The Novel Globalized: Neoliberalism and the Brand in William Gibson and Thomas Pynchon

by

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Introduction

In 2004, Buzz Rickson’s, a small manufacturer of high-end reproduction military flight jackets produced a special limited edition of their popular reproduction MA-1 flight jacket, an iconic short nylon jacket used by mid-century U.S. Air Force pilots. This limited edition jacket came in black and featured almost no identifiable branding. Like all Buzz Rickson’s products, it was made out of materials designed to exactly replicate the mid-century nylon through careful inspection of original samples and use of original machinery wherever possible. What was unusual about this particular limited edition MA-1 jacket was that it bore the name of a contemporary American novelist; this was the William Gibson edition MA-1 jacket.

The protagonist of Gibson’s novel *Pattern Recognition* wears a black reproduction MA-1 jacket made by Buzz Rickson’s, which Gibson describes in loving detail—it is a cool jacket. Buzz Rickson’s contacted Gibson to create a special edition jacket based on the one in the novel, a new marketing direction in more than one way, as it seems their MA-1 jackets had never come in black before.

Novels have always been embedded in culture, giving thematic material in novels a context in a larger system of meaning. Yet Gibson’s novel is particularly embedded not just in American culture of the beginning of the 21st century, but also in American consumer culture. Consumer culture creates and proliferates meaning based on behaviors and patterns of behavior involved in consumption. *Pattern*
Recognition depicted a piece of consumer culture so authentic that it broke free of the novel and landed in the stars of consumer culture.

In this paper I will take up one particular form of meaning within consumer culture—the brand—as it is used in two literary works. I will examine what the brand means in consumer culture, how it imbues everyday exchanges of money for objects with very real feelings. I will also examine what form consumer cultural production, the process by which consumer culture attaches meanings to things that we buy, takes in America in the beginning of the 21st century, at least according to some contemporary cultural critics and two excellent American novelists. Perhaps because brands form a constant presence in our lives, we may feel as though we need to interpret their significance in relation to our experience. In this, the two novels I examine, Pattern Recognition by William Gibson and Bleeding Edge by Thomas Pynchon are very helpful. They provide answers to why the brands mean what they mean to us, and how we should live as consumers among brands.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will trace some changes and reversals in the ongoing battle for the brand, first in the 1960s, with the merging of hip counterculture with consumer culture and second in the 1980s and continuing to the present day, with the effects that Neoliberal economic policies have had on the brand. My principal goal in this chapter will be to define terms for my discussion of the brand in the novels and to sketch out a theoretical framework to understand how the brand works. In the second chapter, I will show how William Gibson’s novel Pattern Recognition deals with an aesthetic and ethical crisis of the brand resulting from the imperialist influence of globalization. In the third chapter, I will argue that Thomas
Pynchon’s novel *Bleeding Edge* casts the brand in an ongoing struggle for individual autonomy in the face of massive and oppressive capitalist structures. Pynchon’s individual Luddite characters in the novel use the brand to resist the abuses of Neoliberal class power in an unequal society and invite us to do the same. I will conclude with some final thoughts about what brings these novels together and what role Gibson and Pynchon might play in a future critical discussion of the brand.

In the worlds of these novels, brands are plentiful, easily read, and they lend comprehensibility, unity and beauty to parts of our lives that might otherwise be difficult, stressful, boring, incomprehensible, numbing or unpleasant. all the while bolstering our self-esteem and displaying our superior knowledge, wealth or taste to others. Ultimately, consumption just would not be much fun without brands. In the two novels I discuss later in the paper, brands are undeniably *fun*. I hope that both the cultural criticism surrounding brands and the fun of creating and buying them will prove interesting and fun in this literary exploration.
Something Alien: 
Toward a Theory of the Brand in Neoliberalism

Neoliberal economic theory and practice has reformed the landscape of capitalism in the developed world since the 1980s. Coinciding with improvements in manufacturing and communication technology, neoliberal economics makes it possible and desirable to move towards a flexible system of production, where labor markets become globally distributed and highly competitive. This shift coincides with the use of the term globalization to describe the expansion of free markets across national boundaries and the cultural and political effects of broadening neoliberal influence.

Neoliberalism’s position as a dominant discourse in American is due in part to its repurposing and replacing of the mainstream consumer culture established in the 1960s. Yet, the cultural effects of neoliberal economics cause a breakdown of the creative, symbolic mode of branding that has been a touchstone of consumer culture since the 1960s. As a special case of the system of representation that Roland Barthes describes as myth, the brand combines a specific targeted symbolism with a mechanism for defining individual identity. The globalized and financialized market’s shortfall in consumer cultural significance appears as a sense of alienation and a lack of authenticity in acts of consumption.
David Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 2). Paul Treanor’s article “Neoliberalism: origins, theory definition” defines the free market as essentially a form of social organization made possible by state protection, in which at least two sellers compete to sell products to at least one buyer. The free market’s characteristic forces are not natural forces, but a way of modeling social behavior in a free market. According to Treanor, “the resultant pressure on the two [competing] sellers to lower prices, is the simplest type of ‘market force’” (Treanor). Treanor emphasizes that a free market is not a neoliberal invention, and characterizes neoliberalism as a fundamentalist bearing-out of a belief in “the moral necessity of market forces” (Treanor). An ethics based on entrepreneurship, neoliberal theory stakes out a philosophical position where market forces, the patterns generated by market transactions provide a guide for how to live the good entrepreneurial life. Neoliberal theory privileges the free market based on an ethical belief that “the operation of a market” is “capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs” (Treanor). The ultimate neoliberal goal is always to “act in conformity with market forces,” and “within this limit, act also to maximise the opportunity for others to conform to the market forces generated by your action,” and “hold no other goals,” or, in other words, to be an entrepreneur in all actions (Treanor).
For the individual, neoliberal theory suggests that trading in a free market is a great way to make money, or use money to satisfy needs and that, if everyone pursues his own self-interest by participating in the market, the flexibility, adaptability, speed and global scope of an unfettered free market will ensure that the interests of all are proportionally represented. In short, neoliberalism suggests that a market in which all participants and their transactions are equally “free,” is a democracy. The more free the market is, the greater its power to represent the popular will.

For the state, neoliberal theory prescribes a secondary role limited to opening markets and ensuring that participants in those markets remain free to buy, sell and own. Neoliberal thought argues that, compared to a free market, a democratic state is an imperfect system. Accordingly, “state interventions in markets (once created) must be kept to a bare minimum because, according to the theory, the state cannot possibly possess enough information to second-guess market signals” (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 2). Intervention of the less-flexible state will tend to cause an overall loss in market freedom.

Businesses, governments and international organizations have put into practice a strain of neoliberal theory elaborated from monetarist theories developed by Milton Friedman, who became the most influential figure in the Chicago school of economics, a group of like-minded economists on the faculty at the University of Chicago. In the 1980s, monetarism, a macroeconomic approach that promotes growth by preventing inflation and using central banks to keep prices stable during recessions and periods of growth, displaced the dominant Keynesian macroeconomic approach, which emphasizes using government spending to prevent unemployment, mitigate
recessions and shape periods of growth. This move toward monetarism took place at the behest of Chicago economists, who gained positions of influence in global market-watching institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as well as in the conservative governments formed by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the U.S. and Britain (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 3). Harvey argues that, through a series of “political forces, historical traditions, and existing institutional arrangements” between the mid-1970s and the present, “neoliberalism emerged victorious as the single answer” for first-world market democracies, that “neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 13, 3). Neoliberalism has since taken a central role in macroeconomic practice in many parts of the world (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 12).

Several prevailing conditions have coincided with widespread neoliberalism. The global capitalist system has been transformed by a triple threat of processes that have been described as flexibilization, globalization and financialization. These dynamics have been advanced by neoliberal practice, but they also create an environment favorable to the advancement of neoliberalism.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey argues that, in the 1980s global capitalism shifted to a new mode, which he terms “flexible accumulation,” in which labor, production and consumption become much more flexible and mobile, able to shift rapidly across global markets, generally allowing multinational corporations to achieve larger profits at the expense of workers, who see lower wages, reduced job security and longer hours; better communication and
transportation mean that their jobs can easily be moved overseas (Harvey

*Postmodernity* 147, 151).

Flexible accumulation is the basis for globalization, which is essentially what corporations can do when their capital becomes suitably flexible. When barriers between markets break down, communication improves and labor becomes flexible, corporations can use the entire world as a labor market and the entire world as a consumer market. Today nearly all markets are global. Globalization is a nebulous term that is used differently by different people. As a euphemism, globalization expresses the exploitation of labor possible through flexibilization as a moral imperative. As a pejorative, globalization can refer to cultural flattening, the spread of Starbucks and McDonald’s to every corner of the world at best, or a thin veneer for hard imperialism at worst.

One of the most important consequences that Harvey argues stems from the shift to flexible accumulation is “the complete reorganization of the global financial system” along the lines of a “rapid proliferation and decentralization of financial activities . . . the creation of entirely new financial instruments and markets” and “in the United States . . . the deregulation of a financial system that had been rigorously circumscribed” (Harvey *Postmodernity* 160). The financialization of the neoliberal economy has redefined corporate practice. Financial trading offsets losses incurred by production, and occasionally replaces production entirely. Duménil and Lévy, in their book *Capital Resurgent*, note that “finance,” in the neoliberal era has “imposed its law . . . after a period of relative decline” (Duménil and Lévy 110). They ascribe financialization to a combination of ongoing changes in the economy, such as a
general growth in the size of most corporations, particularly in the United States, with some specific neoliberal characteristics, like an increase in the use of credit (Duménil and Lévy 118). One of the interesting effects of financialization that they note, is that “the traditional frontier between financial and nonfinancial firms tends to become blurred” (Duménil and Lévy 118).

According to David Harvey’s outlook, these characteristics of neoliberal economics have led to another effect: class warfare, which we might also call exploitation. Harvey, citing detailed research on real wages over time and tax rates for the top and bottom income brackets over time in the U.S., concludes that one effect of neoliberal economics is “the restoration of power to an economic elite or upper class in the US and elsewhere in the advanced capitalist countries” (Harvey Neoliberalism 29). Though the groups that have benefited from this upward redistribution are not necessarily the same ones who were already rich, Harvey describes that neoliberal economics have tended to reinforce class power in two ways, first by “paying CEOs (managers) in stock options (ownership titles),” and, second, by leading companies previously involved in production, such as American automakers or US Steel to make finance a part of their core business (Harvey Neoliberalism 32). The result is a financialization of class relations, the creation of a financial elite. When “stock values rather than production . . . become the guiding light of economic activity,” (Harvey Neoliberalism 32), those involved with finance benefit most from economic growth. The financial elite, which we might also call the neoliberal elite because neoliberalism has brought about their new wealth and power, is thus made up at the top of CEOs and executives in financial services, and
additionally of CEOs of high-tech companies, lawyers and others who are directly involved with the global financial system.

The massive wealth and power of this elite gives them the tools to engage in class warfare. Harvey notes that the neoliberal elite “recognizes the advantages . . . to be derived from neoliberalization” and “exercise immense influence over global affairs and possess a freedom of action that no ordinary citizen possesses” (Harvey *Neoliberalism* 36). Duménil and Lévy go further, arguing that the progress of neoliberal economic practice is no less than a “tour de force” accomplished by the wealthy to skyrocket their wealth to ever more disproportionate levels (Duménil and Lévy 139). This assessment, though it undeniably showing the left-leaning political tendencies of all three authors, does readily explain the massive income inequality in the most developed countries in the world. This income inequality appears in the novels I will discuss, both of which include a larger-than-life portrayal of a massively wealthy antagonist.

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In order to examine the rise of neoliberalism and its cultural effects, I will turn to the version of consumer culture that forms one ideological basis that justifies the ethics of the free market. In *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank argues that, in the 1960s, mainstream advertising underwent a total change from stodgy and conventional to creative and self-aware in order to better market to youth culture. According to Frank, this change took the form of a mass society critique. A large
portion of young middle-class Americans viewed mainstream American culture as a dead end, a boring life that stigmatized individuality and rewarded conformity to restrictive cultural norms. Frank argues that, an often-overlooked but contemporaneous phenomenon was the widespread dissatisfaction of businessmen, who felt suffocated under the weight of bureaucracy and organizational rules that characterized large American corporations at the time. Both conformist suburban life and stultifying organization man culture are, for Frank, aspects of mass society. In the 1960s, both groups rejected mass society in what Frank describes “a sudden mass defection of Americans from square to hip” (Frank 13). This confluence of two mass society critiques created the consumer culture of the 1960s, a relationship between marketing and consumer culture that Frank terms hip consumerism. Young consumers in the 1960s were no longer interested in brands that symbolized conformity and pseudo-science and, accordingly, new advertisements represented their brands as standing for “public mistrust of consumerism” (Frank 55). As advertising pitches shifted from “dealing in conformity and consumer fakery” to “offer the public authenticity, individuality, difference, and rebellion” (Frank 9), they established the paradigm of hip consumerism, which remains dominant today.

In this period, the brand takes on its full capacity as a meaningful sign in consumer culture. Advertisements of the 1950s were generally based on so-called scientific evidence that claimed the virtues of one product over all the competitors. A 1955 article from the Harvard Business Review called “The Product and the Brand,” by Burleigh B. Gardner and Sidney J. Levy, diagnoses the problems of this approach and proposes an alternative. At a certain point, these claims stopped being effective
for two reasons. First, most customers believed that all well-known brands producing similar products would work about as well. Gardner and Levy characterize this situation as the main problem of the pseudo-scientific approach to advertising, which they call quantitative research. Because “most surveys tend to show that consumers want products to be, in one form or another, effective,” this leads to “the belief that people are fretting over those minute differences, presumed to provide the best quality” (Gardner and Levy 33). The products were sufficiently commodified that there was little to distinguish them from those made by competitors. The second failure was that this approach assumed that the same answer was right for everyone and that everyone would naturally want to buy the same product. Gardner and Levy propose that a superior approach would emphasize qualitative differences between different brands, because American consumers “simply may not want to be like, or to live like [other] people of diverse social status” (Gardner and Levy 34).

