

INTERFERENCE ON THE BRAIN SCREEN 6



Number 6 (April 2003) “The meat finds its own use for things.” – jael

INTERFERENCE ON THE BRAIN SCREEN is an occasional publication predicated on the belief that reception is bad. And it’s no accident.

This issue dedicated to the memory of Jean Heriot who passed away in November 2002. She was a good friend and supported *Brain Screen* from its early days. I miss her.

Gibson's Exit Strategy by Jerry Denny

In a recent interview British SF writer, Richard Morgan, expressed his disappointment that William Gibson's most recent novels are not being marketed as science fiction.

I can sympathize with him. I understand him. But I cannot say I agree with him.

It may be controversial to say so, but there is an argument that Gibson is not, and has never really been a science fiction writer.

To justify this position you require a rather strict definition of science fiction. Here it is. Science fiction is the literature which turns on its scientific or technological ideas.

By this definition Gibson is not the only author who would fall at the hurdle.

But taking into account only his own fiction, it can be demonstrated that few of his stories pass the test. Furthermore, this is an indicator as to the underlying reason behind the shift in the way his books are being marketed.

Look at his first published story, "Fragments of A Hologram Rose." What we have here is mediation on love, loss and longing set against a futurist background. The technological idea is apparent sensory perception (which would reappear in his fiction as SimStim). The core of the story is a portrait of a man who will not let go of an old love affair and replays the sense of it through his technology (a theme shamelessly stolen by James Cameron for his script for the film *Strange Days*). To be honest the technological trick is not really necessary (and neither for that matter is the futuristic background) a photograph, or audiotape would do just as well. One swallow does not mean a summer, so here is a more substantial example. In *Science Fiction Eye*, John Kessel ably demonstrated that the plot of *Neuromancer* was standard boilerplate found in routine caper films. The science fictional elements could be extracted and standard caper components substituting without doing violence to the novel. I think I agree with him (although I abhor the motivation behind his analysis).

There are other examples of Gibson's fiction which do not actually depend on the ideas; "Johnny Mnemonic," "Burning Chrome," "The Winter Market," and his collaborative story, "Dogfight." Even though I hasten to say, the ideas are innovative and handsomely presented.

However some of his atypical stories are genuinely science fiction, these include "The Gernsback Continuum" and "Hinterlands."

From the beginning he seemed ambivalent about the label which had been placed on him. There were two problems; one that the material he wrote sat so uncomfortably with the rest of the current scene, two that being labeled with a genre might cut him off from those readers who would most benefit from, and understand what he was trying to do." Both fears were unfounded, in the intervening period since Gibson's youth science fiction had picked up a canny new audience. Said Gibson; "I think the rules of the game have changed slightly."

At the beginning of his career he was certain that his writing would not find favor with the science fiction audience because it was so different to everything else on the scene. The best he could expect would be to become some kind of cult author. He hoped he might be regarded with the same reverence as Britain's J.G. Ballard. Gibson would constantly cite France as the place that was most likely to "get" him. (Perhaps because he had absorbed a certain measure of the then popular French culture theory and this was expressed in his writing.) Ironically the French are quite tepid about both Gibson and the cyberpunk phenomenon. Italy has proven his most enthusiastic country on mainland Europe Furthermore there was a certain amount of perversity, of provocation towards the genre which he both owes and questions. At the beginning of his career his strategy included writing of things that had been outside of the science fiction genre and taking perspectives which were rare; looking at underclasses, ethnic minorities, women as heroic agents of violence.

The truth is that Gibson himself was not at all sure that what he was doing could exactly be called science fiction.

Gibson is great admirer of William Burroughs and has spoken repeatedly of how the beat writer used science fiction. It is apparent that what Gibson appreciated was Burroughs adeptness at the science fictional form, his technique of shredding it as another pop cultural component in his cut-up fictions. Gibson very possibly saw his fiction in the same way. He would claim that the reason he wrote the way he did was the hangover of his reading from his youth -- he called science fiction and rock music his "native culture." But he did not consider that he fit within any particular genre.

With his latest novel, *Pattern Recognition*, it appears that he has produced a contemporary novel using the writing techniques from his "science fiction" works. We should not be surprised. Gibson has been indicating the truth about his writing almost from the beginning of his career. With his early short fiction his aim was look at reality and select the parts that everyone else ignored to highlight them so they formed a kind of grotesquerie. He wanted to see the world afresh.

Not that there has been much in terms of new short fiction lately, the last thing he did was "13 Views Of A Cardboard City" in *New Worlds*, a piece that seems barely fiction at all and resembles the nonfiction pieces he has done for *Wired Magazine* and *Science Fiction Eye*.

To be honest, in volume, Gibson's nonfiction far outweighs his short stories. He has written an extensive amount of Forwards, Introductions and articles.

The most important strategy here is that Gibson takes the Ballardian position that contemporary life can only be understood using science fictional viewpoints. He has spoken of this often. "I think that science fiction serves us best now as a way to explore an increasingly unthinkable present."

Ideologically he believes that there is a qualitative difference between the era we now find ourselves in, and those that have preceded it. We exist in a time which is dominated by technology and rushing forward with a pace of unprecedented social change. In such times the realist novel with its emphasis on characterization and its focus on the, middle aged, middle class, academics who form its authorship, was failing to provide a representative picture. There was a solution. Science fiction gave us a number of tools with which to analyze change. Gibson's quest was to turn away from the pseudo reality of the future and apply the analytical scalpel to the contemporary scene. What lived experience now consisted of were elements common in science fictional narrative. In fact he has a position with regard the SF genre which contradicts the conventional view: SF is not about the future, it is not even about our ideas about the future. He believes, " I'm not predicting anything. I just want you to watch CNN through a different lens." The difference between his fiction and much of genre science fiction is that he is very conscious of the process.

