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January 2011

Traversing the Fantasy of Capitalism in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*

Introduction

In *Pattern Recognition* (2003) [thereafter shortened as *PR*], the chess master wins the game and manipulates the informatic narrative by creating an illusion of the narrative being random. Along with the help of hackers and otaku, the protagonist and heroine Cayce Pollard traverses the capitalist closure, avoids its manipulation, and ultimately follows her real desires. While many has focused on Cayce's post-911 traumatic affect, I would like to argue that it is Cayce's confrontation with traumatic affect that forges as a shield that prevents her from turning into an interpassive subject and commodity fetish as the masses do. In a utopian society that neutralizes its unconscious desires with commodities and spectacles embedded with advertisement, Cayce's phobia to brand names prevents her from being subjectified by advertisement. As one of the political maneuvers of capitalism, advertisement deploys on the footages and its makers as the subject supposed to know, and the big Other that is embedded with symbolic discourse of the market capitalism. Furthermore, in the wake of 911 incident, while the masses choose to forget by consuming footages, Cayce chooses to remember by clinging to memories of her father. Her insistence to remember prevents her from being assimilated into administrated memory of capitalism. If Cayce's resistance to capitalism refigures the utopian society from its fixed hope of a complete wholeness and progress, Gibson's *PR* itself resists a closed capitalist narrative that has haunted us since the early nineteenth century.

Guy Debord's and Raoul Vaneigem's analyses and observations on the society of the spectacles, Bruce Fink's introduction to Lacanian reading of the obsessive and Slavoj Žižek's speculation on interpassive subject in consumer society as well as Jacques Derrida's justification of literature's force to transgress closure and Fredric Jameson's stance in literature as a socially symbolic act all contribute to ground my explanations, analyses, and investigations in this paper. I take *PR* as Gibson's observations on the modern city which is developing into a spectacular space including footages, spectacles, and commodities where the masses are hypnotized to consume the spectacles as commodities at the same time these spectacles shape a diplomatic history controlled by the corporation owner. The capitalist commodifies spectacles and sells them to audiences. With the manipulation of the capitalist, the

spectacles become commodities sold to audiences; moreover, audiences also become commodities in the marketplace. The advertisement's force in capitalist market is to be observed in the semiotics of the market as the big Other. It not only manipulates culture industry, but also incorporates traumatic emotions into the system of consumerism.

The capitalist's scheme of commodifying the world will be revealed, along with the help of Cayce who traces back to the original source of cultural trend, the dexterity of an otaku who decodes the plan of the T-bone city that is deployed by the market in its urbanization process, hints from a Curta lover who points out that Time is the key between the struggle of art and the market, and the help of a secret society that traces for the maker of the footage. As one of the footageheads Mama Anarchia writes on F:F:F discussion board:

Really it is entirely about story, though not in any sense that any of you seem familiar with. Do you know nothing of narratology? Where is Derridean "play" and excessiveness? Foucauldian limit-attitude? Lyotardian language-games? Lacanian Imaginaries? Where is the commitment to praxis, positioning Jamesonian nostalgia, and despair as well as Habermasian fears of irrationalism as panic discourses signaling the defeat of Enlightenment hegemony over cultural theory? But no: discourses on this site are hopelessly retrograde. (PR 278)

Mama Anarchia here inquires the glorious days of cyberspace when it still has its position to criticize the hegemony of cultural history and when cultural critiques from various perspectives form dialogic discourses around Enlightenment rationality. The site of subversion is tamed by capitalism's narrative. The audiences' fantastic desires are evocated by capitalist's phantasmagoric mask. Underneath it, in fact is a dictatorship that orders audiences to consume. Following into the corridors of capitalist's mythic maze, such as the department store, our desires are transformed into attachments to brand names. The brand names thus are one of the chess master's designs in manipulating consumers' desires into passively receiving ideological messages. Through the messages embedded with hidden false ideology, F:F:F members and the global audiences' trauma will not be healed as they hoped. On the contrary, their traumatic memories are to be edited and marketed as commodity.

