Imaginary Films
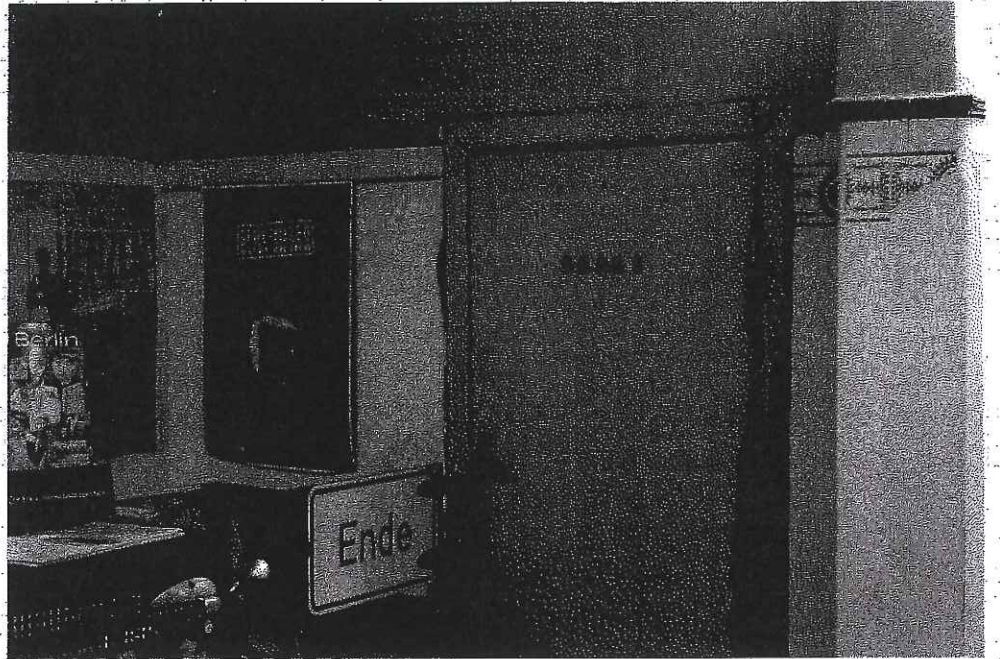# in Literature

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Pattern Recognition: The "Postcinema" Seen by William Gibson

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Some Premises...

What kids nowadays do with their portable video cameras and load on YouTube is one hundred percent cinema.
DERRICK DE KERCKHOVE[1]

In its Visual Networking Index,[2] Cisco foresees that within four years, video will become 70% of the data flowing in mobile networks worldwide. Meanwhile, information about Italy indicates that in this country the majority of the network flow for portable devices (tablets and smartphones) consists of audiovisual texts. In general, audiovisual is already proven to be the most effective language in the network, not only for communication but also for promotion and entertainment.

In addition to this, as of 2014 almost every film projected in theaters is digital. In short, we are transitioning from film to file. Digital technology can not only absorb any form of communication, utilize any device or display, and accumulate texts from different origins; it can also provide for their expansion. We should talk about the digital no longer – or not only – as a technology but as a true expanded language, and refer to the various "devices" that allow its fruition and use as "tools" or "displays" rather than as "media". Pierre Lévy talks about a single standard, the digital, where, behind the definition of "standard", there is an expanded and convergent linguistic property that not only accumulates and utilizes texts, but also allows continuous interaction and integration that switches from "passive" to "active" (considering video cellphones, for example, as "passive" devices when used to watch, read, and listen but as "active" when they become cameras, video cameras, and computers to write, send, post, and tag).