The Gardner and Levy article is a manifesto for creative advertising, redefining the brand as a “crucial symbol” for “ideas, feelings, and attitudes” (Gardner and Levy 35). The brand allows consumers to align themselves with some aspects of its meaning, “picking and sticking to” the emotions, ideas or experiences “that seem most appropriate . . . deciding whether or not the brand is the one ‘for me’” (Gardner and Levy 35). By linking into an aspect of the brand’s meaning, the brand becomes partly a symbol *for them* as they intern become a symbol *for it*.

In hip consumerism, the brand is made to symbolize the attitude of cynicism and disgust with consumption in general, and especially the products of competitors, which symbolize mass society conformism. In order to market to younger generations
who seem cynical and fail to connect with the brand, a corporation need only discover what the objections are and rewrite their advertising message as one that claims to be equally disgusted on the same grounds, an alternative to conformity. Adopting the same suspicious position as the consumers who doubt their message, the producer can invert the brand’s symbolism, or that of competing brands, and the consumers who suspected and doubted the message of conformity before will now find a meaning tailor-made for their identity. They will happily buy and use the product because it gives them a tool for self-representation that matches the way they want to represent themselves. In Frank’s words, “not only does hip consumerism recognize the alienation, boredom, and disgust engendered by the demands of modern consumer society, but it makes of those sentiments powerful imperatives of brand loyalty and accelerated consumption” (Frank 231). Hip consumerism re-energizes the joy of consumption, making it an antidote to the mass society ills we endure during working hours, because “however we may rankle under the bureaucratized monotony of our productive lives, in our consuming lives we are no longer merely affluent, we are rebels” (Frank 232).

In Frank’s view, because hip consumerism allows corporations to very effectively co-opt and convert youthful skepticism and rebellion into fuel for new, more appealing representations of those very same referents, to “transform alienation and despair into consent,” it creates a blueprint for how these ideas can be used to engineer popular consent in other systems. By branding your product “cool,” in the terms that your target audience uses for cool, you can invite them to buy their own identity through your product.
Part of neoliberalism’s success as a theory widely accepted is due to its ability to harness the cultural paradigm of hip consumerism by branding the free market with associations of freedom and individuality. Harvey frames the neoliberal rebranding of the free market as a mass society critique, in response to which the deregulation and expansion of markets provides “a much more competitive individualism as the central value in an entrepreneurial culture” and “a burst of energy that many, even on the left, compare favourably with the stifling orthodoxy and bureaucracy of state control and monopolistic corporate power” (Harvey *Postmodernity* 171). Randy Martin describes the advent of electronic financial trading with an example of advertising for one online banking platform, which, Martin says, “promised nothing less than a new corporate culture for a different kind of consumer” (Martin 3). Harvey, writing *The Condition of Postmodernity* in 1989 is reticent to weigh in strongly on the cultural effects of the rebranding of the free market. Because the goal of neoliberalism is to create markets where none currently exist, embedding other systems in financial markets, we should view these transformations as a financialization of culture.

The financialization of culture is a process of mystification, by which systems are shown to be embedded in finance. Randy Martin describes how, through the financialization of culture, social and cultural functions become embedded in finance. Martin argues that finance has replaced labor and leisure as the dominant process by which the American worker produces a subjectivity. Participation in financial markets and all its associated risks are no longer the province of a few bankers and business owners, but democratized to all as a matter of “official policy,” which redefines “a new social contract” and enlists “the usual suspects of reason, efficiency, and
freedom” plus the “coercive forces” of “civilization” and “progress,” all “rounded up to testify on its behalf” (Martin 10). Finance, by entering the lives of everyone with a computer in the home and in the hours outside of work presents us with a new set of values and behaviors to internalize while undermining completely some old ones fundamental to our understanding of ourselves as subjects in a capitalist system. The effects on the self, as personal finance, risk and debt blur the boundary between home and work is an “assassination” of an older form of evaluating the capitalist self, where labor justifies consumption during leisure and present earning justifies future spending (Martin 43, 10, 20-21). Instead, both labor and leisure become embedded in finance—a good laborer has entrepreneurial ability and leisure time is a good time to make money for yourself and your family. What replaces this principle of ownership and self-assurance for the average worker-consumer-capitalist, Martin argues, is indeterminacy of well-being, unreasonable expectations of happiness and feelings of inadequacy in a society “oriented toward the gain of the few” that has merely “created processes of participation for the multitude” (Martin 44, 17).

Whether or not the financialization of culture is a cause or an effect of neoliberal economic practice, it has repercussions for brands in consumer culture. What we see with the brand under the financialization of culture is that the brand symbol becomes not only a novel financial instrument, but also a means for naturalizing the terms of the new financial subjectivity. Because the brand’s symbolism forms identities, a brand that symbolizes finance does ideological work towards the dominance of finance as a discourse in cultural identity. These processes are mutually constitutive. First, the brand becomes embedded in finance. In the
portfolios of conglomerates, the brand appears as a financial holding. It can be valued as worth a certain amount, and that value is flexible enough to be exchanged. Not only can the brand’s value be exchanged, but its very symbolism can be exchanged. The prerequisite for this very novel exchange, however, is that the brand’s symbolism must be aligned with finance.

In his article “HBO’s Flexible Gold,” Michael Szalay argues that brands function as fiscal derivatives, financial instruments whose value depends on the performance of a difficult-to-quantify underlying entity. Thus the brand’s tradeable value is derived from the qualities the brand represents. To explain this position, Szalay describes a process by which television shows like *Game of Thrones* and *The Newsroom* create a brand identity for HBO. The shows themselves can then influence the brand identity of other brands within Time Warner, the conglomerate that owns HBO, thus trading some valuable qualities of one brand to another one. Szalay expresses this process in a series of allegories, whereby a show like *Game of Thrones* models a view of real-world finance through allegory and thus create the dynamics that bring about the exchange in value, equity, between brands.

Szalay observes that “the precipitating water cooler conversation among the nation’s elites,” as seen on *The Newsroom*, includes a tendency to describe national debt as an impending burden or a pressure too great to halt, which will soon crush us in its iron grip. He sees this allegorically also in *Game of Thrones*: “the imminent winter in Westeros represents the long freeze facing the Anglo-American world, as it collapses under the weight of its own debt” (Szalay 118). By representing the Game of Thrones brand as a symbol of debt, Szalay argues that the real-world debt of the
brand can then be measured to quantify the brand’s value as a marketable representation, and, through that value as a representation, its financial brand equity (Szalay 113-114).

While Szalay shows that the financialized brand can convert its very symbolism to tradeable value, he concludes that, at least in the case of media companies like HBO, “it is currently impossible to recognize the value of brands on corporate balance sheets” (Szalay 130). For now, brands can come to resemble derivatives, to be embedded in a market and to represent finance without being quite reduced to total exchangeability (Szalay 130). Szalay suggests that the market will find a way, and we are currently in a process of transition, where the underlying qualities of Time Warner’s different brands may yet be “in the process of discovering their exchangeable value” (Szalay 130).

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Harvey argues that market exchange inherently “fragments” the “subjective meaning” of production, exchange and consumption (Harvey Postmodernity 103). This fragmentation is better known as the Marxist concept of alienation. In production, alienation is the process by which the laborer becomes estranged from the result of his labor, forced by the conditions of his employment to view the product as someone else’s property, labor thrown away for someone else, making his labor “something alien,” unattached to him (Marx “Estranged Labor” XXII).¹ The corollary

¹ In the manuscripts of 1844, Marx describes the alienation of labor and its product as when labor “confronts . . . the object that labor produces - labour’s product - as something alien”. He argues that
in consumption to labor alienation is what Marx calls commodity fetishism, the idea
that market exchange masks the social relationships of which the commodity is a part,
so that the commodity seems to be an “independent being endowed with life” (Marx
*Capital* I Section 4). Harvey argues that the two work together, that when labor is
alienated, “advertising and commercialization destroy all traces of production in their
imagery, reinforcing the fetishism that arises automatically in the course of market
exchange” (Harvey *Postmodernity* 102). Neoliberalism’s flexible production has
exacerbated alienation by fragmenting production and consumption into more and
more pieces. For the remainder of this chapter, I will attempt to lay out a theory of the
brand in neoliberalism. The neoliberal brand is defined by increased alienation and,
paradoxically, both greater mystification through commodity fetishism and
heightened cultural backlash to the deleterious effects of commodity fetishism.

The combination of alienated labor and commodity fetishism causes the
consumer to become alienated from the product she is consuming. Consumer
alienation, a term which I will define in two senses. The first sense of consumer
alienation is a mass society critique. None of the products available offer an
individual identity, so the consumer feels alienated from the conformity that the
brands available symbolize. The second sense is an increased awareness of the
mystified social and political realities behind the fetishized commodities, a sense of
ethical disgust with the products of global markets and flexible, exploitative labor
practices, and guilt resulting from the consumption of unethical products.

“under these economic conditions this realization of labor . . . labor which has been embodied in an
object . . . appears as loss of realization” (Marx “Estranged Labor” XXII)
The act of consumption, formerly laden with all the cultural significance attached to a product has become alienated; when a consumer acquires a product with no knowledge of where and how it was made, what it was made from, who made it and why, she can be said to be estranged from the product of her consumption. Consumer alienation is expressed more fully in a global market. When the consumer receives a product from another country, she literally “confronts it as something alien.” The brand enters this situation as a form of representation that bridges the gap between consumer, product and corporation and supplies lost meanings to an alienated act of consumption. The brand is a sign which imparts to an object qualities that the object does not have. As a signifier, which stands for certain cultural concepts, the brand affixed to an object translates its meaning to that object, so the object and the brand both stand for the signified meaning of the brand.

The brand itself acquires meaning through representation. By being represented prominently in culture, the brand is given meaning in culture; by being represented this way many times over a long period of time, its meaning solidifies and accumulates so the brand ultimately becomes instantly recognizable with immediate associations that remain stable over time. We can understand the brand as a special case of myth, using Roland Barthes’s definition of myth.

Roland Barthes elaborates Ferdinand de Saussure’s framework of sign, signifier, signified into a multidimensional system, where signs can be embedded within higher orders of signification. Barthes defines myth as a higher-order system, a form of sweeping cultural representation that privileges a specific and myopic reading of a lower-order sign. First, myth, a second-order system of signification, combines a
“metalanguage” that glosses a “language-object” to which it is attached (Barthes 115). The language object is a representation in a system such as language, photography, recorded sound or film. The metalanguage is a cultural significance linked to but otherwise unrelated to the language-object. Barthes gives the example of a Latin grammar example, with a language-object, the words in Latin meaning “my name is lion,” and a metalanguage, the knowledge that this sentence in Latin is a grammar example used to teach Latin. The “global signification” of the two together constitutes the myth (Barthes 116-117). Second, myth privileges a single interpretation, which Barthes calls the “concept” (Barthes 117). Rather than leave the interpretation of the sign up to the viewer, myth presents an “indisputable image” (Barthes 118). It collapses the many possibilities of interpreting the meaning of the language-object into a single reading of the sign. Barthes says of the grammar example that “the story of the lion must recede a great deal in order to make room for the grammatical example” (Barthes 118). Third, the myth has what Barthes calls a “buttonholing quality” (Barthes 124). The myth targets its concept towards an audience for which it will be a concept. By targeting such only the group for whom the concept is already internalized, a myth forces members of that group to acknowledge that this understanding defines, in part, identity of their group. Because it defines the reader, he cannot disclaim it. Myth has the power to subsume a group’s identity into its concept because

the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be

appropriated . . . [to] appeal to such and such group of readers and not another . . . it is I whom it has come to seek. It is turned towards me, I
am subjected to its intentional force, it summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity. (Barthes 119, 124)

What distinguishes the brand from myth generally is that the brand is a form of myth designed to be bought and sold. Before we consider that difference, it is worth elaborating some characteristics of how the brand functions. For Barthes, myths are official forms of representation created by institutions and used to buttonhole people who are subject to those institutions. This is certainly true of brands, which, at least initially, are given meanings by the corporations that invent them. The meaning of the brand is what the corporation says it is. This is because representations of brands are almost exclusively designed and paid for by the corporations, who therefore exercise control over the brand’s meaning. Myths can develop meaning through many different forms of representation, but the brand acquires meaning almost exclusively through advertising. Conventional myths owe much of their accrued meaning to representations in art—the contribution of Woody Allen’s horse-drawn carriage ride in Manhattan to the myth of Central Park comes to mind, for example—while brands rarely acquire their mythical significance from artistic representations—the contribution of James Bond films to the brand of Aston Martin sports cars could be one possible exception to this rule, though the brands represented in Bond novels and films have always been paid for by corporations, placing them under the heading of advertising rather than art. For both brands and myths, this holds true while they are still fairly malleable, but they become more deeply set over time. Once the brand becomes becomes instantly recognizable and deeply set in culture, it becomes less mutable. For example, no amount of re-branding
will completely upend the cultural significance of Coca-Cola. It can still be added to, however, which makes it interesting as a cultural market. No doubt this is also a characteristic of myth.

To summarize, by branding an object, a corporation gives it meanings that do not exist. These meanings have been established by cultural representations in which the brand, a signifier, signifies concepts, including but not limited to narratives of origin for the product. The important difference between myths and brands lies in the brand’s capacity to transfer its meaning to both producer and consumer. In the act of branding, the corporation not only declares that an object has a meaning, which the corporation has defined, the corporation also claims that meaning as a quality of itself. By buying and using a product, a consumer also attaches that meaning to herself. When she places that brand on her own person it signifies the same there as it does anywhere else. From the brand’s ability to proliferate and totalize come both power to self-determine, and coercive power to discipline selfhoods. The same capacity of the brand to sow meaning both fulfills our need to place our actions in a pattern that connects us with other human subjectivities and provides a means of control that the apparatus of official meaning can use to coerce us into patterns of behavior and subjection.

Whether we like it or not, our identities as consumers are constituted from the brands we use. This seems obvious, and yet everyday acts of self-branding remain some of the most visible ways most of us define our cultural identities. When we brand ourselves as consumers of Starbucks, users of Google, drivers of Detroit cars, our consumer subjectivities recognize the way this drops our ongoing narratives of
ourselves into grooves, more or less well-worn. I would like to turn to the status of the brand in neoliberalism, and examine a quality I will define, the authenticity of a brand.