Since footages are the media of capitalism's conspiracy, footage goers's consumption will develop into collective commercial memories, instead of the real memories. The consumption of footages develop into a cultural phenomenon attributed by a loss of meaning after the 911 incident, where urban men and women can be categorized as Žižek's interpassive subjects and consumer fetishists. Their

traumatic kernel and their void are projected in cultural artifacts which, however, are subject to the manipulation of market. Žižek's antidote to this loss is to insist in believing the nonexistence of a big Other (the global market capitalism's command) as a counter-factual belief. In the novel, the only one who "knows" that there is no deeper meaning is Cayce Pollard a cool-hunter whose phobia towards brand names intensifies her ability to forecast future trend. Since the pseudo-deeper meaning is disseminated through global franchised brand names, her phobia is a sensor and a stopper for the misinformation carried in brand names. While it is impossible for the collective unconscious to see the truth—the nonexistence of a big Other, her allergy to brand names (a manifestation of global marketing and mediatization) signals the conspiracy inscribed within the commodity.

Fantasy

Before speculating on Cayce's phobia which shields against the lure of capitalist fantasy, I shall map out the utopian society in terms of its space, and its subject formation. Guy Debord's theory helps to explicate the society that becomes a "spectacular" space composed by brand names, and signs of capitalist messages. According to Debord, "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (*Society of the Spectacle* 12). He notes that reality is mediated through spectacles so completely and in totality that our lived reality is taken over by spectacles that projects Enlightenment progress and hope. Enlightened by Debord's theory, I will explicate how marketing forms a utopia. On the one hand, utopia facilitates as a lure for audiences to consume spectacles that cancel the pain and traumatic memories; on the other hand, audiences' attention and emotions are commodified as marketing goods.

Cayce lives in a utopian society which fashions itself with modern facilities that virtually eliminates traces of the traumatic event. This tendency to cover up the lack bears with the same subject formation of an obsessive. Bruce Fink points out that "The obsessive, as conscious thinker deliberately ignores the unconscious—that foreign discourse within us, that discourse we do not and cannot control which takes advantage of the ambiguities and multiple meanings of words..." ("Neurosis" 122). The obsessive represses the unconscious desires, or breaks the link between thought and affect, so as to emerge as a thinking subject, and to complete himself as a while, without barred by symbolic discourse. We could attribute the formation of obsessive thinking subject to the Cartesian subject and the operation of Gibson's utopia, which is a fantasy that builds upon a thinking subject devoid of castration from the unconscious desires wherein he occupies a fixed space and yearns to achieve a

complete wholeness. In other words, the desire of formulating a utopia is grounded in the obsessive's unconscious impulse to "neutralize or annihilate the Other" ("Neurosis" 119) whereas utopia is realizable only when desires are repressed. In other words, obsessive tends to formulate symbolic fantasy that neutralizes the real. Slavoj Žižek points out the relation between the representation and the real of the society in his "Between Symbolic and Fantasmatic Spectre" in which he argues that "what emerges via the distortions of the accurate representation of reality is the real, i.e., the trauma around which social reality is structured" (265). Žižek implies that utopia is the symbolic fiction of the state which even though tends to be a distorted version of the reality, is nonetheless a referential text to the trauma or the real of the society. In the novel, it is the traumatic event that motivates people to formulate a fantasy so as to repress the grief. When it comes to transforming utopian impulse into a concrete utopia, Fredric Jameson remarks that utopia can be used as "the mere lure and the bait for ideology" ("Varieties of the Utopian" 3). While Jameson rests more on fantasy's/utopia's deceptive mechanism, Žižek and Lacan emphasize more on the traumatic kernel, around which the state's or the subject's fundamental fantasy is formulated.