Returning to the data widely reported by Cisco, the majority of traffic passing through computers and laptops, and especially through tablets and smartphones, is images, and audiovisual images in particular. This interesting news raises two issues: the first is the increasing predominance of visual communication over

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1 Cristiano Poian, "Intervista a Derrick de Kerchove", *Close-up. Storie della visione*, 22 (April 2008), 8.
2 http://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/collateral/service-provider/visual-networking -index-vni/white_paper_c11-520862.pdf.

written; the second is that audiovisual language – the principal medium first for cinema and then for television – is now rooted definitively in connected computing, thus becoming a cross-media trans-language, as reflected in Geert Lovink's observation that "We no longer watch films or TV; we watch databases".[3]

The cinema system is therefore a matter of networks and schemas historically born from two phenomena:

> The first is convergence, connected to the fact that the media are adopting one type of signal, the digital [...] the second is connected to the media's tendency to function not only as simple transmission channels, but as complex structures in which the user can find a range of diversified contents and services, consumer instructions, the possibility of self-intervention, instructions in regards to adopting proper body postures, references to surroundings, etc.[4]

The two phenomena described by Francesco Casetti define a new media ecology, the "postcinema", as a galaxy of modes, practices, forms, storytelling, experiences, and various technologies; cinema beyond "remediation" and "relocation", definitively hybrid, expanded, extended. Cinema now crosses media displays and devices, hybridizes and colonizes new spaces, while building new forms, new practices, and new models of experience, such as interaction. Examples include live cinema, interactive films, Web TV, locative media, the cinema of urban screens, and the cinema of cross-medial documentary. Cinema is no longer a monolithic institution defined by the support (the film) and the place of use (the theater), but is rather an experience: forms and practices roam predominantly in the computer/network macromedia and assemble on screens of various devices. To have a precise idea of this galaxy that we call "postcinema", we can turn to *Pattern Recognition*, a novel by William Gibson.[5]

Pattern Recognition by William Gibson

Cayce Pollard, the protagonist, is an established fashion and image hunter who works for major multinational companies in the fashion and advertising

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3   Alberto D'Ottavi, "Rethinking Aesthetics. Innovazioni tecnologiche nei media e sfide per gli autori in Rete", *Limina*, 1 (January 2010), 42.

4   Francesco Casetti, "L'esperienza filmica e la ri-locazione del cinema", *Fata Morgana*, 4 (January-April 2008), 27–28.

5   William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, New York: Berkley Books, 2003.

industries. Cayce travels all over the world, selling her insight for images, logos, and "effective" advertising. In the meantime, through a forum she follows the episodes of a strange ghost film, an anonymous movie without a title, without a theme, made of numbered fragments, that "magically" appears on the "Network" and virally spreads through it. Her research leads her into contact with great economic, political, and financial issues, but most of all it leads her to define a cinema of networks, a product of viral fandom, a "postcinema" located not only in the "Network" but also in places where fans everywhere are able to download it, use it, exchange it, and comment on it.[6]

1   *Geolocalized Media*

First of all, alongside digital and viral, let's talk about a geolocalized cinema:

> Five hour's New York jet lag and Cayce Pollard wakes in Camden Town to the dire and ever-circling wolves of disrupted circadian rhythm.[7]

This first line of Gibson's novel immediately sets the protagonist and the events in precise places, real spaces that are easily traveled, although with some fatigue. The real space in Gibson's novel has a fundamental importance: Cayce Pollard crosses it with cars, airplanes, trains, and on foot. She marks down, as in a travel diary, street names, architecture, and characteristic urban forms. Permeated by a sort of geolocal obsession, the novel is continuously punctuated with topographic and toponymic annotations. The continuous movement through dimensional space, described as a geography of transit, requires the moving protagonist continuously to re-anchor temporarily by describing her space, marking it, "tagging" it, and naming it. Cayce Pollard lives in a ubiquitous and frenetic realm, easily accessed, crossed, and extended, like a desktop, on which friendships are continuously repositioned. This is the new era that Manuel Castells calls the Information Age, characterized by a revolution in the dimension of space.[8]

It is also a space that needs virtual links and connections in order to be inhabited. The protagonist's identity and that of her English guest are described in a way that reveals their status as "remote":

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6   On fandom, see Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2006; *Il cinema della convergenza. Industria, racconti, pubblico*, ed. Federico Zecca, Milan and Udine: Mimesis, 2012.