Gibson did not only use the medium, the set dressing or furniture of science fiction, he utilized the tools, the literary apparatuses that had been developed specifically to talk about the future, there was a necessity to this; Gibson's experience of the world is one of anomie, where too close examination prompts surprise. He constantly speaks of "CNN moments" where the world shifts beneath the feet, moments like the LA riots, The Oklahoma City Bombing and, most significantly, 9/11. Where most people quickly absorb the new order into their consciousness. Gibson looks closely; this inspection reveals a variety of strangeness appropriate to an alien environment.

So Gibson writes about contemporary reality. The early Cyberspace stories and novels were about living in a Reaganite world. His current fiction follows the corresponding line. The science

fictional ideas and background are a patina which act as lensed with which to examine our contemporary times.

As Gibson's fiction has developed, the science fictional content (which is to say the amount that is invented rather than discovered in the environment) has decreased and he has worked harder to make his novels have a closer correspondence to contemporary times. He calls this "moving the event horizon closer to the windshield" -- the 'event horizon' being the oncoming wave of change and the 'windscreen', our plane of perception.

This is a process which has been accelerating since his fifth novel, *Virtual Light*. There is a thematic break between the first three novels the so called "Cyberspace sequence", and the three novels of the *Virtual Light* Trilogy." The earlier novels are more self-consciously science fictional; each builds on mounting mythology; one which contains the Sprawl, cyberspace, megacorporations, privately paid muscle, SimStim, a network based criminal underground and many other elements which have now joined the clichés of cyberpunk. The later "trilogy", steps back from the accreted tropes, it is based in the much nearer future (early 21st century as opposed to mid 21st century) and actively sought to question some of the assumptions of the earlier works; the heroism of hackers, the romanticism of violence, the possibility that information technology might empower the underclass. He made it clear that he was not interested in continuing in exactly the same vein as he had started, that he was incapable of doing so. His reply to those who pine for more of those early novels is, "it's not my agenda to go back and reinvent *Neuromancer* for the 21st century. Someone else will have to give it to them."

There is a certain artistic courage about the activity that the "Mirrorshades" writers were immersed in. By writing about worlds so close to our own they risked being overtaken by events even within their own lifetimes, they risked ridicule. Despite each novel of the *Virtual Light* sequence being set in the chronological order of their writing, Gibson fought to bring them closer and closer to contemporary reality. "I sort of cranked the time horizon in very close so these books are sort of set next Wednesday really, in a world that's very close to ours." By the last book in the "Trilogy" he was confusing his readership with a portrait of Japan that was, according to the cognoscenti, an unvarnished portrayal of Japan. This was very deliberate. He has been systematically removing the veil of future exoticism, pulling the set dressing aside to reveal the theatre behind it.

By October 1996 he was tentatively talking of dropping the veil altogether. Acceleration of change and the fragmentation of certainties promised the opportunity to write the kind of book that he specialized in while dropping the science fictional props all together.

Gibson is playing a high-risk strategy; he once wrote that a personal computer bought at the store would depreciate in value in the trunk of your car on the way home. He is very aware that the same thing will happen to near future science fiction. When he began writing *Idoru*, there were no digital idols, by the time it was published there was the Japanese Internet phenomenon, Kyoko Date. Her emergence was almost precisely coincidental with the publication of the novel. It did not do Gibson's reputation as a prophet any harm (even if the timing was a little off). But this is a label he constantly shrugs off. He writes, he insists, about the present.

In the meantime, the ground has shifted. William Gibson has not been slow in recognizing it. Perhaps it is no longer true that science fiction has a privileged position to consider the presence. Crime fiction has increasingly moved beyond a simple exploration of violence and mystery to look at the sheer strangeness of life on the millennial cusp. This process began with Carl Hiassen but authors like Tim Dorsey and Robert Ferrigno are eagerly tuning the mossiest stones of reality

to reveal deeply disturbing sociological worms. It is not surprising that Gibson's later novels took a crime novelist (Elmore Leonard) as the model

Gibson's latest novel, *Pattern Recognition*, is not near future, it is not future at all, it is a contemporary novel that utilized Gibson's own unique narrative techniques to delineate what it is like to live in the information society, reports indicate that there is no made up technology, just what we have. In this we see the completion of the process which began in earnest with *Virtual Light*. He has wanted to write in the contemporary mode for some time.

Perhaps the most significant development has been a shift in the reading market that now accepts fiction which is more clearly reflective of reality, and specifically more reflective and the unintuitive aspects of reality, the irrational, and the strange, and can accept that these aspects are grist not only for the avant-garde novel but also for the popular genre works as well. Gibson has always looked outside of the science fiction genre for inspiration, always compared his own writing to writers who sit on the edges between genres. Martin Amis (especially his novel, *London Fields*) Steve Ericson, and Don DeLillo are spoken of approvingly. For the first time he has found a mode where he can write about the reality, his reality, of contemporary times using contemporary terms. He is not alone, his colleagues, Lewis Shiner and Rudy Rucker preceded him there.

What Gibson believes he is doing is providing a cure to McLuhanist amputation. The Canadian theorist Marshal McLuhan posited that the Media first created an intense intimacy between the individual and the rest of the world (the so called "Global Village" effect) and then forced a kind of "amputation", where the individual created distance between their core selves and the events they witnessed (of necessity, as most news is by nature, bad news). Gibson's aim is reconnect the reader to the world, so they can feel the intensity of world which presses novelty on us faster than we can assimilate it.

"In a way, I'm not so much writing about the future as like I'm exploring an unspeakable present. That's the bottom line. To me, this is the future, and it's only going to get weirder. Every day I wake up and turn on the television and it just floors me. "

Book Reviews

Pattern Recognition: A Review (1) by Jerry Denny

Cayce Pollard has a talent; she is sensitive to commercial brands, so sensitive that, simply by looking at a logo, she can tell whether it will be a successful. Her talent is also a curse, certain ubiquitous brands affect her so strongly that they evoke a reaction identical to phobia.