As we have seen, consumer alienation is, in a sense, a loss of localness. Because products in global markets come from faraway places and arise from sources of labor that are located in so many places as to be located nowhere in particular, products appear not to originate anywhere in particular. Because products are sold in many global markets, products also appear not to be destined to go to anywhere in particular.

The brand mitigates this loss of localness somewhat. By providing a consistent meaning, which might include cultural associations linked to a particular place, narratives of origin for a product and the corporation that produces it, not to mention assurances of quality and integrity, the brand provides a remnant or a token of localness. The brand on a product makes it less alienating to buy because it promises that at least some aspects of production and consumption are specific to a location and not distributed bafflingly across the entire globe. Brands present this restoration of localness at different levels. The claims to localness that these brands make can be evaluated. This traceable truth value is the faculty that allows a brand to mitigate consumer alienation, the brand’s authenticity. Authenticity in a brand can thus be measured either as an evaluation of how much a brand mystifies or affirms its origins or as the subjective balm it provides for consumer alienation. This point of view essentially follows Walter Benjamin’s definition that “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its
substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin 215).

Brand authenticity does not necessarily function independently from other meanings that might be attached to an act in consumer culture. For example, the authenticity of a brand should not be confused with the same kind of authenticity in the product, that which is branded. If the brand’s authenticity is a higher-order mystification, I take the product’s authenticity to mean the literal relations of production, which the brand tends to mask. A product’s authenticity can be measured as the degree to which it is alienated from the labor that produced it. In our context, this generally means that a more authentic product is less globalized and its production is less flexible, definitely and permanently located in a single local place, or at least in a small number of traceable suppliers. Both the authenticity of the product and of the brand can contribute to the overall authenticity of the experience of consumption. An authentic product made with care by an artisan not alienated from the product of his labor may provide an authentic experience of consumption whatever the status of its brand might be. From the perspective of a consumer subjectivity, the act of authentic consumption heals the consumer’s alienation in a process I will term authentication.

The mass society critique is an example of consumer alienation. Brands that symbolize conformity fail to ground the consumption of their products locally by suggesting that all people everywhere should be their consumers. Brands that symbolize individuality and target a type of individual authenticate consumption, because they signal that their products are intended to be consumed locally. Products
with globalized, flexible production also fail to ground their production locally—even if they claim to, if this can be proven to be false, the result will be alienating.

Locating both consumption and production is essential to authenticity. The alienation we are discussing results from what Frederic Jameson calls our “spatial as well as our social confusion,” our inability to create a comprehensible sense of our individual consumer subjectivities in relation to the market space they occupy; alienation stems from dispersion of the particular and the imposition of conformity that result from globalization (Jameson *Postmodernism* 50).

The brand appears to be in a crisis of authenticity. A combination of globalization and flexible labor has caused most brands to become less local and therefore less authentic, unless the brand does additional work to bring together far-flung means of production into some symbolic concept of localness. At the same time, corporations that use flexible labor often own no production capacity at all, and are valued entirely according to financial holdings. The value of the company thus becomes tied almost entirely to the value of its brands. This combination of the critical importance of brand value and increased scrutiny on brand authenticity has led to a heightened awareness of ethical concerns involved in consumption. Because brand authenticity is partly a measure of verifiable truth claims and partly a measure of labor alienation, the ethical status of a corporation’s labor practices become central in the authenticity of its brands.
To explain this crisis, I will examine Apple, the most valuable brand in the world.\(^2\) Part of Apple’s brand is the proud label applied to every iPhone or Macbook that reads “Designed by Apple in California.” This slogan very effectively authenticates Apple’s brand. A totally commodified product, a personal computing device made from industry-standard chips that accesses the same Internet and runs the same software as any other one, differentiates itself by proclaiming much less commodity fetishism and much more artisan labor. Production of the iPhone becomes localized in an originary sense—though the product is not manufactured in California, it originates in the mind of the artisan in California, and thus production is localized in a cosmic sense, not merely a literal sense. In the name of transparency, Apple’s website lists some of the suppliers who build and assemble parts for their products—there are literally hundreds, the vast majority in China (“Our Suppliers”).\(^3\) Because of this one trump card of California authenticity, Apple can show how massively alienated its production truly is without worrying that the overall authenticity of their brand will suffer. We see how important localness is to a brand, when a single designer in California can outweigh an army of assembly line workers in China.

Yet even Apple’s authenticity is not safe. After 18 factory workers attempted suicide in 2010 at one of the Chinese Foxconn plants that assembles iPhones, the truth claims of Apple’s very authentic brand came under attack. “It’s hard not to look at the nets,” reads a profile in Wired, referring to the suicide prevention devices the author noticed when visiting the Foxconn plant (Johnson “Who’s to Blame?”). For a

\(^2\) As of April 2015, Apple tops Forbes’s list of most valuable brands (http://www.forbes.com/powerful-brands/list/) with a valuation of $124.2 billion, more than twice as much as either second place, Microsoft, or third place, Google.

\(^3\) The URL for this page is: https://www.apple.com/supplier-responsibility/our-suppliers/. Full citation in Works Cited.
while, it it seemed like it would be impossible to look at the Apple brand without seeing the nets around it. Though Apple’s authentic brand grounded squarely in the mind of a designer in California had gone some considerable distance to authenticate and naturalize a massively fragmented process of production, an ethical crisis in Apple’s supply chain could reveal the brand’s claim to authenticity as a lie. This has caused Apple to respond by applying to its brand more assurances of local, unalienated, ethical production. For example, Apple’s list of suppliers also describes each company’s “conflict-free certification status,” a play for ethical status that literally authenticates Apple’s brand through transfer of authenticity from another brand, that of the certifying body. Certifications like this do probably promote ethical labor practices in the global market, but from a brand-building perspective, they operate on consumer alienation resulting from feelings of guilt, attempting to make Apple’s products more ethically palatable. This appears to have worked, judging by Apple’s stock price. Authenticity is thus revealed to be the nexus of hip consumerism. This type of authentication recycles feelings of guilt and disgust at a breakdown of authenticity into reasons to buy products from the new, repentant Apple. This ethical restoration and assuaging of consumer guilt is the final sense in which I understand brand authenticity, and the one that is most relevant for the discussion of our first novel in the next chapter.
A Seeker After Truth:
The Effects of Globalization on the Soul
in *Pattern Recognition*

William Gibson’s novel *Pattern Recognition* steps back from Gibson’s high-tech science fiction worlds into a present-day one. In this 21st-century capitalist novel, we are introduced to protagonist Cayce Pollard, who “hunts cool,” chasing after hip young people to try and find the latest fashion trends on the street so that they can be picked up and commercialized by fashion designers. Cayce’s great value to the fashion industry is due to her physical allergy to branding; she becomes physically ill whenever she sees excessive branding. She wears only neutral-colored clothing with the brand names and logos removed. This allergy is also a sixth sense, which allows her to instantly recognize what will “work” in the marketplace based on whether or not it triggers her sensitivity to branding. In her spare time, Cayce is obsessed with a viral Internet phenomenon called the Footage, a series of exceptionally beautiful and artistic video clips distributed anonymously online by a mystery filmmaker, whose mastery and minute attention to detail make the Footage unmistakable. Cayce is a member of an Internet community, the Fetish:Footage:Forum, or F:F:F, which studies the Footage. Pitch-perfect depictions of Internet discussions provide much of the novel’s observant cultural investigation.
*Pattern Recognition* opens with its protagonist arriving, jetlagged, in a London “mirror world.” Jet lag Cayce describes as “soul-delay” (2).\(^4\) Unable to keep up with her, Cayce’s soul trails after her several time zones behind and must be gradually reeled in. Not until the very end of the novel does Cayce, taking detours to Japan and Russia, and threatening repeatedly to escape to Paris or home to New York, finally overcome jet lag, or even finish catching up on her email (367).

The novel’s central anxiety is that authentic and particular forms of branding have been erased from the people and things of the first world. The novel provides an account of the confusion and alienation of living in what Jameson calls the “new ‘world system’ of multinational or late capitalism, a space whose negative or baleful aspects are only too obvious” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 50).\(^5\) A late imperial romance, the novel traces its disenchanted protagonist’s journey from the metropolis, where life has been flattened by official consensus, to the periphery, in search of validation and a new identity. As a hip consumer, Cayce looks to the products she buys to help differentiate herself from conformist society and to build an individual identity. Brands that reflect comprehensible history and individual agency offer a chance to extricate us from the mass consensus, to dealienate and re-enchant our subjectivities through the brand’s magical exchange of meaning. Yet the brands in the metropolis have become meaningless; they no longer symbolize any kind of

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\(^4\) All references in Chapter 2 with page numbers alone are to Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*.

\(^5\) Lee Konstantinou argues that *Pattern Recognition* represents the brand as a cognitive map, a term from Jameson for a cultural production activity that would “endow the individual subject with some heightened place in the global system” (Jameson *Postmodernism* 54). According to Konstantinou, Gibson’s novel embodies “coolhunting,” doing a kind of archaeology on the brands in order to make them stand for the unethical geopolitical and economic relations, “invidious externalities” (Konstantinou 89), behind their mirror surfaces, so that we might not only see ourselves reflected but also the ethics of our consumer identities.
individuality to Cayce’s eyes, only more and more global conformity, with the same products offering the same lack of meaning in all markets worldwide. At the edges of the global market, authentic brands with unique meanings still exist and thus there is a chance there for Cayce to find an identity as an individual soul.

Gibson’s novel also diagnoses a deeper problem. By making his protagonist “soulless,” deeply complicit in globalization’s flattening program, even as she tries to break free from it, Gibson shows that even rejection of the global market is an impulse built into the market’s brand. Through incorporating that rejection into the market’s brand symbolism, alienation can be recycled into consent. Caught up in this system, Cayce cannot break free from globalization’s creeping consensus because she destroys everything she touches; in escaping to unpenetrated, peripheral places, she makes herself a foot soldier in globalization’s imperial conquest. Absent is her soul. Gibson portrays a horrifying consumer alienation, in which Cayce can only attempt to recover her soul by searching for brands that will color her identity with authenticity. Meanwhile we are reminded that the soul Cayce would have if she could only reconnect with the world would presumably be appalled at her actions. By portraying Cayce as unable to recognize her own wealth, privilege and power, Gibson shows us that the imperialism and class warfare implicit in globalization are not purposeful but creep insidiously from Cayce’s very desire to free herself from it. By identifying jet lag as the root of Cayce’s loss of soul, Gibson’s novel suggests that the only solution may be to stay at home, that the more we travel in search of authenticity, the more meaningless our lives become. For Gibson, individuality is incompatible with the global capitalist “world system,” which flattens indiscriminately. Because the
individual cannot be dispersed globally but exists in one place at a time, only a system that allows for both local roots and global connection can preserve unflattened, particular meaning.

The Internet offers some hope in *Pattern Recognition* to become such a system and replace globalization’s free market consensus with a less coercive form of world network, a form of exchange between different centers of localness, but one that can accommodate difference, without consensus or flattening necessary. Because of its flexibility and low barriers to entry, the Internet offers the same promise that the free market under neoliberalism offers. Unfortunately, like neoliberal economics, the Internet is tied to more solid power relations. Online presence masks unequal socioeconomic relationships. Thus *Pattern Recognition* portrays the Internet’s balance as very fragile; Cayce’s guilt in the novel is from tracking down the maker of the Footage, attempting to spread flatness into the Internet.

*Pattern Recognition* is seldom analyzed except in the context of Gibson’s earlier work. It needs some maneuvering to place it alongside works by other authors. Though it might be a thriller or possibly detective fiction, *Pattern Recognition* is most specifically an example of the genre laid out by John McClure in his book *Late Imperial Romance*. In the late imperial romance, a protagonist who feels disillusioned with life at the center of the empire, in the metropolis, the “disenchanted” world, travels to an outlying colony in search of a new outlook on life. Ultimately, through an encounter with a foreign place and culture, the protagonist discovers that the world still has some new, mysterious things to see, some sources of difference that have yet to be suppressed by the empire and achieves spiritual restoration. As the late imperial
romances from the 20th century that McClure describes portray a world disenchanted by the progress of empire, *Pattern Recognition* shows us a world disenchanted by the ubiquity of globalization. In this novel, the steamers that colonized the world are replaced with jet airplanes on long-haul flights exchanging money and commodities; Conradian horro becomes jet lag, a traumatic experience that reveals the protagonist’s compromised worldview. Japan and Russia, for instance, offer reserves of strangeness in the novel, which would be impossible in London, but have not yet been ground down and flattened in these places. McClure argues that late imperial romance interrogates and critiques the “civilizing mission” of earlier imperial romance, offering “in its stead a counter-romance of descent into realms of stubborn strangeness and enchantment,” but that, even so, late imperial romances ultimately tend to reinscribe narratives of imperial dominance, because they remain based on and beholden to “imperial mappings and Western dreams” (McClure 8, 7). According to McClure, these romances constitute a closed loop, in what he calls “the prison house of late imperial romance,” and thus offer few balms for the problems of imperial domination (McClure 7).