7   Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 1.

8   Manuel Castells, *The Information Age. Economy, Society and Culture. Volume I. The Rise of the Network Society*, Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

Google Damien and you will find a director of music videos and com-
mercials. Google Cayce and you will find "coolhunter", and if you look
closely you may see it suggested that she is a "sensitive" of some kind, a
dowser in the world of global marketing.[9]

Identity is tracked on Google, requiring no document or local dimension; it
resides in the ethereal, in the informational flow. The only guarantee of its
authenticity is provided by the site signature of the search engine Google, itself
a famous brand, an informational logo.

2   Viral

Cayce looks for tendencies. She is an expert on – or perhaps better, she is "fix-
ated" on – logos, on images. She works for multinational companies, has an
insight for trends. Like viral advertising, she has no place of her own, but roams
the "Network" and commercial space to define what's "on" and what's "off". Like
contemporary images, she is everywhere at once and has no privileged place
from which she originates: she might fix on a viral film created in Russia or a
fashionable logo designed in London. Her friend Damien creates videos, pref-
erably for advertising and video clips. Gibson realizes the centrality of these
types of reduced, spectacular formats, ready to live in the "Network", ready to
be copied and exchanged, viral objects in a commercial broadcasting system
that no longer produces by means of media, but insinuates into the "Network"
to colonize other media and devices. It has its own flowing life that propagates
virally like a disease, like a biological element.

3   Remix and Mashup Practices

This form of cinema is an object in continuous rearrangement that increases
as information increases. It creeps into the social network, accumulating com-
ments and contents. It can be rearranged, contaminated, remixed, mashed
up and then reinserted into the ubiquitous communicative network system.
Where was it born? Where is it going? The user can only trace it and follow it,
geolocalize it – through GPS systems – from one device to another, communi-
cate its presence, its transit, its possible manipulation, and signal its arrival
with a post or a comment.

Damien is a director in the new computerized and convergent post-medial
system who develops fragmented videos that find their economic relevance in the
commercial system rather than the old industrial one. In *Pattern Recognition*,
industrial production simply becomes a sector in a global business system

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9   Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 2.

that subsists on the idea and prospect of guiding – at least during the start-up process – its own transmission. The part that is specifically industrial, the finalized object, becomes a temporary and relatively unproductive accessory. Instead the idea, the design, is at the center of interest in a market described as "light", as in the case of Blue Ant, the company that has hired Cayce as a consultant in London:

> Relatively tiny in terms of permanent staff, globally distributed, more post-geographic than multinational, the agency has from the beginning billed itself as a high-speed, low-drag life-form in an advertising ecology of lumbering herbivores.[10]

In this postindustrial system place itself is hybridized; everyday life becomes ubiquitous: "In the kitchen she runs tap water through a German filter, into an Italian electric kettle."[11]

The computer stands at the center of a system made of objects and global cross-medial communication as the threshold and platform of the sorting of an augmented familiar space that takes over real places and generates an accessible individual experience, almost "circadian" in nature: "In the flat's main room, she finds that Damien's faithful Cube is on, but sleeping, the night-light glow of its static switches pulsing gently".[12] Here is a specific model of computer, a recognizable, "localized" brand name, but it is more a threshold than an appliance, accessible even on standby, even when Damien is far from home. Always "on" although in sleep mode, Cayce Pollard's computer is a gateway to knowledge and citizenship, maintaining her individuality despite changing places, cultures, and languages. It cannot be turned off but it can be put to "sleep", the way our brain might sleep during a transoceanic flight, always ready to reawake without a long process of rebooting:

> She seats herself in his high-backed workstation chair and clicks the transparent mouse. Stutter of infrared on the pale wood of the long trestle table. The browser comes up. She types Fetish:Footage:Forum, which Damien, determined to avoid contamination, will never bookmark.[13]

To access the flow, there is no need for a conventional on-switch.