Lacanian fantasy, as discussed in Bruce Fink's "The Dialectic of Desire," conceptualizes a space that stages "the way the subject imagines him- or herself in relation to the cause, to the Other's desire as cause" (56). Fantasy remains subject's imaginary relation rather than his or her real relation with the Other's desire. Imaginary as it may be, fantasy plays a pivotal role in a subject's formation process. Fink remarks in his "The Subject and the Other's Desire" that we subjectify the trauma by means of formulating a fantasy that neutralizes the traumatic experiences. In theory it is necessary because the subject is itself a void circulated by various fantasy. In practice, however, the traumatic experiences are never to be neutralized and thus the subject formation remains a fantasy. It is not to discourage us from constructing subjectivity but to reshape the Cartesian subject, a "mere place-holder in the symbolic, waiting to be filled out," (58) into a Lacanian "desiring subject," (58) a place-marker in the symbolic that shapes among index of desires.

Although Lacanian subject appears to be promising in escaping the confinement of the Cartesian ontology when in our era, an active "desiring subject" can be easily subjectified by consumerism. As Jameson points out that fantasy has its positive and negative attributes, Fink explicates that fantasy functions at once as a discourse that repositions subjectivity in relation to our desires and as a necessary defense mechanism constructed by our psyche to circumlocute trauma by means of providing the Other's demand in place of the Other's desire. While fantasy as a discourse envisions the subject's becoming process, fantasy as a defense mechanism implies

that the subject, though bypassed the confinement of Cartesian subject, is trapped again in his or her making of new fixation from the Other's demand. I shall discuss and compare fetish commodity to interpassive subject in consumer society.

Commodity Fetishism and Interpassive Subject

In the novel, the survivors' real desire is to mourn over the loss of their loved by means of tracing footages on war memories in F:F:F., however, their real desires is subject to the manipulation of the market which disseminates its word onto culture industry. The masses consume footages to fill in the loss of meaning caused by the void/trauma. However, to neutralize the hole of the fetish masses, they are turned into mere objects by means of installing in capitalism's narrative and command. Another subject fantasy emerged in consumer society is interpassive subject. The function of traumatic audiences' footage consumption matches that with the disembodied voice of the lift:

She can go there. There is a lift.... 'I'm feeling rather excited,' a woman says, breathily, as the door closes, though Cayce knows she's alone in this upright coffin of mirror and brushed steel. Fortunately she's been this way before, and knows that these disembodied voices are there for the amusement of the shopper....Whatever else these designer ghosts say, she blocks it out, the lift ascending miraculously, without intermediate stops, to the fifth floor. (PR 19)

Here Cayce represents collective shoppers who displace their happiness onto the consuming commodities. The lift's disembodied voice depicts an exaggerated scheme of Žižek's "canned laughter" that he uses to exemplify a displacement of emotions onto objects. In his "The Interpassive Subject: Lacan Turns a Prayer Wheel" Žižek summarizes the cultural conditions of our contemporary society as under the subject position of hysterics who rejects to be manipulated as an exchangeable object whereas the subject supposed to know, the Cartesian subject is the ultimate big Other that tells him or her what to desire. Regarding the position of the object in the formation of a subject, Žižek compares interpassive subject with the fetish. While the former takes an object, for instance, VCR as a stand-in for the big Other that passively endures the *object a* for the subject, so that he or she can actively engage with other activities, the latter is passively consumed by the object which he or she takes as manifestation of his or her real condition with the others, that is, the fetish substitutes symbolic order for the Real. In his "The Interpassive Subject" Žižek states that: "This allows us to propose the notion of false activity: you think you are active, while your true position, as it is embodied in the fetish, is passive." Although both the interpassive and the fetish are situated at the passive position, Žižek considers the interpassivity as "the

primordial form of the subject's defense against jouissance." Žižek further notes that "Such a displacement of our most intimate feelings and attitudes onto some figure of the Other is at the very core of Lacan's notion of the big Other; it can affect not only feelings but also beliefs and knowledge—the Other can also believe and know for me" ("Lacan Turns A Prayer Wheel" 27). The displacement of our feelings onto the Other will not only change our attachment to commodities, but also change our belief and knowledge upon the world. Particularly in the consumer society, our knowledge and belief will be manipulated by market ideology. This is what Žižek calls an interpassive subject who displaces emotions onto the subject supposed to know.