*Pattern Recognition*, as a 21st-century late imperial romance, is not on the surface a very subversive novel. It offers no damning critiques of the first world and generally accepts the values of Western privileged classes. Yet by suggesting that not even Cayce would condone her own actions in the novel if she had her soul, Gibson undermines the unequal power relations it seems to rehearse in a much more subtle way than would a more openly polemical novel. Frederic Jameson comments in a review of *Pattern Recognition* that, while the novel is very observant in depicting
Cayce’s relationship with branding and commodities, it offers little criticism or advice for how to live ethically in a world like Cayce’s. Cayce’s cool-hunting and brand consulting “are very much a business proposition, and Cayce is something like an industrial spy of times to come” (Jameson “Globalization”). In Jameson’s reading, Cayce is definitely implicated in the exploitation of branding to engineer consent in the market. Though he does not deny the “rush and exhilaration” of Gibson’s books generally, Jameson concludes that this novel “gives us homeopathy rather than antidote” to the problem of “the noisy commodities themselves, which turn out, as Marx always thought they would, to be living entities preying on the humans who have to coexist with them” (Jameson “Globalization”). He suggests that the novel restates ideology too easily, accepting the neoliberal idea that “just as we no longer need drugs, so we no longer need Pynchon’s staples of paranoia and conspiracy to wrap it all up for us, since global capitalism is there to do it more efficiently; or so we are told,” (Jameson “Globalization”). For Jameson, Pattern Recognition falls prey to commodity fetishism, fails to acknowledge its own privilege at the expense of others, and accepts the coercive consensus that the free market really is free, rather than deeply exploitative of third-world laborers, among others. This is, in fact, the whole point of a late imperial romance. In the hands of a writer as excellent as Gibson, this material becomes intensely incisive. By writing within imperial mappings, Gibson shows that asking for an “antidote,” an easy solution, as Jameson does, is overly reductive when the problem is an unconscious destructive impulse.

London in the novel is the epicenter of global flattening. For Cayce, it is “mirror world” (3), both a joke on London’s left-handed traffic laws and a
characterization of London’s meaninglessness. For Cayce, London is the place where meaning seems most flattened, most reduced to simulacrum, whose streets contain things like one pub Cayce describes, “a pub of such quintessential pub-ness that she assumes it is only a few weeks old . . . a terrifyingly perfect simulacrum, its bull’s-eye panes buffed to an optical clarity.” (70). Mirror world even suggests the possibility that the Cayce we see in the novel is Cayce’s evil twin in an alternate universe. Cayce goes to London in the novel to consult on a logo for an advertising firm called Blue Ant, owned by Hubertus Bigend, a fantastically wealthy and idiosyncratic Belgian who takes on projects of cultural speculation to expand his advertising business. In London, Cayce meets a variety of characters, such as Dorotea, a manipulative and competitive aspiring fashion designer, Voytek, a bohemian Polish kid working on an art piece crudely wiring together Sinclair ZX-81s, iconic 1980s-era personal computers, and Hobbs, a former spy obsessed with collecting a kind of hand grenade-like mechanical calculator called a Curta, designed and built for a few years after World War II by a concentration camp survivor. It turns out that Bigend, who stands for the forces of globalization in the novel, really wants to hire Cayce to track down the person behind the Footage, so that his agency, Blue Ant, can expand its commercial influence to the wild West of the Internet. After someone breaks into Cayce’s flat, and gives himself away by leaving behind a porno site in Cayce’s browser history, Cayce reluctantly agrees. She becomes seriously implicated in Bigend’s co-opting program as a result, and she is uncomfortable with this encroachment on the hitherto uncolonized land of the Internet, as well as the invasion of the Footage maker’s privacy, but reconciles her guilt with a desire to solve the
mystery first in order to protect it from someone even worse. Provided with a bottomless expense account and paired up with an attractive itinerant computer programmer named Boone Chu, Cayce goes off in search of clues. She also asks for help from her Internet friend and fellow footagehead alias Parkaboy. Parkaboy runs a scam on a Japanese kid, Taki, with connections to an otaku group that has discovered an important clue. To get the information out of Taki, Parkaboy and another American footagehead named Darryl pretend to be a teenage girl studying in the U.S. who falls madly in love with Taki over online chat. Cayce travels to Japan to negotiate with Taki on behalf of her “friend,” the imaginary girl. In Japan, Cayce is attacked by associates of Dorotea, gets a haircut and becomes increasingly paranoid. Eventually, Cayce tracks the maker of the Footage to Russia by trading a Curta calculator for a favor from Hobbs’s Cold War-era intelligence connections. The maker of the Footage turns out to be a woman named Nora, the daughter of a Russian mobster-oligarch. Nora’s twin sister Stella explains that Nora was injured by an explosion, in which their parents were assassinated. Nora has a piece of a trigger mechanism from a Claymore mine embedded in her brain, and she deals with her resulting mental disability by editing scraps of found footage from security cameras, creating the Footage. After a brief scuffle with some Russian mobsters, Dorotea, revealed as the real identity of one of the F:F:F forum’s obnoxious posters, is defeated in an attempt to sabotage Cayce. Bigend gets what he wants, and Cayce recovers her soul and ends the novel happily matched up with a love interest.

Brands in the novel fall along a spectrum, from most alienated to most authentic. This spectrum corresponds to Cayce’s allergic response. The two opposite
ends of the allergy spectrum for Cayce seem to be her Japanese-made Buzz Rickson’s reproduction flight jacket at the most authentic end, and Tommy Hilfiger at the most excessive and least authentic end. Of Tommy, she says

My God, don’t they know? This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra . . . There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul. (18)

The Rickson’s jacket, on the other hand,

is a fanatical museum-grade replica of a U.S. MA-1 flying jacket, as purely functional and iconic a garment as the previous century produced . . . The makers of the Rickson’s have exaggerated this, but only very slightly, and done a hundred other things, tiny things, as well, so that their product has become, in some very Japanese way, the result of an act of worship. It is an imitation more real somehow than that which it emulates. (11)

The Tommy Hilfiger brand symbolizes nothing in itself. It falsely usurps the surface meaning of the brands it imitates. The characteristics it adopts from its originals are lies; any meaning the brand may seem to have belongs to other brands, and Cayce is not fooled. Behind Tommy lies nothing but a desire to exploit the masses by selling them products under false pretenses. The horror of Tommy for Cayce is that she sees herself in it. Here in the center of mirror world, Cayce looks into a mirror and sees only the “null point, the black hole” (18). Both are “devoid of soul,” and the “mountain of Tommy coming down in her head” is the infinite
regression, the hall of mirrors effect that results when soulless Cayce looks into Tommy (18).

Tommy Hilfiger is portrayed as an example of a disenchanted brand. It is not just boring, but financialized, devoid of any meaning other than the money it makes for a global conglomerate. This kind of brand only reflects; it is sold only to be sold. It adds nothing to enchant itself with meaning, but represents only its exchange value.

As we have seen, a brand has symbolic meaning where the brand symbolizes what the consumer wants to be, and the consumer who uses the product both signifies and becomes part of what is signified by the brand. If a brand has no symbolic meaning, then it only signifies the money that changes hands, the consumer of it only the person who has bought it. Thus there is no enchantment, no magical transfer of meaning between the brand and the consumer by way of the branded item. Instead, under it all there is only money moving around; the branded object becomes a financial instrument, something that only signs for a quantity of money, which only exists in some financial space. Meanwhile the Rickson’s jacket offers a romantic, sublime and pre-globalized alternative experience.

Meanwhile the Rickson’s jacket is all authenticity. It is made by “Japanese obsessives driven by passions having nothing at all do with anything remotely like fashion” (11). As an example of an older, less alienated brand of production, and the Rickson’s brand stands for individuality and an alternative to mainstream, conformist consumer culture, and especially mainstream fashion. As we have seen, the Rickson’s is the opposite of Tommy Hilfiger. Where Tommy is loudly self-proclaiming, the Rickson’s is perfect yet self-effacing. Where Tommy is global and ubiquitous, the
Rickson’s is intensely local and nearly unique. Where Tommy is at least a third-order simulacrum, looking forward to total dispersion, the Rickson’s is an Ur-source, translating itself backwards into the kernel of the originary signified, the myth of the MA-1 jacket.

The Rickson’s jacket is then an example for how to re-enchant the brand, to return some authentic meaning to the commercial symbols of everyday life and to hook the money in the finance space back into a space that we occupy. Because of the “hundred other things, tiny things” that are reflected in the product, the product proclaims the hand of the worker who made it (11). The “worship” evident in the product and the fact that it is very rare makes it almost not alienated at all from the worker who made it (11). The brand, which symbolizes a reading of Japanese culture as “obsessive,” presents both a token of the product’s origin, a trace of localness, and the associations with which Cayce wants to align herself: authenticity, an alternative to consumer culture and, yes, obsession (11). The jacket becomes a new original, “more real somehow than that which it emulates” in two senses: first, because the product is less alienated from the labor that produced it than the military jacket it copies and second, because it creates a new symbolism apart from the original’s meaning (11). That new meaning is grounded in the real world; the brand’s symbolism stems entirely from its production. Where a brand like Tommy effaces production and origin, symbolizing only money, the Rickson’s effaces the money involved by suggesting it is an object of worship for both producer and consumer; it symbolizes only production and localness, while the money exchanged is almost invisible. This is somewhat troubling. While the Rickson’s brand represents things
much realer than money, the physical jacket belies the money that is actually involved. Authentic encounters with a local brand must be bought with large amounts of money. Gibson makes us understand that a large quantity of money is exchanged to purchase the jacket. When Dorotea burns Cayce’s jacket with her cigarette, Cayce replaces it on Bigend’s expense account, using the funds of a global corporation. The Rickson’s is certainly enchanted, but, like most magic, its power involves some trickery. Because of the class power required to buy an alternative, these re-enchantments are somewhat tainted. To hide the taint that stems from the unfairness that authenticity is only possible for the very rich, the cost, as we have seen, is Cayce’s soul.

In Japan, Cayce finds a refreshing authenticity. The Rickson’s jacket is the most sublime example of an authentic Japanese brand, but throughout Cayce’s visit to Japan, she feels relieved that Japan, a quintessential source of strangeness, has not yet been flattened like neoliberal London. These small enchantments range from local color, such as when Cayce, “catching the eye of the barman, points to a poster advertising Asahi Lite and nods,” to the ridiculous, “the Coca-Cola logo pulsing on a huge screen, high up on a building, followed by the slogan ‘NO REASON!’” (128, 153). On seeing one Japanese TV commercial, Cayce of all people reacts as the perfect consumer with no awareness at all of what she is doing:

And there he [Billy Prion] is, in full BSE neo-punk drag, half his mouth dead and the other twisted in demented glee, proffering a small bottle of Bikkle, a yogurt-based Suntory soft drink that Cayce herself is

It tastes as though ice cubes have melted in it, she remembers, and instantly wants some. (135-136).

She accepts Billy Prion, a pop singer with a grotesque act for which he paralyzes half of his face with botox injections, as a symbol of the product Bikkle. The product she accepts as a symbol of her own identity in exactly the terms that the advertisement presents both of these symbols. This transfer of symbolism is the archetypal response to a brand as represented in advertising. As Gardner and Levy describe in their 1955 article from *Harvard Business Review*, “The Product and the Brand,” Cayce responds by “picking and sticking to” the emotions, ideas or experiences “that seem most appropriate . . . deciding whether or not the brand is the one ‘for me’” (Gardner and Levy 35). The brand represents “ideas, feelings, and attitudes,” which make up “the image of a product associated with the brand” (Gardner and Levy 35). One of the associations present in the brand Bikkle is the idea of ice having melted in the drink—Bikkle could be cold and refreshing on a hot day, a summer drink and so on. Cayce associates herself with it, she is “somewhat partial” to it. Accordingly, the advertisement speaks to her and makes her want to buy the product. How can Cayce, the “design-free zone, a one-woman school of anti whose very austerity periodically threatens to spawn its own cult” (9) respond so readily to a seemingly guileless advertisement and react so readily to its meaning?

These Japanese brands appeal to Cayce’s hip cynicism and alienation with consumer culture. Cayce performs the role of the consumer on the stage of a Japanese
hotel room. The mid-century ad men Gardner and Levy help little in explaining why
Cayce seems less bothered by branding when she goes to Japan: “why, she wonders,
gazing blankly at more Hello Kitty regalia than seems possible, do Japanese
franchises like Hello Kitty not trigger interior landslide, panic attack, the need to
invoke the duck in the face?” (148). Perhaps Cayce finds that Japanese
advertisements are less harmful because they are more surreal. Embracing the death
of its own symbolic meaning, the Coca-Cola sign announces, “NO REASON!” (153).
Billy Prion can be “the gaijin face of Bikkle, his complete lack of recent exposure in
the occident evidently posing no problem here at all” (136). By acknowledging that
they are essentially meaningless, they wink at Cayce and agree with her, offering
themselves as an alternative. To this they add something completely bizarre, which
certainly offers individuality and creates meaning of a sort. In short, Japanese brands
have yet to be flattened by the self-sustaining consensus of globalization, and still use
the older hip consumerism paradigm by which both brand and consumer can be
refreshed by embracing a shared frustration with mainstream consumer culture.

Charles Paulk argues, in his article “Post-National Cool: William Gibson’s
Japan,” that “the Japanese emerge throughout Gibson’s fiction as highly adept at
pastiche, collage, recombination” (Paulk 490). Because “skillfully retrofitting the
past for the present confers a Darwinian edge,” Paulk says, Japan “is portrayed as
supremely fit to survive” (Paulk 490). Following Paulk’s view, Japanese brands are
not necessarily more authentic than Western brands, but they appear so because they
do a better job linking themselves with meanings from the past. Paulk reiterates that
“the notion of historical authenticity (or any other sort) holds no special privilege—
the past is revered in the sense that it is voraciously consumed and redeployed as product.” (Paulk 490). I find Paulk’s explanation too simple. For one thing, pastiche, collage and recombination certainly have to do with fashion—whence the Rickson’s, which comes from impulses with nothing to do with fashion? The Japanese may be more attuned to the future possibilities of branding—Cayce is “Mistress Muji,” referring to Muji, the store where nothing has a logo. Muji is a cause celebre with at least one current-day marketing guru and expert on branding.\(^6\) Perhaps this is not because of some new form of postmodern trickery, but merely that some Japanese brands have developed symbolic “ideas, feelings, and attributes” in the usual ways, and are now offering consumers a symbol of something that Western brands no longer stand for: authenticity (Gardner and Levy 35). The Rickson’s jacket is an argument that the Japanese brands may be offering not a simulacrum of authenticity, as we might conclude from Paulk’s argument, but instead a fairly true, direct kind of symbolic meaning. The distinction is not clear and may be difficult to determine—we should either feel very refreshed or very suspicious.

