and burnished fruit, the vivid and happy transactions. This sense of reassurance and pleasure derived from ceaseless functioning is not quite like the anaesthetising and seductive effect of hard gloss: there is still an overriding texture of dirt and disobedience, a sense that one's place in the system is tenuous. *White Noise* concludes in the hypnotically slow-moving checkout line, the

shoppers still reeling in confusion from the rearranged supermarket shelves –
DeLillo's object world has time for one last betrayal – but soon the ceaseless
functioning soothes Jack once more, the cash registers 'equipped with holographic
scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly'; the 'carts stocked
with brightly coloured goods'; and the tabloid racks that contain '[e]verything we
need that is not food or love' (375).

Conclusion

Science fiction and postmodern fiction participate in a feedback loop, a relationship
that intensified in the 1980s. This was an historical conjuncture in which the
penetration of the 'future' into the 'present' was made visible by academic and
literary discourse and the dissemination of technology that saw the succession of
machines by systems. Science fiction and postmodern fiction are two narrative forms
that respond to the same set of concerns, which this chapter has characterised as the
technologised subject's fear of obsolescence. The strategies of
defamiliarisation/naturalisation and intolerable spaces discussed in the first two
chapters of this exegesis underpin the narrative strategies that I have identified in
White Noise – the representation of 'lively' systems, an aesthetic of dirt and
disobedience, the construction of an even more constricted closed space, and behind-
the-curve characters. In particular, *White Noise*'s non-naturalistic dialogue and 'dirty
realist' setting were suggestive models for my own fiction: DeLillo combines the
deeply familiar and ordinary (shopping, ATMs, advertising chatter) with the deeply
unfamiliar and absurd (theatrical character monologues, SIMUVAC, Babette's
Eating and Drinking class) to create an estranging science-fictionalised present.
However, what differentiates *White Noise* from *Pattern Recognition* and *Inception* is
a more pervasive sense of agency panic, from which the protagonists do not ever
seem to recover. In *White Noise*, DeLillo resists the persistent cultural fantasy of
technological proficiency and human uniqueness and autonomy: everything is *not*
correctible; 'brilliance' is futile. And yet, DeLillo concedes that there is still comfort
to be found in the ceaseless functioning of existence, however fleetingly we may find
ourselves in accord with the system.

CONCLUSION

This exegesis has described postmodernity as an age of information overload, technological proliferation and vast overarching systems. It is an age predicated on a troubled relationship with 'the real' and the predominance of images and media culture. This exegesis has suggested three 'frames' for conceptualising this conjuncture.

Chapter 1 explored Veronica Hollinger's term 'the science-fictionalised present'. This is a characterisation of postmodernity as an unstable present continuously ruptured by science-fictional imagery and iconography, a present which is already perforated by the future. The compatibility of science fiction's plots, images, and language with our current reality suggests that science fiction provides a productive narrative form for addressing postmodern anxieties and undertaking a 'cognitive mapping' of our present. An examination of William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*, a novel which participates in contemporary science fiction's general withdrawal from representing 'the future', demonstrated that the strangeness of the science-fictionalised present is at once conspicuous and inconspicuous to its inhabitants. Tools, technologies, and the reductive processes of capitalism and media culture are not only defamiliarised for the reader and the protagonist, but reality itself becomes conspicuous as a narrative or conspiracy, rife with ambiguous coincidences and patterns, capable of being 'read'.

Chapter 2 explored Scott Bukatman's interpretation of Fredric Jameson's term 'intolerable spaces'. Postmodernity has inaugurated the creation of spaces which are not designed for humans to perceive or comprehend, such as the electronic realm created by computer terminals and networks. These spaces are 'intolerable' not only because they are incompatible with human senses, but because they decentralise the human and repel the human's attempts to master it. An examination of Christopher Nolan's film *Inception* surmised that real space is important even to science-fiction narratives that ostensibly engage with intolerable spaces – real space provides the language with which to bring intolerable spaces into visibility (and thus under the command of the human), as well as providing motivation for characters and mobilising plot. The dominant narratives and power structures of real space are also extremely difficult to 'dream' outside of: *Inception* demonstrates how deeply technology, late capitalism, and Hollywood cinema have pervaded the unconscious,

delineating who may occupy the 'centre' of narrative. Bukatman's concept of 'intolerable spaces' further interpolates postmodern reality as text, and the intolerable spaces of *Inception* are accordingly also narrative spaces, in which the human's attempts to compensate for lost mastery are challenged or made conspicuous by closed space, collisions, deceptive objects and landscapes, and dream logic.