Since shortly after the disappearance of her father, Win Pollard, on September 11th, 2001 she has been fascinated with a phenomenon called "the footage"; fragments of an unknown digital video work which turn up at random on the Internet, apparently all a part of some unknown whole, each fragment fascinating in its power to evoke emotion. Cayce's boss, Hubertus Bigend, has become aware of the growing underground phenomena which has accreted around the footage, and its marketing potential. He believes that Cayce's talent can help him. He dispatches her across the world to track down the maker of the footage, for purposes of his own. This triggers a series of incidents and adventures that throw light on the footage, its global fan base, and the truth behind the disappearance of Win Pollard.

What fans of William Gibson will notice most immediately is that this novel is not science fiction. It very contemporary, taking place in a time frame of June-July 2002. The only vaguely

fantastical element is Cayce's talent, described variously as a 'sensitivity' or 'allergy' but having more of a resemblance to a phobia. Despite this, the familiar elements of Gibson's novels are here in force: information technology, subcultural movements, hotel rooms, espionage and travel.

In the use of the single fantasy element, Gibson is defiantly unconventional. It is a given that fantasy factors should have consistent rules. But there is nothing consistent about Cayce's peculiar talent. For instance, she has no problem with Starbucks, (indeed she seeks it out to satisfy her caffeine habit). Mickey Mouse is tolerable, as is the Gucci logo; however, Louis Vuitton, Tommy Hilfiger and particularly the Michelin Man cause her panic. Some of this can be explained by Gibson's own proclivities (likes Starbucks, hates Hilfiger) but it would be wrong to ascribe everything in the novel simply to his likes and dislikes.

Gibson has previously been known to apologize profusely for his lack of futurological foresight, he is particularly chagrined (in his own estimation) to have missed the significance of the Internet. In *Pattern Recognition* he heavily makes up for his oversight. The prevailing technologies of the novel (besides jet travel) are aspects of the Net. Google is repeatedly evoked, there is a message board, F:F:F, around which communities coalesce. Hotmail is the primary means of communication (slightly leading mobile telephony).

Most interesting is all of the technology that is *not* in *Pattern Recognition*. There are no palmtops or GPS cars, or 3G phones with cameras, although most of that technology already exists in the world, and much of it was known to be on the drawing board while Gibson was writing the novel. It could be an indication that Gibson's novels (although saturated with technology in the past) have never been concerned with the technological window-dressing. There is less technology here than in any Gibson novel, but it is worth noting that this is consistent with a trend apparent since *Virtual Light*. This tendency has now become apparent because Gibson has removed the futurity from *Pattern Recognition*. It was occurring in *All Tomorrows Parties* where the technological McGuffin was no futuristic gadget but an antique watch. It is reflected in *Pattern Recognition* where Curtas, antique calculators, become an object of obsessive veneration.

Pattern Recognition is a nest of mirrors, the text constantly reflects fragments reminiscent of his earlier books and interviews rise like anchovies in a tossed salad. Part of the vertiginous reflectivity is in the setting. We open in a London of alarming familiarity. The density of Gibson's prose is overlaid in the deeper layers of familiarity with Camden Town and Portobello Road.

Cayce is very much the Gibson heroine, (she physically resembles Molly Millions from the *Neuromancer* trilogy, sans shades, blades and muscle) skinny, shorthaired, favoring black clothing, a strange absence of physically present girlfriends. There are aspects of Gibson heroines which are quite masculine.

Kodwo Eshun has called Gibson a "Virtual Couturier." Never has this been more apparent than here. Cayce's sensitivity to brands makes clothing the first thing she notices when meeting each person; she clocks the designer and year reflexively. (We have seen this kind of thing before in the person of Mona from *Mona Lisa Overdrive* but never to this intensity). Gibson's fashion acuteness is so intense that the majority of heterosexual men are left bemused as Cayce nails one fashion statement after another in curt cryptic sentences.

The Elmore Leonard stylings of his *Virtual Light* Trilogy are receding; the conceptual fathers of *Pattern Recognition* are Ted Mooney and Don Delillo. The prose has the quality of being both precise and dreamy. In *Pattern Recognition* Gibson brings himself fractionally closer to writing a

book as impressive and significant as *White Noise*. Every time the character of Baranov-Hobbs walks on stage the shadow of Iain Sinclair seems to loom up hard.

The terrorist attack in the World Trade Center on September 11th 2001 forms a fulcrum around which the book turns. Where Bruce Sterling barely mentions the occurrence in his futurological book *Tomorrow Now*, *Pattern Recognition* would have been very different without it. 9/11 is a fracture in Cayce's existence, it represents incomprehension in her life. Through her father, she is personally connected to the tragedy, the large outer event has become very personal to her. In a small way, the solution to her individual loss is a solution to the fracture caused by 9/11.

This is a novel that evokes cities; it takes in their splendors and miseries with an extraordinary gusto; London, Tokyo, Moscow. New York appears only in memory and dream and there is a filtered, soft-focus haze to those passages. Gibson has long been fascinated with the urban aspects of Japan and England. In nonfiction he has written of Tokyo often (in his articles: "Tokyo Collage," "Modern Boys And Mobile Girls," "The Future Perfect," "My Own Private Tokyo" and "Shiny Balls of Mud") perhaps commercial considerations have never warranted such a similar treatment of London. Gibson has been to London previously in fictional prose, most notably in the "Kumi In The Smoke" passages of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*; but he has never been so determined to evoke the sensation of being there with minutiae, atmosphere, and flavors. In fact the unusual intensity of the localized experience intrudes into the reading experience; when Cayce awakes in Damien's Camden flat, hungry and facing an empty kitchen, you mentally urge her to take the couple of dozen yards across the road to the 24 hour Sanisburys supermarket. The spaces delineated in *Pattern Recognition* are both familiar and strange, the segments in Harvey Niccols' Cafe and the high post restaurant in Soho, are as alien to me as those set in Roppongi.