Russia too offers sources of authentic strangeness for Cayce. The principal re-enchantment from Russia is the Footage. The Footage has a secret digital watermark on it, which is its brand, although the hand of the artisan is evident enough to make it instantly recognizable before the brand is even discovered. Like the Rickson’s jacket,

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\(^6\) David Aaker, a marketing guru and widely-read expert on branding describes Muji as “a non-brand that delivers emotional and self-expressive benefits,” because “consumers have seen the downside of the debt-driven commercialism excesses of today’s society” and Muji satisfies what is “almost a craving for the simple” (Aaker). What is remarkable about Aaker’s description is how the Muji brand perfectly authenticates by harnessing consumer alienation, the hip consumerism paradigm, and how Aaker describes it as though Muji \textit{discovered} the alienating effects of neoliberal markets. Aaker predicts that “Muji may become a brand role model that others look toward” (Aaker).
the Footage bears many tiny invisible details that only an obsessive could successfully manipulate. In one Footage segment, two lovers are depicted dressed as they have always been dressed, in clothing Cayce has posted on extensively, fascinated by its timelessness, something she knows and understands. The difficulty of that. Hairstyles, too.

He might be a sailor, stepping onto a submarine in 1914, or a jazz musician entering a club in 1957. There is a lack of evidence, an absence of stylistic cues, that Cayce understands to be utterly masterful. (23)

The Footage contains a sense of local Russianness both through its style, which is compared to Tarkovsky at one point, and through the mysteries of its creation and distribution (4). One contradiction in the Footage is how it can be distributed anonymously given the massive computing power necessary to render its visual effects. This mystery is solved when Cayce discovers that the rendering work is farmed out to a privatized prison, which Parkaboy describes as a “bold New Russian entrepreneurial experiment,” owned by Nora’s mobster-oligarch uncle, and located in the middle of a “Soviet eco-disaster,” a “40-mile strip” of dust with “way too much titanium in it” (340, 339). There prisoners are given “only one choice . . . in occupational training,” to render by hand each pixel of the Footage (341). Only Russia’s peculiar status as an emerging neoliberal state with massive social inequality and an oppressive past can create the Footage brand, and thus it presents its localness through these contradictions. Bigend views the Footage as a combination of competing form of advertising, which he calls “the most brilliant marketing ploy of
this very young century. And new. Somehow entirely new,” a new and exciting way to market, which he wants to adopt for his own agency, “you think that wouldn’t get my attention?” (67).

While the Rickson’s jacket appears to be in no danger of co-opting influence, the Footage has already been targeted by Bigend—Japan it seems is safe for the time being, but Russia’s sources of strangeness are already falling under the shadow of Bigend’s co-opting global flatness, presumably through its rapid market-opening neoliberalization in the 1990s. All of the Footage’s opacity and secrecy will soon be permeable to money. Cayce realizes from the beginning that, by finding the source of the Footage, she may kill it or at least “interrupt the process” (69). Yet she lets her objection be overruled by Bigend’s influence, which she describes as disorienting, like globalization: “amorphous, foglike . . . It spread out around you, tenuous, almost invisible; you found yourself moving, mysteriously in directions other than your own” (70). Bigend, in line with his work as a globalizer, mystifies money and yet declares that money is behind everything; he insists “with absolute seriousness” that “I don’t count things in money. I count them in excellence,” and Cayce fashions him a “seeker after truth (or at least functionality) in the markets of this young century” (68). Meanwhile he declares that “everything, today, is to some extent the reflection of something else,” which is at least true of mirror world, but must be tested in the rest of the world (70). When Cayce asks him if the Footage is a reflection, he replies “that’s the question, isn’t it?” though the question he really seems to be asking is whether it can, forced to reflect, polished through financialization to a mirror shine (71).
Cayce’s role as a complicit element in Bigend’s very sinister flattening agenda is represented in an image from one of the novel’s Russian episodes. Cayce’s friend Damien films a documentary about a yearly looting dig on the site of a World War II battlefield in Russia. This year, the drunken, partying Russian archaeologists unearth a pristine German Stuka dive bomber from World War II, complete with skeletal pilot, “eerie, how well it was preserved” (308). The Russian excavators, “yanking the canopy open . . . simply tore him apart, the pilot” (308). This section represents Gibson’s self-consuming version of the late imperial romance’s drive to unearth then simultaneously record, destroy, preserve and consume far-flung sources of strangeness. Cayce finds herself caught up in this drive.

The Internet offers hope in the novel for a space to find authentic brands without the tainted class power behind globalization. *Pattern Recognition* gives us an optimistic view of the Internet in its portrayal of the F:F:F forum, imagining the Internet as a place where opinions are shared, difference is encouraged and consensus need not result from coercion. On the forum, posters observe a code of politeness and sociable behavior, and the forum is small and friendly enough that not much enforcement apparatus is needed. Cayce reminds people who misbehave that F:F:F “is only here because Ivy [the moderator of the forum] is willing to expend the time and energy to keep it here . . . we should try to keep this a pleasant place for her, and we shouldn’t take it too much for granted that F:F:F will always be here” (50). The most prominent misbehaver is Dorotea, alias Mama Anarchia, who turns out to be the direct source of most of the troubling aspects of the Internet that the novel portrays. The spyware on Damien’s Mac Cube and the tap on the phone at his apartment come
from Dorotea, as does the porno website, “Asian Sluts,” that Dorotea’s hired goon leaves in Cayce’s browser history. The good guys easily thwart these singularly inept efforts; Mama Anarchia turns out to be a put-on, her posts not even written by Dorotea, but by a “puppenkopf . . . graduate student in America” (325), and the porno website is a dead giveaway, a rookie mistake made by a low-tech robber who does not actually understand the Internet. Cayce herself contacts the maker of the footage simply by sending an email. Yet she gets the email address she contacts by way of another residual element. Hobbs, the British ex-intelligence agent who uses his connections to find information for Cayce, lives in squalor in a trailer on a disused government site with only “a rutted path . . . brown puddles,” and “discolored concrete,” which “feels old and somehow dead” (244-245). A wounded and disenchanted warrior of empire; even in withdrawal to the margins of society, he still has enough power through his connections to discover the Internet’s most secret information. The nascent global Internet remains tied to physical locations and forms of material power, from which it will have free itself. In particular, the novel’s suggestion that all the vices of the Internet, including pornography, harassment and crime can stem from the real-world actions of bad actors chasing after money and fame suggests that the Internet is a delicate ecosystem that must be actively preserved—whether this is possible to do without ethical consequences remains to be seen.

To understand Pattern Recognition’s romantic hopes for the Internet, we might turn to what Caren Irr terms the “world novel,” in her book Towards the Geopolitical Novel. Irr describes the world novel as an ambitious project “since at
least the late 1980s,” to build fiction into “a new ‘epic’ that spans many locations, documents the simultaneous and multidirectional movements of the world’s populations, and registers without being swamped by the new communication technologies” (Irr 175). In this novel, Gibson depicts the F:F:F message board with the self-conscious “cosmopolitan ethics, multilingual sensitivity, and a renewed commitment to realism” that Irr says characterize the world novel (Irr 175). Over the Internet, Cayce can speak directly to the developing world without the need for imperial steamers or jet airplanes. By sending an email directly to the email address that the Footage is finally traced to, she finds that she, in the first world, can easily communicate with people from more peripheral places. We find Irr’s “cosmopolitan ethics” in the rules and etiquette of the F:F:F community. While it is not exactly “multilingual,” the Internet as portrayed in this novel is not restricted by language barriers, which are easily crossed, as when Darryl translates messages to Taki, or ignored, as when Cayce emails the maker of the footage, who replies in English. That the novel has a renewed commitment to realism when depicting the Internet is clear; Gibson has an excellent ear for the language of Internet message boards, and a good sense of the kinds of characters and traditions that appear in online communities.

However, while the novel does project a utopian view of world community onto the space of the Internet, what is missing is the protagonist’s guilt that is a key component of of Irr’s world novel. According to Irr, the American protagonist of the world novel “remains intensely aware of the enormous disparities in power, wealth, access to care, language, and life chances that characterize the international scene” as represented by locales outside the first world. Cayce seems barely aware at all of
these incongruities. To gain access to a world community through the Internet, she must engage in various imperial acts in the physical world. She uses the resources of first-world academics to find the watermark on the Footage, and she uses Hobbs’s Cold War intelligence connections to acquire an email address for the source of the footage. Furthermore, Stella and Nora, the maker of the footage and her twin sister, are only accessible to Cayce through the Internet because their uncle is one of the most wealthy and powerful men in a corrupt post-Cold War Russian hierarchy. Yet the Internet masks these real-world indices of inequality, and Cayce can ignore them. Gibson portrays Cayce’s guilt in a more subtle and yet more damning way. If we recall that, until the very end, Cayce is under the effects of “soul-delay,” we realize that these are the actions of someone without a soul. With no connection to a single local time zone, she is left with no moral compass, no awareness of the moral consequences of her actions, and thus no sense of guilt.

As we have seen, Cayce’s brand allergy superpower has a secret weakness. She is not the superhero fighting global capitalism that we might have hoped she would be, as her superpower is countered by a sufficiently authentic brand. Yet, more importantly, Cayce does not fight against the commercial structures at all. She is deeply complicit in globalization, both in her work for Bigend and, we can safely assume, in her other work in the fashion industry. She seems aware of her role as a highly effective tool for marketing and commercial co-opting, but, at least until her soul comes back, she seems largely to have resolved any cognitive dissonance she may have had between her work and her goals as an individual consumer on a quest
for a more authentic brand. Cayce explains her role in the co-opting process to Voytek’s sister Magda:

“What I do is pattern recognition. I try to recognize a pattern before anyone else does.”

“And then?”

“I point a commodifier at it.”

“And?”

“It gets productized. Turned into units. Marketed.” (88).

She sees the co-opting process as something like zapping fashion trends with a ray gun, which, like co-opting, is an image left over from 1960s, a time of less economic inequality. Meanwhile, Magda, who works as a kind of viral marketer, getting paid by a Bigend subsidiary to name-drop approved brands in bars, describes her own role in the co-opting process:

“I mean you’re in a bar, having a drink, and someone beside you starts a conversation. Someone you might fancy the look of. All very pleasant, and then you’re chatting along, and she, or he, we have men as well, mentions this great new streetwear label, or this brilliant little film they’ve just seen. Nothing like a pitch, you understand, just a brief favorable mention.” (87).

If Cayce finds co-opting a clichéd oversimplification, the bugaboo of a naïve counterculture, Magda fears that her entire social reality may have been co-opted by advertising agencies like the one she works for:
“But it’s starting to do something to me. I’ll be out on my own, with friends, say, not working, and I’ll meet someone, and we’ll be talking, and they’ll mention something.”

“And?”

“Something they like. A film, A designer. And something in me stops. . . I’m starting to distrust the most casual exchange.” (87).

Advertising, for Magda, becomes indistinguishable from simply liking things that happen to be commercial products.

In this, we see one opportunity the novel gives Cayce to reassess her role as a member of the elite. Cayce, Parkaboy, Bigend and Damien are all wealthy, white, attractive, young people born and raised in the first world, who travel the world pursuing aesthetic goals. Even Voytek seems to have enough financial independence to work full-time on an elaborate art project, though he at least represents an opportunity to engineer a homegrown reenchantment in the middle of empire. One genuinely working-class person, Magda, who has a day job selling hats at a stall in Camden Market, finds that her world has been taken over, at least in some small way, by wealthy and powerful entities. She is beholden to the abstract, aesthetic concerns of the wealthier characters, like Cayce, for her livelihood.

Frustratingly, Cayce, still soulless, misinterprets this overture. Magda is also an aspiring fashion designer, and Cayce concludes their meeting by mentally noting Magda’s potential to become one of the novel’s fashionable, globe-trotting, hip plutocrats. Magda’s hats, which “Cayce could wear, if she wore hats,” pass Cayce’s infallible litmus test for marketable cool (86). Cayce does not register that her casual
approval, with its power to taint all social meanings with globalized money, could have ramifications for Magda’s whole social world.

At the end of the novel, Cayce recovers her soul. In order to do so, she must leave behind the tainted authenticity she has acquired in her quest to both escape and advance globalization. The jacket becomes a tool for her escape at the end of the novel, as she uses it to get over a barbed-wire fence. The narrator describes “the tooth of one barb” excruciatingly “finding its way through layers of lovingly crafted otaku nylon and mil-spec interlining,” leaving the jacket “shredded” (332). The jacket’s significant authenticity and physicality protects her even still, as she then wraps her bare feet by “tearing up whatever’s inside the Rickson’s” (333). The Footage remains, as Cayce stays in touch with Stella, the footage-maker’s sister, who lets her know that a new segment will be released soon and invites her to come visit again, but the Footage is on its way out as we will see, and Cayce may accelerate its demise (366).

As if recovering from amnesia or describing her behavior in a dream from which she is only now waking up, Cayce notes that, as part of her rehabilitation, she apparently visited Damien’s archaeological dig, “where she’d found herself, out of some need she hadn’t understood, down in one of the trenches furiously shoveling grey muck and bones, her face streaked with tears” (367). This description, primed with a remark from Parkaboy that he had not traveled “since he was someone else, and very stupid,” suggests that Cayce realizes just how morally compromised the mirror-world, soulless version of herself has been throughout the novel. Thinking back, with her soul “reeled entirely in on its silvery thread and warmly socketed,” she suspects that “weeping for her century, though whether the past one or the present
one she doesn’t know” might be a reasonable response to everything she has experienced (367).