Other than capitalism's assimilating interpassive subject and commodity fetish into its maneuver, spectacles of the society become a system of semiotics that writes a map to guide footage viewers and those who participate in the discourse and system of modernity. It inscribes its narrative on fashion industry where the masses apply capitalism's symbolic fiction on their bodies. The attachment of the masses to commodified Other can be described as retrograding back to the imaginary space. Linking imaginary space with spectacles of the society, Debord remarks that the late capitalist society sees spectacles not as images we consciously see, but as ideological signs spectators unconsciously received in mind without our notice, and then integrate and assemble into a collectivity.

Since the fetish imitates symbolic order in its subject formation, its memory will then be assimilated into capitalist narrative. In other words, the collective fetish's real memories are replaced by false memory deployed by capitalism. As such, a collective false memory will manifest itself upon cultural sphere. The trademark of fashion industry then serves as lures of consumption, and composes into patterns of culture industry. As one of the F:F:F: goers Parkaboy explains: "Homo sapiens are about pattern recognition. Both a gift and a trap" (PR 23). The spectators might notice the pattern of capitalist mechanism, but may not detect its maneuver as Cayce does. Even if they do, it is not easy to resist. The spectacles disseminate big Other's (global market capitalism) truth/conspiracy, inscribe into the masses' consciousness, and then assimilate the masses into commodity flow.

If the obsessive Cartesian society deliberate ignores emotion to achieve capitalist progress, then Cayce's blocking out mediated messages allows her to trace back to memories of her father. The former's ultimate aim is to forget the unbearable historical trauma, whereas the latter attempts to retrieve the forgotten past. Cayce, the seer of the future trend, and the archaeologist of the forgotten past is the nodal point¹

¹ In his "Che Vuoi" Žižek's explicates that ideology is "the multitude of 'floating signifiers', of protoideological elements, [which] is structured into a unified field through the intervention of a certain 'nodal point' (the Lacanian *point de captation*) which 'quilts' them, stops their sliding and fixes their

of narrative line. One thing that makes Cayce uncomfortable is that not only will the advertiser sell the traumatic memories as a commodity, but also by so doing history will be changed.

This is Cayce's observation on how modernity works on our unconscious, its function and result. If displacement of emotions onto the Other function to form a fantasy, Cayce chooses to go against the grain. She subjectifies the false-desire by insisting in attaching to memory of her father who is missing in 911 event. "She's trying to remember what would have come after securing the perimeter, in Win's (Cayce's father) bedtime stories. Probably maintaining the routine of the station. Psychological prophylaxis, she thinks he called it. Get on with ordinary business. Maintain morale" (PR 48). When the masses turn collectively to fascination narrative commodities have to tell so as to forget the traumatic memories, she clings on to her Real desire—memories of her father.

Situationist International as Therapy

According to Žižek, we have to understand that "what precedes fantasy is not reality but a hole in reality, its point of impossibility filled in with fantasy. Lacan's name for this point is, of course, the *objet petit a*" (The Plague of Fantasies xiv). In other words, the fantasy, or the reality that fills in with ideological surplus-enjoyment is not the opposite of reality but the ideological surplus-enjoyment of the subjects. Trauma prohibits the traversing of the fantasy and replaces utopian concept of a subject as a whole with Lacanian concept of a subject as a hole. Cayce sees the trauma and the impossibility of traversing the surplus-enjoyment, but insists on confronting the deadlock. If this ideological surplus-enjoyment is responsible for society's symptoms such as interpassivity and commodity fetish, Situationist International's theory will provide a therapy for the prevalent plague of capitalist fantasy.