In many ways *Pattern Recognition* is Gibson unleashed, it is like a Gibson novel, only more so. Almost everything that makes a Gibson novel his here minus the invented gadgetry: his obsession with Japan, his adoration of urban spaces, his female protagonist's name which resembles the protagonist of *Neuromancer*, and mirrorshades do indeed appear in the chromed visor of the mystery motor cyclist. Cayce also evokes Marley from *Count Zero*, a woman sent on a chase across the world (and beyond) to discover an unknown artist, one who turns out to be more than is expected. It is also an excellent showcase for Gibson's humor. There are nuggets of hilarity here, made more effective for their unexpectedness.

This is very much a novel of coincidences, Cayce, keeps running into significant people Voytek in Portobello Road, and then again in Camden town, (he has a sister, Magda, who happens to work for a subsidiary of Cayce's own employers). Billy in Camden town and again on a BA Airliner to Tokyo.

Eventually even Cayce begins to question these coincidences. As Goldfinger himself remarks to James Bond, the original cyberpunk: once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, three times is enemy action. In *Pattern Recognition* are we looking at chaos or conspiracy? And why have we not noticed this tendency towards coincidence driven plot in Gibson's earlier novels? There are in fact conspiracies, they are perhaps not what we expect.

It is a great game, trying to figure out who is the real life model for the characters in *Pattern Recognition*; in *Idoru* the character of Rez was vaguely based on his friend Bono from U2. Posts on the williamGibsonbooks discussion board have suggested (with great perception) that the character Damien is inspired by Gibson's collaborator, the director Chris Cunningham. It is further likely that the character of the footage maker (the so called "Garage Kubrick") also shares

some of Cunningham's traits (love of Tarkovsky, obsession with controlling all aspects of the production). It is quite likely that Gibson's friend Billy Idol is the model for the rock star, Billy Prion (one side of the mouth hanging down instead of turned up).

In previous Gibson novels, and in fact in cyberpunk novels in general, there is room accorded to the mystical. Quite often the mystical is described in terms of the material: revelation, is a consequence of neurochemistry and neuroelectricity; it is something induced by technology. Here there is no such technological opt-out clause (except for an unfortunate moment involving Rhohypnol) and Gibson is forced to nail his colours to the mast. *Pattern Recognition* has several incidence of the mystical, largely involving Win Pollard, Cayce's vanished father, He appears to Cayce at various times to give advice, sometimes cryptic, sometimes direct.

The denouement is strangely conventional, the principals are gathered the conspiracies are explained, and the plots unraveled. Of course this is a William Gibson novel so a few mysteries remain, and that is right as well. Despite this, the climax (as has become usual in Gibson's novels) is off-screen and diffuse.

The early blurbs for this novel have been superlative. On this we should sound a note of caution, yes, it is indeed a better novel than *Neuromancer*, but then Gibson has been improving in the consistency of his prose and the strength of his novelistic structure with each novel. *Pattern Recognition* is a remarkable achievement, carefully and lovingly crafted, well balanced. It will not have the transformative effect of *Neuromancer*, Gibson will never write another *Neuromancer*, and he does not want to. Anyone hoping for the pyrotechnics and technofetishism of that novel will be sorely disappointed. But if you had an inkling of where Gibson has been going all of these years, if you thought he might be all about being human in the technological age we live in, then *Pattern Recognition* is full of rewards. Unlike Bruce Sterling's *Holy Fire*, *Pattern Recognition* is not a watershed novel. It is however a damn fine book that will amuse you, thrill you and tug on your heartstrings.

***Pattern Recognition* Review (2) By JPC**

"Other times, though, I have mildly creepy intimations that I might have not done all that badly in advertising." William Gibson (1997)

William Gibson's latest novel, *Pattern Recognition*, is a fascinating exercise. Continuing a trend long apparent in his recent fiction, Gibson has brought the future home. *Virtual Light*, *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties* all take place in the early decades of the 21st Century. *Pattern Recognition* actually takes place in the past: the Summer of 2002. Yet it very much retains a sense of science fiction. Of course when you consider what 2002 was really like compared to, say 1984, the year *Neuromancer* was published, "science fiction" is the proper sense indeed.

So we have Cayce Pollard, "cool hunter" sniffing out breaking trends for her advertising agency employers. Cayce (no relation to *Neuromancer*'s Case, by the way -- or is she?) is also the Delphi Oracle of logos and in an instant can foretell its viability or lack thereof. A side effect of this skill is that Cayce herself is deathly allergic to certain logos: the Michelin Man hits her like anaphylactic shock. You would think in media-saturated 2002 this malady would paralyze her but it seems not.

Cayce's father, Win Pollard, vanished from the face of the earth on the morning of September 11th, 2001, his fate unknown. This loss haunts her now as she visits London for a consultation. Increasingly she has involved herself in a mysterious phenomenon called "the Footage": unconnected snippets of what may be a movie appearing out of nowhere on the Internet. The Footage has spawned an online community dedicated to understanding what the snippets mean, who created them, how do they fit into a (presumed) complete work. For Cayce the Footage

connects in a deep way with her sense of sorrow and loss not just of her father but of the world sundered by 9/11.

Cayce's employer, Hubertus Bigend, is also examining the Footage but his interests are purely commercial. Convinced that the phenomenon of the Footage may open new methodologies for advertising he sends Cayce on a quest for the auteur behind the enigmatic film -- if it *is* a film. She accepts the assignment for reasons of her own and, with Bigend's wealth and logistics at her disposal, travels the world following leads.