In the third novel of *Pattern Recognition*’s trilogy, *Zero History*, Cayce turns up again, with her own clothing label, producing a line of undeniably authentic jeans. Yet the scene where she appears in *Zero History* provides a somewhat pessimistic epilogue to her work as a global co-opter and commodifier. We learn that Bigend has done “something ghastly, in marketing” to “repurpose” the Footage (*Zero History* 439). Cayce explains her brand allergy to Hollis, the protagonist of *Zero History*, who asks “but don’t you have your own now?” with a logo that Hollis says “worries me, a little” (*Zero History* 439). Cayce explains that, no longer bothered by branding, she co-opted for her brand a logo drawn by the maker of the Footage, who apparently “died, a few years after I found her,” an ambiguous detail we can blame on Cayce’s interference or not (*Zero History* 439). Either way, Cayce seems just about as bad as Bigend in this scene, except that her commercial product is slightly more aesthetically pleasing than his. We might share Jameson’s disappointment with Cayce, and wonder what has happened to her soul this time.
This Rolling Museum of Desire:
The Brands and the Luddites in *Bleeding Edge*

Thomas Pynchon’s 2013 detective novel, *Bleeding Edge*, is saturated with brand names; references to brands make up the texture of the novel’s over-the-top 2001 setting. Pynchon refers to what are undoubtedly some of the worst products of the late ‘90s, early 2000s, like Furby, a brief fad, Zima, “the bitch drink of the nineties,” and Beanie Babies, which will absolutely not retain their value (45). One role, at least, that the brand plays in *Bleeding Edge* is to historicize. As the brands allow Pynchon’s detective, Maxine, to build an understanding of her case, they also serve a similar function for Pynchon’s reader, clues in Pynchon’s historical detective work, artefacts in his ongoing archaeology of American history. This is a late capitalist version of what a historical novel would look like, with political leaders and major battles replaced by corporate startups, acquisitions and launches of iconic products.

The novel’s mystery plot cuts on a slant across a broader cultural investigation. *Bleeding Edge* takes place in New York, where protagonist Maxine, like Cayce in *Pattern Recognition* observes a gradual flattening, a creeping imposition of “some stupefied consensus about what life is to be” (51). In his review

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7 All references in Chapter 3 with page numbers alone are to Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*.
of *Bleeding Edge* for the journal Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon, Albert Rolls describes how the novel wrestles with this creeping consensus. Rolls concludes in his review that the novel fails “to posit an alternative story,” and that Pynchon, having failed to find any escape from the flattening of everything in the promising technology of the Internet, leaves the problem to the younger generation in hopes that they will figure it out better without the guidance of their elders (Rolls). Mitchum Huehls echoes a similar sentiment, allowing that, despite Pynchon’s best efforts, “things have changed” (Huehls 870). *Bleeding Edge*, Huehls says, holds out against that change, but that it smacks of capitulation, proving only that “Literary technology . . . endures,” but with little glory, only a pragmatic muddling-through (Huehls 870).

In this chapter, I will show that the “stupefying consensus,” here as in *Pattern Recognition*, is brought about by neoliberal cultural changes. Where the Gibson novel focused on globalization, *Bleeding Edge* deals primarily with the effects of the financialization of culture, a particularly ‘90s feeling. Maxine is a fraud investigator who, though she is inextricably a part of the global financial system, goes up against the world of finance and exposes the legal and moral faults of one financial bigshot and everything he stands for.

Brands in the novel are divided. Some have lasting significance in culture, and these are difficult to successfully co-opt and financialize. Maxine uses these as clues to help solve the mystery and maintain some meaning in opposition to the flattening consensus. Others are completely financialized and used by the elite to exploit anyone who will buy them, the ultimate goal being to convince or force everyone to buy them. The financialized brands themselves work towards this goal. By elevating
money to a higher-order significance, these financialized brands reinforce the dominance of those who have money, like the neoliberal elite, and the structures that allow them to make more money, like the free market. This ideological work leads more people to consent and brings more brands into the financialized fold, expanding the flattening consensus. In any case, Pynchon portrays the overbearing, flattening, forced consensus as the result of deliberate exploitation by the neoliberal elite, through control of deregulated markets.

Yet Pynchon shows us that the brand can also be used to resist coercive flattening. He portrays some characters in *Bleeding Edge* as cultural Luddites, who resist the financialization and globalization of the brand, attaching themselves to significant and local brands. The Luddite, for Pynchon, is someone who can see through the rhetoric that promises a free market revolution. Luddites do not buy into the neoliberal brands and instead fight back against the elite and elite-sponsored cultural changes. This the Luddites accomplish by recapturing and maintaining localness, by refusing to buy the neoliberal brands, opting instead for older brands, with deeper and more authentic meaning, which sometimes can only be gotten through innovative or heroic efforts, as these brands are, by design, unavailable to the global free market. *Pynchon’s explorations of brand-building significance not only serve to test the depth of the late capitalist cultural history he explores in the novel, but also provide the first paragraphs of counternarratives that Pynchon invites us to write, helpful and confident signs pointing to not one but many possible ways out of the neoliberal consensus that threatens to reduce everything to money. For Pynchon, our hope to resist the baleful effects of neoliberal hegemony is through a combination*
of Luddite cultural action and escape into reserves of localness, physical, spiritual or perhaps conceptual places to which money is ultimately grounded, places where the globalizers have no influence and will never go.

In *Bleeding Edge* Maxine Tarnow, a fraud investigator (hard-boiled) and Upper West Side single mom is hired by an old friend to check up on a slick and successful computer security firm called hashslingerz. Her friend, Reg Despard, begins to suspect that all is not strictly legit at hashslingerz while filming a documentary about them. Maxine discovers that, sure enough, hashslingerz directs massive amounts of cash, through some combination of money laundering and high-tech encryption, into overseas bank accounts with a sinister connection to the Middle East. Maxine’s investigation of one startup that hashslingerz has acquired, called hwaahhwhgh.com, introduces her to the social scene of software engineers and nerdy entrepreneurs in New York’s “Silicon Alley.” She meets colorful characters such as Eric Outfield, a paranoid übergeek and foot fetishist, Driscoll Padgett, a temp and freelance web designer trying to transform herself into Jennifer Aniston, Lester Traipse, a schlemiel web designer and his sleazy partner, Felix Boïngeaux who sells Lester out to Gabriel Ice, the arrogant and utterly morally bankrupt CEO of hashslingerz. Ice, the novel’s villain, is a greedy and soulless social climber who, unlike all the other likeable computer nerds, is really only in it for the money. His wife Tallis has drifted away from her roots and become estranged from her left-wing activist mother, March, a friend of Maxine’s whose “old lefty” politics provide the aging counterpoint to Ice’s neoliberal ascendancy. Lester Traipse is murdered, and the smell of foul play, or at least the smell of cologne left at the crime scene leads back to Nick Windust, a right-
wing federal agent, whom Maxine despises but finds oddly attractive. After the September 11 attack, when *Bleeding Edge’s* mystery finally begins to unravel, we learn that Ice has in fact been laundering money to a CIA anti-Jihad operation all along, but that he may be dealt into deeper levels of war-profiteering. At this point, Maxine is told by an unspecified government agency to drop it, and Windust goes into hiding, possibly for botching the Ice operation, or possibly for botching the CIA’s cover-up of U.S. government involvement in 9/11—mysterious coincidences and smoking guns abound.

Ice is perhaps the antithesis of Maxine’s ex-husband Horst Loeffler, a day trader with a very specific form of prophecy that allows him uncannily to see into the future of stock prices, yet who is totally benign and uninvolved with any of the sinister and criminal dealings in the novel. Where Ice, a “boy billionaire” with a “permission note from his parents instead of a pocket square” (11) represents the present and future of the market, run by angry and greedy spoiled kids like Ice, Horst represents, classy, “emotional as a grain elevator” and “indispensable,” represents the market’s past (21). Horst has an office in the World Trade Center and drives a mint-condition ’59 Impala.

We also meet Igor Dashkov, a genial former Spetsnaz operative of indeterminate age and his two sons of indeterminate age, Misha and Grisha. About the time we learn that Gabriel Ice is working for the CIA, we also learn that Igor has been laundering money to a Chechen reparation fund he runs, having started it after he witnessed the massacre of a Chechen village by his Spetsnaz unit. Lester Traipse was offed because he embezzled money from Ice’s CIA project and gave it to Igor’s
Chechen project, though both Igor and Ice may be implicated in accidentally funding the 9/11 attackers—Misha and Grisha comment that “there are Chechens and there are Chechens” (461). In the end, though, Russia proves to be a source of Luddism in the novel as Misha and Grisha, the “two young torpedoes” (138) conclude the novel with a literal Luddite act, zapping Gabriel Ice’s hidden server farm at Ice’s massive Montauk retreat, beneath a lake called Lake Heatsink.

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*Bleeding Edge*’s mystery plot brings Maxine into confrontation with some of the beneficiaries of neoliberal economics. Gabriel Ice is the worst of these, described as a “a mogul on the black-diamond slopes of the IT sector thinks he’s a rock star,” wearing “a capitalist party mask, with a neo-Stalinist rerun” in one scene (311). A would-be member of the neoliberal elite, Ice is only too happy to completely financialize his business. Deborah Madsen argues that, in Pynchon’s novels, an oppressive “absolutist discourse” is “revealed from within, by a questing hero/ine who suspects that the questing impulse is determined by this mastering cultural discourse,” but “cannot determine whether their quests have been prescribed for them or whether they discover an authentic alternative to inherited cultural beliefs” (Madsen 114, 133). At first it might seem as though the absolutist discourse in *Bleeding Edge* is consumer culture. Like Cayce Pollard in Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, Maxine, in *Bleeding Edge*, has a keyed-up sensitivity to the brands
around her. When Maxine meets Ice’s wife Tallis at their apartment, we see Maxine as both a detective and a consumer:

Black silk slacks and a matching top unbuttoned halfway down, which Maxine thinks she recognizes from the Narciso Rodriguez spring collection, Italian shoes that only once a year are found on sale at prices humans can afford—some humans—emerald earrings weighing in at a half carat each, Hermès watch, Art Deco ring of Golconda diamonds which every time she passes through the sunlight coming in the window flares into a nearly blinding white, like a superheroine’s magical flashbang for discombobulating the bad guys. (124)

We are to understand that Maxine actually recognizes these details—investigating fraud is her career, but bargain shopping is her passion. In attempting to figure out whether Tallis is complicit in Gabriel Ice’s double dealings, Maxine buys the fantasy of consumption that Tallis’s outfit offers her. Maxine imagines herself as the skilled consumer, judging some aspects of Tallis’s home and outfit, while noting her own superior taste and shopping prowess. Noting that “the bad guys . . . maybe includes herself” (124-125), Maxine even seems to buy into the symbolism, as if reading an advertising pitch for the brand of diamond ring that marks its wearer as a superheroine, a good guy, though she realizes shortly after that she has fallen for Tallis’s act, “like so totally a sucker” (128). Only when Tallis’s many commodities are out of sight completely does Maxine realize that she has been played. Maxine’s receptiveness to brand meanings almost causes her to profile Tallis as innocent. Yet, while Maxine’s experience of the world is certainly constituted by the discourse of
consumer culture, she does not actually fall for the consumption fantasy that Tallis is trying to sell her. Earlier in this same scene, she uses brands to get an accurate reading of Tallis’s apartment without being fooled by the brands. The narrator describes Maxine’s view of Tallis’s apartment, decorated with assorted expensive works of art—[Maxine] recognizes an early Matisse, fails to recognize a number of abstract impressionists, maybe there’s a Cy Twombley or two—not coherently enough to suggest the passions of a collector, more like the need of an acquirer to exhibit them. The Musée Picasso, the Guggenheim in Venice, it ain’t. There’s a Bösendorfer Imperial in the corner, at which generations of hired piano players have provided hours of Kander & Ebb, Rodgers & Hammerstein, Andrew Lloyd Webber medleys. (124)

We might read Tallis’s taste as a metonym for in-group style. By acquiring a few paintings, Tallis name-drops a few artists, indicating that she has the required knowledge to be a member of an in-group of wealthy and cultured socialites. Maxine understands that these particular objects signify only that required knowledge and no more. Indeed, by recognizing that in-group style for the wealthy is made up of only the barest, most cursory knowledge, Maxine also recognizes the arbitrariness of Tallis’s social status—just because Tallis is rich, she can be a member of the hip in-group of cultured people, though it is obvious to anyone with deeper knowledge that she has no culture. The goal of using these brands as in-group style for the wealthy is to make them represent money, a lot of it, in other words to financialize them—unfortunately for Tallis, these brands represent other associations to those who can
read them. The brand of the Bösendorfer Imperial specifically, as opposed to a Steinway or an unnamed grand piano, stands for the most high-brow music played in the most ritzy concert halls, and the brand of Andrew Lloyd Webber, as opposed to that of Sondheim or an unnamed composer of musicals, stands for popular but overplayed and mediocre musical numbers. Though these brands are very similar, they have very particular meaning to those who can discriminate between them.

Assuming we understand it, the symbolism attached to these objects specifically and not merely objects *like* these expresses what Pynchon wants to show about Tallis: that she has high-brow pretensions but low-brow taste. Pynchon’s narrator is not merely including these names to indicate that both he and his reader are members of a culturally hip in-group. The requisite in-group membership and the specific and clear symbolism combine to create the punchiness of the joke. To describe these very specific brand name symbols as in-group style is not a dismissal—like many symbols, their meaning depends on cultural knowledge that only readers who are members of a more or less hip in-group would have.

Consumer culture, then, is not the overarching coercive framework that the heroine fails to escape in *Bleeding Edge*. Maxine can see the ways in which consumption is a part of her subjectivity, as we see when she describes her formative experiences shopping in Loehmann’s as a child, honing her “discipline and reflexes” (274). She is only blinded by Tallis’s razzle-dazzle for a moment. Rather than circumscribing Maxine’s quest, consumer culture assists her. She uses brands in consumer culture as signifier signposts to pin people and events on her ongoing mental map of the case.
The mastering discourse, both the object of suspicion and the controlling framework that sets up smoke screens to prevent Maxine from discovering the truth is the neoliberal theory of the free market. As a fraud investigator, Maxine’s job is to legitimize the functioning of the market. This puts her in a somewhat contradictory position. Though neoliberal economics eschews government regulation, it requires people like Maxine to ensure that the market functions according to its own rules. Though she polices the market, it also circumscribes her authority because, according to neoliberal theory, markets are a better form of political representation than governments. Thus the extent of government authority is to ensure that markets remain open, so Maxine’s authority extends no further than preventing fraud. As a “Certified Fraud Examiner gone rogue,” her license having been pulled, she can “share the trade secrets of auditors and tax men,” but she knows that fraud investigators are beholden to the market, and serve the purposes of the market, a condition of which she says that “they want us to be the one incorruptible still point in the whole jittery mess,” suggesting that it is difficult for her to feel as though she acts independently of the market when to do so would be to counterbalance all the jitters of the entire market system (17, 18). Her office is merely the latest reuse of a financial cult site, a building that “opened as a temple of finance shortly before the Crash of 1929,” and it is the “auditors and tax men” whose secrets she leaks, not the CEOs and day traders (4).