One of the leading Situationist International theorists is Raoul Vaneigem who remarks that when our real desires are replaced by spectacles and commodities of the consumer society replace, we are trapped within the ideology of survivalism, which manipulates on the sole value of life to dictatorship of market and commodities. Thus the phenomenon of interpassive subject and attachment to commodities becomes the Borromean knot of the late capitalist society. Žižek's antidote to the knot is in the hand of Lenin and Antigone who, as he argues, "does not merely relate to the Other-Thing; for a brief, passing moment of decision, she is the Thing directly, thus excluding herself from the community regulated by the intermediate agency of

meaning" (338).

symbolic regulations” (“The Real of Sexual Difference” 70). The thing is itself a *being* that empowers by desire, not by the law. However, I do not agree with his example of Lenin being our revolutionary model, because there lies a risk of another version of a fascist leadership. As Michael E. Gardiner notes, “SI refused to consider itself as a political vanguard *à la* Lenin, for this would mean a return to specialized politics, a separation between leaders and led. Instead, the Situationists strove to operate as a catalyst, to trigger the dissolution of false consciousness perfected by the spectacle and thereby enable the masses to actualize their own liberation” (*Critiques of Everyday Life* 119). SI serves as the alchemist that brings the magical process of counter-capitalist act by refuting the economic logic as a false consciousness thereby engendering our real desires to lead the life. Since the capitalism disseminates its ideology from culture industry, Situationist International criticizes on the plague of fantasy mediated via information and the media “not as an end to itself, but as a prelude to a total revolution of everyday life. For Vaneigem, this revolution hinged on the negation of three aspects of consumer capitalism –the spectacle, or the replacement of reality by appearance; separation, the atomization of social life; and sacrifice, the renunciation of desire and personal happiness for the empty promise of the commodity ...” (Gardiner 120).² Vaneigem proposes a reverse act of our everyday practice from ideological narrative of the spectacles and false happiness towards the real desires and reality depleted of ideological surplus-enjoyment.

Hit the Real: Literature’s Socially Symbolic Act

Just as Situationist International is the therapy to the Borromean knot of a consumer society that neutralizes the gap between the real and the imaginary, interpretation in literature will unravel the fantasy of capitalism. In fact, Gibson’s *PR* attempts to articulate what Luis Borges’s “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (Hereafter “TUOT”) points out for us in 1940, where the content changes but the form remains. Gibson’s works thus, poses as a remainder of the pattern of history. Gibson wrote an invitation to *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* which included Borges’s “TUOT” as the first short story. He begins the invitation with his childhood memory

² Media have been used dated from Napoléon’s time to disseminate ideology. As explained by Paul Virilio in *The Art of the Motor*, Napoléon founded industrial press to control civilians’ mind. “This was a system originally set up for information gathering, investigation, and censorship with the help of police minister Joseph Fouché and his disciples, such as the famous Charles Louis Havas. It also had the financial backing of Gabriel Julien Ouvrard, the dubious banker who tendered for army supplies” (6). This system is what Virilio suggests as the mediatization in which media are in services of political and economical forces so as to filter out messages and disseminate ideology. In modern society, media regime is a coup d’état that dictates consumers to meet its ideal state—phantasmagoria formulated by capitalist. As such, when subjects displace their emotions onto mediated Other, they are subject to the fascist control. In other words, without actively perceiving cinematic narrative, audiences’ alter ego are being framed by the projector, whereas the eyes are unconsciously and passively being integrated into singular vision provided by the projector’s point of view. The world represented in the cinema then becomes the only version audiences take to be real.