Gibson abandons his usual practice of multiple points of view and focuses the entire novel on his heroine. But she is in constant touch with a host of other characters whose emails and conversations very nearly replicates the sort of chapter hopping we are accustomed to in a William Gibson novel. And, as always, we have that trademark Gibsonian set detail. It describes the year 2002, of course, rather than the "future" (though sometimes you wonder). London and Russia are gritty enough to seem familiar but Japan is drawn in such bright colors and 21st Century gloss that you can't help but feel, "We're in the future here." Rather like Chiba City on a bright day. In a conversation with Jack Womak Gibson once remarked that he wasn't "so much trying to create an imaginary future" as he was "trying to create something that feels the way the present feels, *but even more so.*" With this new novel he might be said to have done the opposite: created an imaginary present that feels the way the future feels.

The character of Cayce is well developed though, frankly, she seems too intelligent, too clear-sighted to really be involved this plot. There is a certain amount of yuppie caricature in her focus on fashions. I was reminded of Gibson's over-ripe descriptions of watches in *All Tomorrow's Parties* more than once when Cayce inventoried the brand names of the clothing of everyone she meets. Her logo phobia was too inexplicable to be taken entirely seriously. How does it work? What could possibly be its cause? Why is it so selective? The other characters in the book are a bit colorless next to Cayce. Bigend needed some fleshing out. He's clearly quite intelligent but Gibson also makes him a somewhat ridiculous womanizer. Fellow Footage enthusiast, Parkaboy, is essentially a hacker-type while he is in email communication with Cayce. When he actually appears in the flesh at the end of the novel he is not at all what you'd guess, rather unbelievably so.

The main weakness of *Pattern Recognition* to my mind is that this elaborate construction is in service of such small stakes. There are no rogue AIs longing to be free or cabals of gangsters plotting to take over the world (or at least take over San Francisco). There are only advertising firms jockeying for market share and some otakus obsessing on a bit of Internet whimsy. Cayce thinks she is in danger but she really isn't. In the end everything is explained, somewhat unsatisfactorily and we see that, oh, yes, there was really nothing to worry about after all. It's not as if the world isn't actually a perilous place. Much has been made of Gibson's use of 9/11 to inform this novel and yet the very thing it lacks is the presence of real terror. Surely Gibson is too good a writer for this to be accidental. The more I think about it the more I wonder if *Pattern Recognition* is meant to be a parody of his earlier SF thrillers.

YET ANOTHER OBSCURE INTERVIEW

Just in case you missed the May 28, 1995 issue of *The Orange County Register* (the what?), here's a mini-interview with William Gibson.

Stephen Lynch: Is your fiction cautionary?

Gibson: I think of that as being a very American question. One thing I noticed was that by and large -- until *Virtual Light* where I was deliberately trying to strike a comic note -- reviewers didn't realize that I was sometimes trying to be very funny. Which is not to say I'm not trying to be very serious at the same time. Whereas European reviewers said, "*Neuromancer*, oh wonderful black humor." Is it cautionary? Is it satirical? I don't know. I think it changes from page to page.

Are you surprised that it has taken 15 years for one of your works to be made into a film?

There have been various Gibson projects which made it to the development shelf and stuck there. I had pretty much given up on it when Robert Longo turned up and we clicked. His initial concept was that this was a \$1 million black-and-white art film. We couldn't find anyone to fund it so someone advised Robert that he had to ask for much more money and then they would take him seriously.

What do you think of Keanu Reeves as Johnny?

He made the character coherent for me. One problem with casting Johnny, most readers would read it and say, "I just don't get this guy." And I'd say, "Actually, I don't either; he's kind of a cipher. I've never figured him out," and at that point, they'd leave. When Keanu showed up, he said pretty much the same thing, but said, "What if he's like this?" And I said, "Yeah," and really between the two of us we were able to figure out who he was. After he was on board I could adjust the script in any number of ways to bring out his interpretation of the character.

Is *Johnny Mnemonic* a parody of sci-fi films?

Well, sometimes we're setting ourselves up as being a little smarter-- knowing that you, the audience, is smarter.

Why do you like writing science fiction?

The beauty of writing this stuff -- if people are committed, as I am when I read this sort of book, of getting a real science fiction hit -- the reader's imagination takes over.

Why do you live in Canada?

One of the cool things about Canada is that I've never been able to figure out how to become Canadian. There's no melting pot. The official metaphor is the cultural mosaic, although it doesn't exactly spring to people's lips. You're not really expected to melt. You're suppose to come here, be polite and pay your taxes.

WHY DOES WILLIAM GIBSON KEEP SAYING THOSE THINGS ABOUT PHILIP K. DICK? By JPC

"I'm starting to get into punk rock."
- Philip K. Dick (1980)

"I never got into Phil Dick."
- William Gibson (1987)

To tell you the truth I personally never saw much connection between Philip K. Dick and William Gibson. They are both fascinating writers but beyond the fact that they work in the genre of science fiction they seem to have little enough in common. Harlan Ellison, to keep it in the SF family, always struck me as being a more likely precursor to Gibson than PKD. Of course Phil is, today, a cultural icon, what with *Blade Runner* and *Minority Report* and John Ashcroft. Phil gets written about a lot these days in places like *The New York Times* as a prophet of the encroaching Total Surveillance State. This is fairly recent and has more to do with Spielberg than any PKD novel as such. Still his popularity is probably at an all time high here in the 21st Century, which is pretty ironic given his near invisibility in the mainstream while he was writing. Inside science fiction, of course, he was well know and appreciated. It's pretty hard to imagine anyone writing in the field not having been at least a little bit influenced by Phil -- in particular anyone reading and learning their craft from the Sixties through the early Eighties. Even so, a good writer, an original writer, will develop his or her own distinct voice and soon shed any obvious influences. In the case of William Gibson PKD does not seem to have left a trace.

Now that in itself is not unusual. Gibson had other influences such as Alfred Bester and Joanna Russ and you can see bits and pieces of them in his early work. What *is* unusual is the repeated insistence that there is not a trace of PKD DNA in his makeup. It's weird. Over and over again he say, "Philip K. Dick? Nope. No connection. Barely read the guy and besides he was crazy. Everything I know I got from Pynchon. Pynchon, Pynchon, Pynchon. And William Burroughs." Gibson has been saying this for seventeen years. It makes you wonder. In January 2003 alone he speaks of Dick on three separate occasions, once to tell us Dick was crazy, twice to reiterate, in case we missed it the first fifty times, that *there was no influence*.