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10   *Ibid.*, 7.
11   *Ibid.*, 3.
12   *Ibid.*
13   *Ibid.*, 4.

4   A Text Born and Raised on the Internet

The browser is the place of connection. The forum is a platform shared by a circle of social "friends" that join remotely around a specific issue, which in this case is a form of cinema that lives on network flow and becomes a product of what we can call "network culture":

> Consequently the network is a model of communication of knowledge and connection between representations and simulacra produced by contemporary man. The Network believes it can become a world and diffuses its colonizing thought.[14]

In the virtually infinite Network space/world, fragmentation and specification become a way to identify oneself and identify one's circle of friendships and acquaintances, which starts here from the sharing of a fragment of viral "postcinema".

5   A Social Text

In *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce Pollard's forum is dedicated to a mysterious series of cinematographic fragments identified only by a number; without title, author, story, or any apparent logical connection. Like a virus, the fragments have appeared on the "Network" and have triggered a sort of treasure hunt amongst its fans. The heart of the novel is the pursuit of this phantom "cinema" composed of sequences, mysterious pieces that refuse any cinematographic categorization: they have no defined genre, no recognizable forms, no distinguishable protagonists, do not tell a story; their sequence is mysterious, perhaps inexistent, their author unknown. This "postcinema" domain is *"fandom 3"*, a domain of the fan user in search of answers who enters the production and distribution system, takes possession of it and somehow becomes the protagonist of the text itself (think of the phenomena of downloading, streaming, video-on-demand, and user-generated content).

What remains cinematographic in this enigmatic audiovisual event? Gibson explains: "The front page opens, familiar as a friend's living room".[15] In the meantime, however, we perceive what has been previously mentioned: the familiarity of space is no longer established by recognizable, real places. Instead, space is ubiquitous, located in the "remote":

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14   Stefano Coletto, "Se si può narrare/rappresentare dall'interno del paradigma della Rete", *Limina*, 1 (January 2010), 33.

15   Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 4.

A frame-grab from #48 serves as backdrop, dim and almost monochrome, no characters in view. This is one of the sequences that generate comparisons with Tarkovsky. She only knows Tarkovsky from stills, really, though she did once fall asleep during a screening of *The Stalker*, going under on an endless pan, the camera aimed straight down, in close-up, at a puddle on a ruined mosaic floor. But she is not one of those who think that much will be gained by analysis of the maker's imagined influences. The cult of the footage is rife with subcults, claiming every possible influence. Truffaut, Peckinpah... The Peckinpah people [...] are still waiting for the guns to be drawn.[16]

6   "Postcinema"

The cinema still exists as a memory, as an archive of modes, practices and forms, but today it escapes the sole space of fruition of the "black box" to expand into the network to contact, wander, and become object of re-readings and interpretations. It is a cinema that invades archives, that offers itself to fragmentation, to comments, to be analyzed and re-read. The "postcinema" is flexible, fluid, without supporting structures, as light as digital data; it moves in "the cloud" of ubiquitous reception. The essential is lost; absorbed into computer language, "postcinema" freely circulates and leaves its traces throughout the network, on sites, in social networks, in myriad contemporary places, from museums to shopping centers, from clubs to computers. No longer a monolithic institution defined by the support (the film) and the place of fruition (the movie theater), it is rather an experience consisting of forms and practices that roam predominantly in the computer/network macromedia and assemble on various screens. The Network is characterized by the flow of databases; within it, cinema constitutes one of the biggest text and fictional storage elements, while digital flow makes it circulate nomadically, subject to comment, remixing, mashup, and hybridization, as described by Laurent Jullier.[17] Gibson's "Network" becomes a sort of infinitely expandable map across which we are invited to roam, navigate, or casually adventure, to seek or find, although one is not necessarily the consequence of the other. The cinema becomes a model and prototype, a magazine of stereotypes and forms, a database, but also a place to loot, a trove of remakes and remixes, quotations and rewritings. "Postcinema" is a fluid mass in which the viewer is requested to be a user, to navigate and participate, not only to watch, but comment, build communities around

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16   *Ibid.*

17   Laurent Jullier, "Digitale e postmodernità: l'era dei flussi", *Close-up. Storie della visione*, 24–25 (June 2009), 9.

one or more similar texts, manipulate, create personal paths; in a word, to interact.