Chapter 3 investigated 'the technologised subject', a term which foregrounds the effect of the postmodern conjuncture on the persistent cultural fantasy of the human as an autonomous individual separate from, and standing above, the rest of existence. The term 'technologised subject' gestures to a human which is not only literally technologised (in the sense of taking on the attributes of technology), but a human which is a commodity or a trademark, a human as a participant in a system of meaning. As such, the human can find itself irrelevant, outdated, unnecessary, or obsolete. An examination of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, a novel which exemplifies the co-constitutive relationship of postmodern fiction and contemporary science fiction, demonstrated that the threat of obsolescence is made manifest in 'lively' systems and closed spaces of dirt and disobedience, which all undermine the human's agency and uniqueness in postmodernity.

The wound at the centre of my fiction is obsolescence. Many of the characters in my fiction experience their contemporary reality as overwhelming and incomprehensible – a reality that is simultaneously estranging and familiar, cluttered with information and noise, with codes and protocols that are not always grasped, with multiple and equally valid truths. These characters navigate a closed space in which technology allows both text and body to be edited, and in which unlikely coincidences, 'magical' benign objects, and dream logic challenge the ontological purity of the world. To these characters, reality is conspicuously readable, perforated by a sense of fictionality and dreamlike repetition and repurposing. *Rubik*'s overvoice insists that *everything can be repurposed* – images, words, sounds, texts, scenery, stories, characters, parts, organs. Within such a world, the characters cannot help but be keenly aware of how easily they, too, can be replaced and repurposed. They experience themselves as technologised subjects – as constructed, as programmed, as manipulated image, as conspicuous tool. They know that their place in 'the system' is tenuous; they are permanently in the grip of agency panic. Some of the characters attempt to shore up their autonomy by following protocol, others by abandoning protocol and performing 'against type'; some do not even get as far as

understanding the protocol in the first place. The ceaseless functioning of quotidian reality becomes reassuring and precious to these characters, and some of them use their abilities as image-makers or image-manipulators to create makeshift, imperfect narratives that can compensate for the overwhelming confusion and uncertainty of their world.

Pattern Recognition, *Inception*, and *White Noise* suggested productive narrative strategies for representing the 'invasive weirdness' of postmodernity, with *White Noise* perhaps going the furthest in revealing that a modernistic conception of the human as a rational, autonomous, and unique subject, who may command technology, information, images, and protocols to triumph and progress, is only illusory, despite a significant cultural investment in its continuation. Perhaps science fiction's persistent association with 'the future' is a symptom of this cultural investment. Although science fiction is often applauded for 'looking forward' and imagining alternative possibilities, many of the texts examined in this exegesis seem to suggest that 'the future' still popularly belongs to the familiar white masculine hero, and the loudest theories of postmodernity are predominantly articulated in terms of how this familiar identity is affected. Even *White Noise* takes as its central figure an affluent white man. While Jack struggles with the dawning obsolescence of his knowledge and authority, he fails to recognise the ways in which others in his life, like Babette, had always-already been deemed 'obsolete', unfit to occupy the centre of narrative – *White Noise* is, after all, more the story of '[Jack's] pain and [his] attempt[s] to end it' (221) than Babette's. With *Rubik*, I have attempted to offer some resistance to this model: my project's fragmented form of interrelated short stories, as opposed to a continuous narrative, disrupts a sense of there being 'centre', and, although many of my protagonists do not radically challenge the category of human, I have attempted to construct characters who reside outside the traditional cyberpunk hero mould – children, women (especially women who are not romantic foils), and others who occupy liminal/threshold identities.

Contemporary science fiction and postmodern fiction both take part in the same conversation about postmodernity, and this exegesis has examined three exemplary texts that, while US-centric, written by white male authors, and centred on characters who enjoy a degree of affluence and privilege, nonetheless spoke to my own particular anxieties and lived experience in the contemporary moment. My efforts to

'dream' outside of, or concede to the pull of, persistent cultural narratives about technology, human subjectivity, and narrative itself, are brought to fruition in *Rubik*.

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