Gibson actually wrote the introduction to *The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick 1974* in 1990. It is, without a doubt, the worst introduction he ever penned -- and Gibson typically writes terrific introductions. But on this occasion his muse failed him and he ends up saying nothing much at all. Coincidence? The really odd aspect of all of this is that when Dick died in 1982 a thirty-four year old William Gibson published a moving tribute in a Seattle fanzine. By 1986, after winning the Philip K. Dick Award no less, it's all about Pynchon.

It doesn't matter much, of course. We read William Gibson because we like his books and that's that. We read Philip K. Dick because we like *his* books and maybe never the twain shall meet. What follows is a collection of Gibson's remarks about PKD collected for no other reason than idle curiosity.

...WITH A STRANGE DEVICE a column by William Gibson

Some Blues for Horselover Fat: Some dozen years ago I sat on the grimy hardwood floor in a room that had once been the library of an elegant Toronto townhouse, the walls coated with uneven layers of art students' white latex, a single bulb dangling from the center of an enormous plaster rosette intended to support a chandelier, and watched pale tendrils sprout from my dirty bare feet and take root in the cracks between the floorboards. That night my private picture show was being orchestrated by a substance that put Trumbull's best efforts to shame; I'd eaten an

eighth of a minute tab of a chemical the street knew as STP, variously alleged to be either an escaped Dow bid for Barefoot In The Head wars or a methedrine molecule dolled up with assorted baroque tails by a legendary California chemist.... None of the eight people who sampled it that night ever felt the least desire to go back for a second taste; I only mention it now to make a point. After that, we always referred to the night we did the PKD and spent the next 48 hours looking for the way home to Base Reality.

Now the writer we renamed the stuff after is dead, it's been years since I've tripped on anything I'd have considered psychedelic in those days, and lately the late night news has been going from bad to weird.... I'm going to miss Mr. Dick, a man I never met.

Remarkable the number of Phil Dick's fans who have no desire to read any other sf. It always impressed me. "Well, no, I don't read that stuff.... But do you know this guy Dick?" How did they get on to him? Word of mouth.... He was the only product of the American genre sf scene you could give to hardened Burroughs and Pynchon fanatics without wincing a little. Because, at his best, he was truly Dread, the poplit equivalent of certain moments in rock when an improvised guitar line comes scything out at you like a snapped cable and cuts the mind-body dichotomy eight ways from Sunday.... Reading him, sometimes, I'd get this image: man typing at a kitchen table maybe, stoked on dex and twenty cups of coffee, typing fast; just making it all up, and somehow behind it all his admirable desire to drive us all, if only for a few seconds at a time, straight of our wretched minds.

So it's '82 already and I turned 34 today in a world more peculiar in its particulars than anything I could've dreamed up a decade ago. President Ronald Reagan. (Well, Ballard tried to warn us, he did....) Real bad Craziiness is loosed again, my dears; the spook juice is flowing from the bunkers under McLean, that old CIA ectoplasm snaking down Nicaragua way to congeal in rancid jizzy clumps along another border.... Every species of Ugly Shit coughs and shuffles in the wings....

Times like these, a good hit of PKD shakes the scales from the tired eyes. Only we can't get any more, now.

--Vancouver, March 17, 1982

Wing Window [Seattle fanzine] 1982: pp. 5-6.

the whole Dick catalog by Jerry Denny:

(1985 Philip K. Dick Award Winner William Gibson Talks About Philip K. Dick)

1. An Interview With Larry McCaffery for Mississippi Review Vol 16, No 2&3. (web version) August 1986

LM: Philip K. Dick was always writing about people like Virek who have so many "reality options," so many different reproductions and illusions, that it starts to get difficult to know which reality is more real--the one in their heads or the one that seems to exist outside. That's a powerful notion.

WG: It is powerful, which is why it's such a temptation to keep pushing it once you've got a concept like cyberspace that creates an instant rationale. I probably was a little heavy handed about this in Count Zero, with Bobby's mother, who's hooked on the soaps and lives in them, but

that was hard to resist. Everybody asks me about Dick being an influence, but I hadn't read much Dick before I started writing. I'd already gotten my Dick from Pynchon. I've always imagined an alternate world where Pynchon sold his early stories to F and SF and became an alternate Dick.

2. Eye to Eye with William Gibson by Tom Maddox: SF Eye issue 1 Winter 1987.

“I never got into Phil Dick. Somehow I missed him, coming up. I don't remember reading any of his novels when I was a kid. I may have read some of his short stories. But by the time I realized who he was, I had already read Pynchon. Pynchon will do for you what Dick does, but it's like free-basing. I never needed Dick.”

3. An Interview with William Gibson and Tom Maddox by Darren Wershler-Henry (source: Virus 23 #0 [Fall 1989], 28-36)

WG: (back to the list) Alfred Bester, yeah. Bester I'll go for. [William Burroughs'] Naked Lunch, yes. Philip K. Dick, though, had almost no influence.

TM: Right, you've really never much really read...

WG: I never really read Dick because I read Pynchon. You don't need Dick if you've read Pynchon. I mean Dick was the guy who couldn't quite do it.

TM: Ah, I think that's different, but you haven't read Dick, Bill (laughs).

WG: That's true. I read a little Dick, but I didn't like it.