This is not to say that finance in the novel is inherently evil. We see good and bad examples of finance. Igor’s Chechen philanthropy is one example of an ethical use of the global free market in all its flexibility. The free market is only a problem
because of the ways in which it can be exploited. Pynchon adopts real financial
theory to explain what bad actors like Gabriel Ice can do with a deregulated market.
Rocky tells Maxine that Ice is notorious because he
takes a position, typically less than five percent, in each of a whole
portfolio of start-ups that he knows from running Altman-Z’s [an
algorithm that predicts whether a company will go bankrupt] on them
are gonna fail within a short-term horizon. Uses them as shells for
funds he wants to move around inconspicuously. (63)

Ice’s actions show the bad side of the free market. His predatory investment
tactics allow him to pursue his own fraudulent projects, at the expense of everyone
else involved with the companies hashslingrz acquires. Ice throws a party using one
acquisition’s special “Party Fund,” to be, as Maxine puts it, “the genial host and not
spending a nickel out of his own pocket,” putting on what amounts “the Alley’s
biggest pink-slip party” (295). Ice represents the up-and-coming elite, “who walked
away in one piece when the dotcom fever broke” (10), the group that David Harvey
describes as the core constituency of neoliberal class power, “large corporations, their
wealthy CEOs, and their financial/legal advisers” who become rich through finance
“at the expense of the poor, the middle classes, and even ordinary shareholders”
(Harvey Neoliberalism 188). With Ice as their representative, Pynchon portrays this
group as totally immoral. In theory, Ice’s actions are against the free market’s rules,
and within Maxine’s authority to police, but that Ice never actually goes to jail is
proof that the free market is insufficiently protected against exploitation by the
wealthy and powerful, possibly by design. Neoliberalism is one of many theories of
how to organize financial markets, and it has both good and bad characteristics, but Pynchon views it as a bad development, because it has allowed the Gabriel Ices of the world to gain control of the market and use it for class warfare.  

Maxine’s friend Vyrva is saving up her Beanie Babies to use “ten, twelve years down the line, college looming, you know what these are gonna be worth to collectors?” (39). In Maxine’s exploration of the neoliberal elite’s secret forms of global power, Vyrva’s Beanie Baby habit appears as a hopelessly naïve approach to personal finance, an example of how neoliberal economics has been sold to the masses against their best interests. The Beanie Baby bubble must invoke a twinge of pathos, which, indeed, is delivered by Maxine’s precocious millenial son as the punchline of the chapter:

Ziggy’s not so sure. “Except for one or two special editions . . . in ten years there won’t be one in collectible condition . . . But that’ll never occur to her, because it makes too much sense.”

“You’re saying . . .”

“She’s crazy, Mom.” (40)

Pynchon builds out a thematic meaning, in which the Beanie Babies function as a symbol; the toys stand for other easily-traded items that only have value because

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8 Edward Mendelson defines Pynchon’s novels as encyclopedic novels, which, he says, attempt “to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge” (Mendelson “Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon” 1269). Essentially, the encyclopedic novel is a historicizing work that codifies a narrative into an “encyclopedia” of literary style, social and political theory, linguistic history, art and, importantly, technology. If Bleeding Edge, as an encyclopedic novel, suggests a framework of social and political power, it is that an elite made up of CEOs and investment bankers are reorganizing society according to neoliberal principles, with the goal of maximizing profit for themselves.

9 In his review of Bleeding Edge for the New York Review of Books, Michael Chabon describes a similar use of dramatic irony at the end of a later chapter as “a soap-opera sting of Hammond organ audible only to the reader” (Chabon).
some people think they do. Whole portfolios full of both kinds of small collectibles will turn out to be worthless in the end. This kind of collapse in value will cause some people to go bankrupt, while others will use the flexibility that neoliberal economic policies give to very large amounts of money. The result will be that middle-class people who were encouraged to put out to sea on the rising tide of the new free market, to become investors and entrepreneurs, will be crushed utterly by a system that was rigged against them, was in fact designed to take away their wealth and give it to the top one percent. One character in *Bleeding Edge* remarks that “what this country worships above everything else” is “the market, always the holy fuckin market . . . this blind faith that resources will never run out, profits will go on increasing forever, just like the world’s population—more cheap labor, more addicted consumers” (338).

Pynchon writes the Beanie Babies as both a symbol for the manipulation and dismantlement of the middle class by the elite through financial maneuvering in the neoliberal market and an example, a metonym, of how the brand becomes disconnected from the product and financialized in a neoliberal free market order for corporations to better manipulate the consumer. The Beanie Baby brand is the perfect example of a totally financialized brand. First, the value of the brand is completely disconnected from the product—a cheesy stuffed toy is worthless; a cheesy stuffed toy with a “ty” tag on it is collectable, an investment. Second, the brand has no symbolism of its own apart from its exchange value (except, now, by cultural context—everyone remembers how stupid they were). Interestingly, because the brand’s value is perfectly tied to its market exchange value, the Beanie Baby brand
symbolizes finance. Thus it does ideological work towards the hegemony of finance. By making the brand seem to imitate finance, these conspicuously branded toys make the brand subordinate to finance. If the brand is a system of meaning embedded in finance, the brand is like a toy financial instrument. Those who invest in Beanie Babies, which are already financial instruments in disguise as toys, may one day grow up to invest in stocks or securities, and the brand may one day be revealed in culture as a comforting window dressing to help ease the masses into the brave new world of free-market finance. The goal of neoliberalism is to conduct all social actions as transactions and to quantify all social values as exchange values. If market forces are to be our guides for all actions, neoliberal ideology must attempt to naturalize free-market finance as the true form underlying everything; therefore the brand must be shown to be another financial derivative and nothing more.

As we have seen, in *Bleeding Edge*, the Beanie Babies, like the stock market, are a form of manipulation by which Vyrva, a dupe, will lose all her money. That she is a dupe is clear to Maxine’s son and everyone else. If Pynchon did not clearly show what, in his view, the neoliberal elite do to middle-class dupes, he suggests that we take what Gabriel Ice does to Vyrva as a symbol and a metonym in the form of a crude joke. When Vyrva reveals to Maxine that she has in fact been sleeping with Ice, Vyrva tells Maxine just what the neoliberal elite do to the middle class:

“Thing is,” after some nose blowing, “the sex is always so great.”

“A sensitive, considerate lover.”

“Fuck no, he’s a son of a bitch. Did you ever try anal?” (364)
Vyrva’s actions are an expression of a subjectivity formed by the financialization of decisions that were previously part of home life. As Randy Martin shows, “risk will replace labor,” and any “negative effects are . . . something one accepts as a consequence of seeking prosperity” (Martin 35-36). Accordingly, the most important outcomes to plan for are the ones where the most risk must be taken on. All of the authorities with a claim to objective knowledge would tell Vyrva that savvy personal finance is the key to putting her kids through college. Because she cares about the future, she will take on the risks associated with financial trading. That she gets it so wrong is tragic, though Pynchon leaves open a hint of possibility that she may actually be a Luddite, as “it occurs to Maxine that the Beanie Babies could have been a cover all the time, couldn’t they, for activities less in the public interest . . .” (359).

In his 1984 article “Is it O.K. to be a Luddite?” Thomas Pynchon tells the history of the Luddites, “bands of men, organized, masked, anonymous, whose object was to destroy machinery used mostly in the textile industry” (Pynchon “Luddite”). Pynchon calls this act “frame-bashing,” referring to the prototype Luddite, Ned Lud, who, in 1779, apparently smashed two knitting frames, machines used for domestic

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**Footnote:**

10 Martin, writing in 2002, also describes financialization’s two-pronged approach to child-rearing. Banks and other financial institutions market personal finance as a way both to provide for children and to bring them up right. One advertisement Martin cites for an online banking and finance program uses images of children to offer parents an opportunity to maintain what Martin characterizes as “round-the-clock vigilance to support the family” (Martin 2). In addition, authors offer products to teach finance to young children, such as “Bernie’s Super Cool Savings Plan (for only $19.95, plus $4.95 shipping and handling)” and self-help books with titles like *Kids, Parents and Money: Teaching Personal Finance from Piggy Bank to Prom* (Martin 56-57).
clothing production (Pynchon “Luddite”). Pynchon says that Luddites historically came “to be imagined as the counterrevolutionaries of that ‘Industrial Revolution,’” a role that lines up with the most commonly-understood modern sense of the word Luddite, a conservative person who avoids and mistrusts new and liberating developments in technology (Pynchon, “Luddite”). Pynchon reimagines the Luddite as an underdog who stands up to oppression and, against the course of history, wins a small but symbolic victory essentially by being a tough guy and nobody’s fool. The Luddite, Pynchon says, is a guy who “saw the machines . . . [which] had been putting people out of work for well over two centuries” and saw “what this did, had been doing, to wages and jobs” (Pynchon “Luddite”). The Luddite is a “Badass” and an “equalizer” engaged in “open-eyed class warfare” (Pynchon, “Luddite”).

*Bleeding Edge* shows us what has become of the Luddite in the 21st century. In *Bleeding Edge*’s view of consumer culture, brands that are symbolic and tied to real objects represent a new counterculture. Adherence to a more local relationship between brand and that which is branded is a throwback. The brand retains a symbolism in culture, sometimes entirely vestigial, that signifies something separate from market forces. Brand adherents are thus a cultural form of Pynchon’s Luddite badass. As the Luddite badass resists the so-called progress of the Industrial Revolution, which looks to him like another hat-trick by the rich to swindle the poor, those hip and loyal to the less flexible, more local brand resist the so-called freedom of the neoliberal revolution, which looks to them like an effort to cut corners and redistribute wealth towards the already-rich. Like the Industrial Revolution, the neoliberal revolution is “smoother, less conclusive, more like an accelerated passage
in a long evolution,” and one in which the role of the computer, like that of the steam engine “may have been overdramatized” (Pynchon “Luddite”). What is clear is that, if the Luddite Badass has persisted to the modern day, acts of Luddite “frame-bashing” must have become less literal and more distributed, as the knitting frame-analogues have transformed from frames into factories into global supply chains into flexible equity. Where 18th-century Luddites targeted the mechanisms of production, 21st-century Luddites can now target the mechanisms of cultural production. Modern, first-world Luddite Badasses must work in an economic or cultural scale at a broader zoom-level; as communication technology has multiplied the scale of production and markets, it has also multiplied the Luddite’s ability to achieve “mischief on a large scale,” to achieve the trademark “multiplication of scale” (Pynchon “Luddite”). Like knitting frames, free market forces, though not inherently oppressive, are, it turns out, increasingly locked down by the rich and powerful neoliberal elite, and everyone can see what happens to wages and jobs. Accordingly, the frame-bashing act for the 21st-century capitalist Luddite is to defy the ideology of neoliberal freedom by refusing to accept the guidance of the infallible market force, as Ned Lud defied the ideology of Industrial progress by refusing to accept the superiority of the labor-saving knitting frame.

Pynchon offers a Luddite alternative to globalization. As I have argued in Chapter 1, under the auspices of globalization, viewed by neoliberals as a moral imperative to gradually expand market democracy to other parts of the world, we see several changes in the way brands function in order to better serve the neoliberal elite. First, the brand must become, as much as possible, completely separated from its
product and means of production. Second, the brand’s symbolism should be, as much as possible, freely manipulated. Third, the brand must be, as much as possible, purged of any trace of the local. This process of financializing, flexibilizing and globalizing leads Cayce, in Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition*, to purge herself of inauthentic symbolism, as alienating for her as it is alienated from its own origins, and to begin her spiritual search for a more local brand and a more authentic product. In *Bleeding Edge*, this process leads characters to find ways of preserving the local in small and surprising acts of Luddite market-bashing. As an antidote to the almost meaningless global brand of finance, the novel encourages us to embrace older, authentic brands, and older, authentic consumption practices instead of the faceless ones that reflect only money.

Maxine’s ex-husband Horst is a particularly badass Luddite. A stubborn and stoic Midwesterner, he appears in the novel totally uncorrupted by globalization. In one scene we see Horst attempting to assemble an IKEA desk. IKEA is a totally globalized brand, its labor market so flexible and its production so fragmented that every customer becomes a laborer working for free on the final task in IKEA’s assembly line. Its symbolism represents, for Pynchon, nothing less than the “stupefied consensus,” as applied to home life, an officially sanctioned generalization of “a theory of domesticity too alien for Horst fully to be engaged by” to the whole world, claiming to represent all of us by the democracy of the market (51, 298). “Blood already streaming from several fingers, reading glasses about to slide off the sweat on his nose,” Horst seems a Luddite both literally, by his incompetence with so-called labor-saving technologies such as “mysterious metal and plastic fasteners” and
“instruction sheets” (297) and spiritually, as we see that his resistance to IKEA labor-force subjection has left him more wounded than anyone could reasonably expect to be while assembling a desk. Horst is so pure of the will of globalizers that mere contact with their encroaching influence injures his body, as he reenacts the role of the alienated laborer, pouring his blood and sweat into a commodity with no connection to him. Blood and sweat also imply the presence of tears, products of a spiritual injury that Horst might show if he were not the type of badass that contains his emotions, “which,” Maxine notes, “despite appearances, he may actually have” (287).