where there is a bookcase on top of a desk which once belongs to a Revolutionary hero Francis Marion. He writes: "Its lower drawers smelled terrifyingly and chemically of *Time*, and within them, furred, lay elaborately printed scrolls listing the County's dead in the Great War. I now know that I believed, without quite wanting to admit it to myself, that *that desk was haunted*" (ix; emphasis mine). His invitation to Borges's story suggests that Time/History itself remains the past and current struggle between the angel's history and that of the chess master, and that the desk as a metaphor of symbolic order is still casted under the shadow of authoritarian history. "TUOT" was published in 1940, a critical moment when the WWII takes place whereas *PR* was published in 2003, two years after the 911 attack. "TUOT" is an encapsulated version of *PR*, which manifests a prototype of dictatorship and its pattern that Gibson takes as a cultural pattern that is deploying the consumer society. The point is not that Gibson rewrites Borges's story in a longer version, but that the message Borges once tried to inform his readers in 1940 again appears in 2003, two years after the 911 attack. The year 2003 particularly has seen a proliferation of criticism on terrorist attacks. This pattern of criticism reflects general public's and also the academics' present concern. If "TUOT" represents a pattern of totalitarian regime in WWII, *PR* demonstrates a capitalized utopian society that is modeled on the scheme of totalitarianism. If we take Cayce's phobia as the pointer of the symptoms of the society, and that of the history, her temporary panic disorder indicates a Cartesian society's, and the Western civilization's cultural traits. Although the knot will be untied or not is under scrutiny, Gibson's writing out the phenomenon is a way of articulating the real desires of her, of the society, and of the entire Western civilization.

Besides Gibson, Jacques Derrida also affirms literary writing's aim to compose a symbolic act. In an interview with Derrida "This Strange Institution Called Literature," Derrida defends for the death of literature at a time when the rumor has it that it is the end of literature. Derrida asserts the possibility of fictionality and responsibility of literature as an institution in the contemporary society. He declares that literature carries social responsibility to shape the future and rethink the past. Among all genres of literature, science fiction or fantasy fiction is one of the categories that will be expelled from the society particularly because of its fictionality which is conventionally taken as one that opposes to truth. However, according to Derrida, it is exactly this fictionality that grants it a utopian institution that is so powerful as to "say everything, in every way" (37). In other words, it is the fictionality of literature that enables it to hit the real that is too unbearable to represent it bereft of the frame of make-believe. In addition to its fictional props as references to reality, literature is to Derrida an inscription of a condensed historical memory, which

is encrypted with repression and desires. Writing is composed of the unseen and unsaid desires that are silenced by censorships, whereas reading is a way of decoding, and a way of reinscribing real desires into a certain historical context.

Other than literature's task to say everything, the act of interpreting literary works (which is embedded with the unsaid and desires of the society) parallels to the clinical setting where analyst's interpretation of analysand's symptoms "restored a missing link in the chain of the analysand's thoughts and feelings, and it could be said to have 'hit the real' in the sense that it verbalized (or symbolized) something that had never before been put into words" (Fink "Interpretation: Opening up the Space of Desire" 48). In short, literary text is a blank screen in which society's symptoms and ideologies are represented, a space that articulates real desires, and a bridge that leads to the real of history.

Conclusion

In his "On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act" Fredric Jameson writes that "History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis..." (102). Situating the literary interpretation to a larger historical context, desires articulated in Gibson's and Borges's works can be understood as attempts to traversing the fundamental fantasy by means of writing. For Jameson, history is the real that is so traumatic with which we are afraid to directly confront. Yet, he assumes that through interpretation, we shall unveil the political unconscious in literary works as a socially symbolic act that strives to write into the deadlock of history. Gibson's fictions as a fantastic literature that exposes the desires in our daily lives, problematizes the issues brought forth by global market capitalism such as interpassive subjects, commodity fetishism, administrated cultural memory and history, and gives critical voices to genuine emotions that resist the ideologically laden emotions as commodity. In micro-operation in the political sphere, the counter-capitalist force exists in minute symbolic acts of everyday life that can be modeled on Cayce's clothing design and her insistence on not falling asleep in front of mesmerizing brand names and mediatization, whereas in macro-state and historical apparatus, literature as a symbolic act will continue its incessant effort to subjectify the trauma of history.

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