4. Interview with Gregory Daurer Journal Wired Summer/Fall 1990 [interview conducted November 1988]

“When I was a kid reading science fiction in a one-horse town in rural Virginia, I discovered science fiction, and it was my sole source of subversive ideas. There was no where else to get them. It was so far below the notice of the authorities or my parents that it was totally free. So I could walk around, thirteen years old, and Philip K. Dick was addressing me from his amphetamine fog in California. “

“I think Dick was a marvelous writer, but he was totally bughouse. I think the guy was crazy and had been for a long time. I'm sure he was a wonderful man to hang around with, and he was a remarkable writer, but I tend to back Kim Stanley Robinson's hypothesis that Dick's VALIS experience – when the pink beam of light came down and hit him, and he started receiving information – was the first stroke in the series that finally killed him.”

5. Introduction to The Selected Letters of Philip K. Dick 1974 24 September 1990

When I first encountered the country you are about to enter, it consisted of a pristine stack of unbound proof pages housed in a special sort of cardboard box native to the workshops of serious small press publishers. But these letters formed part of a whole that was anything but tidy; they constituted a harrowing literary journey -- one that can never entirely be separated

from the corpus of Philip K. Dick's fiction. They are, to borrow a phrase from J.G. Ballard, *terminal documents*, demanding our full and immediate attention; I regret the decision to publish them I anything less than their terrible human entirety.

I never met Philip K. Dick, but I know that he inspired loyalty and affection in many who knew him. At the start of my own writing career, Vancouver's science fiction community still swayed slightly in the wind of PKD's recent passage. He had arrived as guest of honor at the local convention, and had delighted the locals by unexpectedly jumping ship and taking up residence. Fans who were privy to this Vancouver Period subsequently spoke of him, but fondly, as one might of some profound Fortean singularity, the human equivalent of a torrent of frogs. And though no tow versions of the sighting ever seemed to quite match up, it could be agreed that the luminous object had definitely vanished over the southern horizon.

Now we are left with his fiction, and with these letters, the majority of which were typeset from the carbons he scrupulously preserved. To those who protest that he might have objected to the publication of much of this material, I can only point to that extended act of literary preservation. The letters exist: they were not written on water. And they allow us insight: however strange, however sad, however embarrassing.

Their cumulative effect, I think, is one of nightmare.

But if they frequently resonate, as they certainly do for me, with paranoia and an underlying sense of dark momentum, so then does our age. Much of the postmodern esthetic is prefigured in Dick's best work -- in his sleepless deconstruction of generic science fiction's shopworn tropes -- in his lively sense of pastiche, and in a certain abiding tone of exhaustion in the face of a most imperfect present and an onrushing futurity.

Yet the turbulence that rises beneath the surface of this collection, this de facto testament, is also exactly and heartbreakingly personal, the product of one single soul's passage through savagely lonely country, I the latter half of our increasingly strange century.

Illuminating and embarrassing, brilliant and pathetic, the letters of Phil K. Dick are the real thing.

6. An Interview with Mr. William Gibson by Aanta Boreale _The E-Zone_(1995)

Q: This make me think of another writer Mr. Philip K. Dick who wrote a story "The Man In The High Castle" about what history might have turned out to be if the Axis had won WW2.

G: I read the story years ago, Mr. Dick was never any big personal favorite of mine, and I suspect that I got what most get from Philip K. Dick is that distilled paranoia that is found in most in his writing. Dick wrote, I don't know how many books and short stories that evolved along the same storyline, and they give me the impression that they are sections of the same log. And he wrote these things endlessly and never quite got it into one masterpiece.

7. Virtually Real Interview, _Telegraph Magazine_ 21 September 1996

"I've also read Dick's collected letters which were deeply dismaying and indeed a very off-putting thing to do. I had to do it, because I agreed to write an intro to the first volume. And it seemed there was a great deal very, very overt psychopathology going on...I mean he was a few bricks shy of a load. A brilliant guy, but....

“Well his whole life was a state of nervous breakdown. And he fueled it with a lot of prescription speed and tranquilizers and other that, for they upped his output. I don't think it did much for his clarity of perception.”

8. Online Chat at the Sc-fi Channel website: December 29 1999.

Moderator: Did you want to comment on the Phil Dick influences?

Joblard (Gibson): PKD: precious little, honestly. I think I got my PKD-like moves from Pynchon, mainly.

9. Ain't It Cool News Interview, February 3, 2000

Gibson: [Discussing the film *Matrix*] As far as having been an influence on it, I thought they had digested their Gibson very well – and also taken quite a lot of Philip K. Dick.

Interviewer: Oh, definitely.

Gibson: And you know, that's fair – I mean, I mean I do that myself all the time.

10. Online Chat at Books Unlimited: March 24, 2000

tom 26: How much of your success as an author do you think you owe to Philip K. Dick, if any?

WG: He was not an influence. On me, anyway.

11. blog: January 13, 2003

PHILIP K. DICK

I usually skip the “influence” questions, on grounds that if you know your own influences, your digestion's pretty sluggish. I'll make an exception, though, when someone suggests an influence I know I haven't had, and PKD is definitely one of those.

I read *THE MAN IN THE HIGH CASTLE* when I was twelve or so, and a proud new member of the Science Fiction Book Club. The concept of American vintage collectibles in a Japanese universe stuck with me, and not much else. Thereafter, I read virtually no PKD. Why? My guess is that my MDR of paranoia was satisfied by reading Pynchon instead, and my regular nature-of-reality workout provided by the ever-limber Jorge Luis Borges. Dick just never found a niche in my ecology of favorite writers.

12. blog: January 18, 2003

But influential impact often has little to do with how well a writer or book might be known. Phil Dick's entire corpus has had almost no impact on me, but a single reading of Thomas M. Disch's *ON WINGS OF SONG*, I know for a fact, influenced me mightily.

13. blog: January 28, 2003

I thought it [*The Matrix*] was more like Dick's work than mine, though more coherent, saner, than I generally take Dick to have been. A Dickian universe with fewer moving parts (for Dick, I suspect, all of the parts were, always, moving parts). A Dickian universe with a solid bottom (or for the one film at least, as there's no way of knowing yet where the franchise is headed).

About Molly Million...