7   *Interactivity*

Gibson narrates Cayce Pollard's new cinematographic experience:

> She enters the forum itself now, automatically scanning titles of the posts and names of posters in the newer threads, looking for friends, enemies, news. One thing is clear, though; no new footage has surfaced.[18]

An experience becomes interactive when the participant is called upon to enter a comment. Here, the comments in the forum become an integral element of the film itself. When Cayce "enters" the forum, she does not enter it as a circumscribed space, like a movie theater or even like turning on a television by clicking the remote. Sharing a platform with a fan cult of "friends", her search for more information about the film becomes yet another element of the substance of the film, a "fragment" that appears without being projected or transmitted.

> Nothing since that beach pan, and she does not subscribe to the theory that it is Cannes in winter. French footageheads have been unable to match it, in spite of countless hours recording pans across approximately similar scenery.[19]

The community around "postcinema" is a ubiquitous community, spread around the world, situated in the "remote". Geolocalization, however, still has a fundamental role, it is still essential to the process of deciphering and representing reality. Cayce travels the world, mapping her movements, "tagging" places, and the fan community searches real places in an effort to anchor the series to a recognizable space beyond the "Network". Gibson describes the contemporary audiovisual storytelling system of geolocalized obsession:

> When she returns to the forum page, her post is there. It is a way now, approximately, of being at home. The forum has become one of the most consistent places in her life, like a familiar café that exists somehow outside of geography and beyond time zones.[20]

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18   Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 4.
19   *Ibid.*
20   *Ibid.*, 4–5.

Geolocalization is necessary in order to circumscribe a friendly emotional space, "homey" and familiar. The "postcinema" experience is like a new birth for cinema, expanding its story and language across the "Network". Gibson is convinced of this as well:

> Damien's Studio Display fills with darkness absolute. It is as if she participates in the very birth of cinema, that Lumière moment, the steam locomotive about to emerge from the screen, sending the audience fleeing, out into the Parisian night.[21]

Gibson again cites early cinema when describing one of the fragmentary sequences that the protagonist has viewed: "Above, somewhere, something flares, white, casting a claw of Caligarian shadow, and then the screen is black."[22] But the cinematic reminiscence remains a mere suggestion, an image to trace perhaps more in the memory of the navigator than in the producer of images. In fact, cinema as a twentieth century experience doesn't exist anymore: "She clicks on Replay. Watches it again."[23] In place of the historical experience of cinema is a cinema of recording and individual fruition; a cinema revised, made of data flow. As a result, the cinematic experience is one of storytelling, emotionally involving, but also playful and participatory. Apps and systems tied to social networks provide for the sharing of data, information and opinions within a community that shares a project, which in Cayce's forum has succeeded in assembling:

> one hundred and thirty-four previously discovered fragments, having been endlessly collated, broken down, reassembled, by whole armies of the most fanatical investigators.[24]

In Gibson's "postcinematic" community, shared emotional and performative elements combine in a personalized and individualized storytelling model.

Conclusions

Technology has changed, the "device" has transformed, become digital and part of the system Gibson terms the "Network". Consequently the experience of

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21   *Ibid.*, 23.
22   *Ibid.*, 24.
23   *Ibid.*
24   *Ibid.*

technology – that is to say, experience itself – has changed, opening to different, hybrid types of fruition, reaching beyond the movie theater and the living room to colonize public spaces of all kinds. "Postcinema" embraces a dimension of expanded spatiality, increased through geolocalization and the ubiquity of computing, comprising forms such as web cinema, game cinema, and new expanded cinema. We are witnessing a new media horizon, a galaxy we have termed "postcinema" and that Gibson has traced better than any theoretical essay.