As a consumer, Horst is very loyal to old examples of branding that localize and authenticate rather than purge localness and impose generality. Through his love of ice cream, he shows two responses to branding: either authentic consumption, a shot of localness that revives him when he feels alienated, or Luddite anger and threats of smashing. Horst needs Ben and Jerry’s Chocolate Peanut Butter Cookie Dough ice cream in order to keep functioning. In one scene shortly after he moves back into Maxine’s apartment, Horst discovers that Maxine’s freezer contains no Chocolate Peanut Butter Cookie Dough. He warns Maxine that “I would not want to freak out in front of the boys” (132). He is only saved when Marvin the mysterious bicycle messenger magically appears to deliver some. When Maxine questions him, saying on the grounds that “they discontinued this back in ‘97,” Marvin replies “That’s only the business page talkin, Mahxine. This is desire” (132). Horst’s ice cream craving apparently springs from an alienation, which he describes as an alien feeling, “like Chinese medicine. Yang deficiency. Yin? One of them” (132).
Presented with a world in which Chocolate Peanut Butter Cookie Dough no longer exists, he shows signs of lapsing into a fit of rage almost like what Pynchon describes as the Luddite’s “single comic shtick - every time he spots a stocking-frame he goes crazy and proceeds to trash it” (Pynchon “Luddite”). Horst’s Luddite anger is calmed by a sufficiently authentic consumption experience. He becomes the very picture of a happy ice cream consumer, “already gobbling ice cream with spoons in both hands, [nodding] enthusiastically” (132).

To reiterate, Horst the Luddite is not angry at consumer culture, which, after all, created the delicious product that can make him happy and authenticated. His anger is directed towards the transformation that consumer culture undergoes when it is embedded in the neoliberal deregulated market. A market that claims to be the ultimate form of democracy fails to represent Horst’s ice cream interests. From his point of view, the market cannot have discontinued something so delicious for any reason other than greed or sheer perversity, hence his anger.

Ice cream resists globalization. Meltiness precludes alienation. Only through dedication, money and effort can ice cream, locally produced, be transported for consumption somewhere else. Only a Luddite in search of a peculiar bit of localness would attempt it. Marvin brings Horst’s ice cream by perhaps the most local form of transportation possible, bicycle, and he appears by magic, “ganjaportation” Maxine guesses (132). Igor Dashkov is also an ice cream Luddite. His limo, a “ZiL-41047, brought over piece by piece from Russia, reassembled in Brooklyn,” contains a freezer filled with Russian ice cream, such as “Ice-Fili here, Ramzai, also Inmarko, from Novosibirsk, very awesome morozhenoye, Metelitsa, Talosto,” all ice creams
with “high butterfat content,” which Igor has flown in because of “Soviet-era nostalgia, basically,” as he complains that “fucking Nestlé,” a global conglomerate is trying to force “fucking unsaturated vegetable oils. Hippie shit” on him, “corrupting entire generation” (160-161, 162). Igor’s complaint, more explicit than Horst’s, is that globalization has flattened out the choices available to him, so he can only find what he wants in a place where globalization has not yet penetrated. While this is also an argument in favor of free trade, a neoliberal agenda, Igor knows that globalization will eradicate, rather than spread, difference. The reason why globalization in ice cream should be feared is that ice cream retains its localness; it can never be fully alienated from its production, fully taken up in commodity fetishism. Because it melts and spoils, it can always be traced, through a ride in a refrigerated truck, to a regional farm, eventually back to a cow. Because production is not fully flexible, even for Nestlé, the brand never really escapes its own localness. The problem then, with globalization, is that imperfectly globalized products force their alien residue of localness on other places, where, with the support of the elite in an undemocratic market, they will push out local products: neoliberal ice cream imperialism.

David Cowart argues that Pynchon’s own Luddism extends to the novel’s own postmodern historiography. Horst is a dedicated viewer of absurdly-cast biopics, including Keanu Reeves in a potential Derek Jeter Story (367), Anthony Hopkins in The Mikhail Baryshnikov Story (374) and others. Cowart argues that “seeing such paired faces as the duplicable parts of fame’s machinery, effects a slowing down, if not a general seizing up, of popular culture’s assembly line,” an act of Luddism that, if nothing else, “may complicate the casting of any future Thomas Pynchon Story”
Brands with funny names also serve this function in *Bleeding Edge*. Like the biopics, brand names like hashslingrz, a pun on the computer-security meaning for the word hash, with breakfast connotation, and hwgaahwgh.com, a name like an inarticulate choking sound, “[conflate] the cog that propels the machine and the wrench that breaks it,” by both expressing the way that brands produce meaning in popular culture and breaking realism by being completely absurd (Cowart). Like Beanie Babies and Bösendorfers, funny brand names are both symbol and metonymy. These brands simultaneously express the function of the brand discourse and test its limits as a system of meaning in popular culture.

Horst, a financial commodities trader, is also loyal to an older, local brand of finance. When Horst takes his and Maxine’s kids on vacation to the Midwest, the narrator gives us a description of Horst’s “trip down memory lane,” to Chicago, “the LaSalle street canyon, his first and oldest home turf” (289). He recalls trading Eurodollars on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. In Horst’s day the CME had a trading floor where players traded using shouts and hand signs. Horst understands the symbolism of that brand as tied strongly to Chicago. Its name affirms that it is located in Chicago, and Horst’s “custom trader’s jacket with tastefully muted green and purple stripes and a three letter name tag pinned to it” is part of its myth, marking him as “one of those handjiving adventurers who dared the pit every trading day” (289). For Horst, “it’s Chicago that really pulls you,” and he takes his and Maxine’s kids to visit locations like the traders’ cafeteria at the CBOT, and to the Brokers Inn, where they ate the legendary giant fish sandwich, and to old-school steak houses
in the Loop where the beef is hung aging in the front window and the staff address the boys as “Gentlemen.” Where the steak knife next to your plate is not some flimsy little serrated blade with a plastic handle but whetstoned steel riveted into custom-hewn oak. Solid. (290)

For a description of finance in the 1990s, this is not only remarkably local but also remarkably aristocratic. Horst’s brand of Chicago finance is “solid.” It is based on physicality, the aristocratic yet exhilarating life of the trader and the material products that remind the trader what places and things in the real world their financial transactions model. It is also exclusive, with no claims to democracy, a life lived for and by the wealthy traders themselves, not extended into the home and the suburbs as another part of routine, middle-class life. When finance becomes rebranded, increasingly global, virtual and abstract, Horst steps back into an even more local brand of finance, farm futures. We find Horst “answering some call from deep in the tidy iterations of Midwest DNA,” trading in

the agricultural pits, and the next thing he knew, he was out in deep American countryside, inhaling the aroma from handfuls of wheat, scrutinizing soybeans for purple seed stain, walking through fields of spring barley squeezing kernels and inspecting glumes and peduncles, talking to farmers and weather oracles and insurance adjusters—or, as he put it to himself, rediscovering his roots. (289)

This deep connection to the provincial territory of the Midwest seems to be the source for Horst’s market precognition, which gives him a “nearly error-free form history of knowing how certain commodities will behave . . . before they themselves do” (21).
Horst’s deep reservoir of localness is the solution to his alienation in a globalized world. Jonathan Lethem, in his review of *Bleeding Edge* for the New York Times, notes that Pynchon’s novels give us “license to attempt disappearance into some radical space adjacent to history, and to daily life” (Lethem). This, for Pynchon, is the solution to the stultifying, flattening effect of consensus and official history. In place of globalization’s coercive generalization, such an escape promises a distributed localization, where disconnected places retain their difference, and radical acts of Luddite individualism are possible and desirable. Maxine notes that “Horst’s head in fact is a single nationwide snowdrift of motel rooms in far windswept spaces that Maxine will never know how to find her way to, let alone inhabit” (298). Reg Despard and Eric Outfield make a similar exit at the end of the novel, sending Maxine a video of themselves taking a “rolling server farm” out into the middle of nowhere, an experiment in “bleeding-edge” Luddite “development” on a new distributed network that they theorize, made up of “a fleet of us, out on the move and untrackable 24/7” (437). That they intend to use it for Luddite mischief is clear, as Eric says “this ain’t the civil war, by the way . . . not even Fort Sumter . . . we’ll see where it takes us” (437). “Contact,” he finishes “will be intermittent” (438). As Misha and Grisha toast Ice’s server farm, Reg and Eric can start a new one to advance a different kind of cultural production than Ice was attempting. They have hope for the future, suggesting that Pynchon believes Luddites are in no danger of being wiped out, and are far from admitting defeat. Like Horst, Marvin too has a reserve into which to disappear: the streets of New York, which, for Pynchon, have not yet been completely flattened. Marvin declares that, in spite of personal victimization by Mayor Rudy
Giuliani, “These days I’m all over the place,” that his distributed and helpful mischief “can ride forever” (107). There is no single answer for Luddites in *Bleeding Edge*, no single alternative story. Rather, there are many options, all of which draw on counter-spaces, inaccessible to the writers of official history, and occupied by the preterite, those who have been forgotten and ignored by history.

Part of the novel’s promise is that these escapes into authenticity are inaccessible from the world of the globalizers. In *Pattern Recognition*, Gibson portrays not-yet-globalized sources of authenticity as fragile. In *Bleeding Edge*, they are elusive and badass. Yet sometimes Pynchon’s sources of localness do seek us out, and we can know them by their Luddite brands. Horst’s return from the deep Midwest is certainly an invitation to Maxine, as are Marvin’s helpful deliveries. The invitation cannot be forced; “not how it works,” Marvin replies when Maxine asks for a way to contact him, “I come to you” (133). Marvin says that he sold his bike messenger uniform, with “the running man logo of the recently failed kozmo.com” and “iconic . . . single-digit employee number” on eBay “for more than you would ever dream. Nothing dies anymore, the collectors’ market” (107, 435). We might read this as either an invitation to the realm of the authentic, or a Luddite counter-exploitation, fleecing some neoliberal yuppie. Perhaps this latter reading is more to the point, since, of course, Marvin himself is not branded “kozmo.com.” Like all bike messengers, he is branded New York. What could be more authentically New York than a Trinidadian bike messenger? In the novel’s final scenes, Pynchon describes the restorative capabilities of authenticity. In Horst’s vintage Impala, Pynchon reaches
back both to a classic brand and a classic novel, borrowing from *The Crying of Lot 49* the chastening but ambiguous “unfurrowing” concept:

Maybe it’s this Luxury Lounge interior—forty years down the road with the not-yet-damped vibrations of Midwest teen fantasies that’ve worked their way into the grain of the metallic turquoise vinyl, the loop-carpet floor mats, the ashtrays overflowing with ancient cigarette butts, some with lipstick shades not sold for years . . . whatever Horst saw in this rolling museum of desire . . . now, presently, has wrapped them, brought them in from the unprofitable drill-fields of worry about the future, here inside, to repose, to unfurrowing, each eventually to her own dreams. (475)
Final Thoughts

What brings these two novels together? Both are undoubtedly novels of late capitalism and novels of the brand. Both observe a crisis of meaning and affect in 21st century capitalist society. Both propose accurate accounts of living among markets and brands, and both suggest possible solutions to some of the detrimental effects of these potential sources of moneyed taint. One important aspect of both novels I have not examined in the previous chapters is their portrayal of technology. Gibson perceives with startling acuteness what technologies are being used for in the present, which makes his books seem very cutting-edge. Pynchon takes a very long view of technology. His “bleeding edge” is more like a cresting wave of history about to come crashing down upon the emergent uses we have found for technology. Where Gibson views technology as a way to observe changes in how we live, Pynchon views technology as an accumulation, a sedimentation of signs that we have lived.

Gibson writes about the Internet with an eye for realism. The characters’ individual voices come through most clearly in their emails. Gibson has a good ear for the not-quite-speech, not-quite-writing, almost internal monologue quality of emails, as we can see from greetings like Damien’s to Cayce, “Hello and greetings from six feet down in the currently unfrozen swamps past Stalingrad. I am all bugbites but still do not fit in, as I am not drunk sufficiently constantly, tho am
working at it” or Cayce’s strained opening to her mother, “Hi Mom, I hope you’ll forgive my silence, or anyway not take it personally . . . Thanks for keeping in touch and I’ll try to do a better job of that myself” (Pattern Recognition 74, 275-276). Like a techno-naturalist filming a documentary, Gibson shows us these emails without many comments from the narrator or interspersed thoughts from Cayce and allows us to observe the way they express internal states better than the novel’s dialog or even its narration. These contrasts in naturalness or unnaturalness between different modes lend Gibson’s style a sophisticated layered quality.

Gibson observes the internet as an emergent area of human behavior and culture, whereas Pynchon almost drives the Internet into the past. Maxine’s political radical father, Ernie, recites a canard about the origins of the Internet, that “it started back during the Cold War . . . back then the Defense Department called it DARPA net, the real original purpose was to assure survival of U.S. command and control after a nuclear exchange with the Soviets” (Pynchon Bleeding Edge 419). We should not take this at face value as a truth that Pynchon is relating. It strikes me as a sign that the Internet has been fully catalogued and integrated and reduced to a set of cultural markers. That said, when Ernie remarks “call it freedom, it’s based on control. Everybody connected together, impossible anybody should get lost, ever again,” this may be the voice of Pynchon predicting that, while the Internet still seems culturally hip and new even as of 2013, it is already in the process of becoming a historical phenomenon, divided into periods and contours like everything else (Bleeding Edge 420).
The computers we see in the two novels reinforce this difference in approach. Cayce’s computer in the novel is a Mac Cube which her friend Damien “keeps for the way you can turn it upside down and remove its innards with a magic little aluminum handle,” with all its accessories, “cable modem, keyboard, speakers and Studio Display” (*Pattern Recognition* 3-4, 47). In *Bleeding Edge*, one of the items in Maxine’s parents’ apartment is “an antique Apple CRT monitor on a desk, left on” (*Bleeding Edge* 417). In Gibson, the Apple computer stands for a very natural kind of technology, so useful that it can overcome even fashion imperatives, such as Damien’s “ambivalence for design” (*Pattern Recognition* 3) or Cayce’s brand allergy (Apple’s branding oddly does not seem to bother her). In Pynchon, the Apple computer is abandoned, a relic like others that we might find in our parents’ attic. Pynchon’s long view invites us to imagine that the same fate, not exactly forgetting, but certainly antiquing, compartmentalizing will happen to even the most useful of technologies. The brand continues, though. In the end, the “Studio Display” that Cayce uses will surface with all its accumulated dust, grit and grease, and it will look like the “Luxury Lounge interior” in Horst’s Impala (*Bleeding Edge* 475).
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