In *Cyber Noodle Soup* #5, during a somewhat peevish discussion of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto," a question is asked: "And could someone please ask Gibson if he kept a dog-eared, heavily underlined copy of *Picnic on Paradise* by his bedside?" We would like to report the following bit of information from Denise Caruso's interview with Gibson, which appeared on "The Site."

Caruso: ...I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the female characters in your books. You always have very strong, very fully developed female characters, is there something special about that?

Gibson: Well, you know I think the bottom line is that I'm a feminist and I think the reason I'm a feminist is that the hippest Science Fiction that was being written when I started writing Science Fiction was being written by women who had a strong feminist agenda.

Caruso: Like who?

Gibson: Uh, Ursula LeGuin, Joanna Rusk [sic] come immediately to mind.

The *Pattern Recognition* Road Show By JPC

The William Gibson book reading took place on 19 February 2003 at the Galleria Barnes & Noble in suburban Edina, Minnesota. It lasted about an hour including book signings. This was definitely more upscale than his last visit to the Twin Cities. For *Virtual Light* he was hunkered in a windowless bunker at a branch public library in the Uptown area of Minneapolis. There the crowd was considerably edgier. In the white-bread Galleria the attendees were definitely middle class and polite. *Tempus fugit!*

There were about 90 people though it was hard to say for sure as they were spread out down the aisle and behind bookcases like Vietcong waiting in ambush. The usual clueless bookstore rep introduced our hero and, of course, *had* to bring up the "invented cyberpunk" descriptor, which will haunt Gibson 'till his dying breath. She rattled off the titles of Gibson's other works but, very strangely, ignored *Neuromancer*. Gibson stood behind the podium and actually reads from

a hardcopy, not the cranky PowerBook he used the last time he was in town. He read Chapter 14, "The Gaijin Face of Bikkle" -- coincidentally enough the very chapter I was getting ready to read myself. It was great, especially the description of Keiko/Judy. Even Gibson had a hard time reading this without laughing. Then answered questions. Some highlights:

[Music?] "Doc Boggs is bedrock for me." Also Jeff Becker's "Dozen Tracks of Whack" -- Becker was one half of Steely Dan.

[The 'seed' for PR?] His "yardstick" from the 80s "had gotten old and out of shape." "Needed to take the measure of the weirdness of *now*." After 9/11, he said, "the weirdness factor stretched way out."

[Why the name Cayce?] "Maybe for no reason at all." Based on Edward Cayce, of course, and he was attracted by the idea of a female Edward Cayce. "Part of the attraction is the typographical beauty of a given name as much as what it sounds like." "I saw it [in my mind] in cursive, like the Coca-Cola logo" script. "Other people need to make the connection" [to *Neuromancer's* Case].

[Japan?] "I just like it, like them, like them very much." He used to watch the Japanese tourists in Vancouver. "Well-heeled Japanese slackers go to Vancouver to hang out. They stay for years sometimes."

[Creating female characters/] No problem creating them, "especially after creating Chia Pet McKenzie of *Idoru*. Cayce was much easier." "I like writing female characters. I like them more. I do less cruel things to them." He loses interest in his male characters unless he is stressing them out in some awful situation.

[Creating characters in general?] He referred to Daniel Day Lewis interview (?) in the *Gangs of New York* book. [Unknown to me -- a press book perhaps?] He continued, "The first thing I ask is, 'What is their job description?'" "Most science fiction characters don't have job descriptions. What is it that they do?" *Star Trek* always baffled him. It "strikes me as a perfectly evolved Marxism." No one seems to have jobs. "Everyone is in the [Space] Navy."

[Current reading?] On the tour he's reading *Boonville* by Robert Anderson. He's about 80% of the way through it and has enjoyed it greatly. Very funny book though the people of the actual Boonsville (California?) are not thrilled.

[His blog?] He likes it. The web site was set up by his publisher as a marketing strategy. He felt that he needed to actually participate. He likes doing it. Spends about an hour each morning working on it when he is not touring or writing a book. Hadn't read many blogs before getting his own.

[Was he amused that the Internet, which was supposed to be so free-spirited, had become a mass of logos itself?] Yeah, a bit. But "even anarchy has a logo." In Denmark they expected him to be a "neo-Marxist puritan" who hated all logos, but he doesn't at all. He thinks they are necessary to an extent though their ubiquity is getting on everybody's nerves.

[Did he write his books longhand or on a computer?] "I wrote *Pattern Recognition* on the same kind of computer as is in Daemon's London apartment: the Cube." "Don't believe what you read in the newspapers about this. I've used word processing of some sort since midway into my third novel." His handwriting, he says, is abysmal. His cursive is unreadable.

One factoid he mentioned to me while signing a copy of *Unearth* magazine was that he had been paid \$27.80 for his first sale, "Fragments of a Hologram Rose," that appeared in that magazine.

Some of the better sound bites...

Part of the world's population is already post-human. Consider the health options available to a millionaire in Beverly Hills as opposed to a man starving in the streets of Bangladesh: the man in Beverly Hills can, in effect, buy himself a new set of organs; the man in Bangladesh is still human, a being from an agricultural planet. The man in Beverly Hills is something else. For him, the future has already happened.

-- *Cyberpunk* video 1990

Y'know the technical community's ability to read my words as prescriptions for technology never ceases to amaze me. Social criticism and irony just seem to have passed these guys completely.

-- *i-Zone* [e-zine] May-June 1996

If we could get a long-distance from me, from myself in 1965, I'd be saying, "Wow, did we win this sexual revolution? Have we gone to the moon or Mars?" What am I going to tell myself? I'm going to say, well, we did but we've got this contagious sexual cancer and you can't really have sex with people you don't know unless you're wearing a really heavy duty condom. Yeah, we went to the moon for about five minutes but nothing ever came of it. And, by the way, the Soviet Union doesn't exist.

-- *Addicted to Noise* 2.10 [e-zine] Oct. 1996