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Agents or Pawns?
Power Relations in William Gibson’s Bigend Trilogy

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Abstract: The article explores power relations, resistance, and agency in William Gibson's Bigend Trilogy, his three latest novels to date. It analyzes Gibson's protagonists through Michel Foucault's observations on power. In the Bigend Trilogy, power relations between free individuals are turned into relations of constraint by various agents, most importantly by the advertising magnate Hubertus Bigend. Furthermore, Foucault's principle of the Panopticon is applied through modern surveillance technology, which plays a prominent role in the novels, to manipulate power relations.

Such manipulations lead to resistance in Gibson's protagonists who try to retain their agency in a world order that strives to dominate them. The characters appear as versions of John G. Cawelti's Western heroes and villains on the border between progressive order and independent chaos. The protagonists are not, in the end, invested in defeating schemes to dominate global power relations, but those that threaten their personal integrity. The article argues against Tom Henthorne's interpretation of the conclusion of the trilogy as dystopian and devoid of choice, claiming that the protagonists do not remain pawns in a game, but succeed in their resistance, emerging as agents on their own terms.

Keywords: Gibson, William; power; surveillance; agency, Bigend Trilogy

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Introduction

“[T]he actual conspiracy is not so often about us; we are most often the merest cogs in larger plans.” (Pattern Recognition 341)

The partially invisible and nearly untouchable nature of global security apparatuses has cast an Orwellian hue on life in the 21st century. In the post-Patriot Act era, and especially after the 2013 NSA leaks, it seems clear that we live double lives, the first as ordinary citizens going about our daily routines, the second as potential security threats whose every move, especially on the Internet, must be cataloged and processed by the powers that be. This is all for the greater good of national security, no matter how grave violations of the rights of privacy it might engender.

William Gibson's contemporary novels *Pattern Recognition* (2003), *Spook Country* (2007), and *Zero History* (2010) all predate the NSA revelations, but still deal with the zeitgeist of the world as a network of information, individuals, and powers that are worried about the subversive potential of the other two. The protagonists of the three novels find themselves under constant surveillance and are faced with an abusive attitude that threatens their personal security and integrity. In this essay, I explore how these violations lead to acts of opposition against these entities in terms of Foucauldian relations of power. Further, I analyze how the protagonists' characterization as, for example, "wild card[s]" (*Zero History* 24) and "rogue wave[s]" (*Zero History* 347), links them to John G. Cawelti's model of the Western hero whose existential choices veer on the border between progressive order and independent chaos.

Gibson has been called many things. After *Neuromancer*, his immensely successful 1984 debut, he has been recognized as the seminal cyberpunk author and one of the most important figures of science fiction in the late 20th century. His recent novels have so far distanced themselves from speculative futures and attached themselves more clearly to the present, resulting in opinions denouncing him as a science fiction author. To Gibson, however, there is no other way that "the actual twenty-first century" can be "unpacked [but] with the toolkit of science fiction" (*Distrust That Particular Flavor* 46).

Thus, it is not surprising that *Pattern Recognition*, *Spook Country*, and *Zero History* seem to bridge the supposed gap between speculative and realist. Their world is that of our own or, more accurately, an alternate recent history, as the books are set exactly a year before their respective publication. The narratives incorporate elements we recognize to be part of the immediate real – from global events like 9/11 and the market crash of 2008 to pieces of technology the impact of which has been revealed only in retrospect (e.g., iPods, social media, GPS and drone technology) – and those of the speculative (but conceivable) like print patterns on clothing that erase surveillance footage, computer programming predicting the state of the market, and EMP weapons used in corporate espionage.

Gibson's placement on the realist–postmodern continuum has been problematic due to this amalgam of real and speculative. Tom Henthorne notes that much of the academic discussion after Fredric Jameson attempted to categorize Gibson as a postmodern author in the early 1990s centered on debating the claim. According to Henthorne, some critics agreed that his settings might be postmodern, but that the action in his novels is resolved with realist and humanist techniques (4). Jameson has remained adamant and sees *Pattern Recognition* as a novel of "hyped-up name-dropping," where the usage of brand names "whose very dynamic conveys both instant obsolescence and the global provenance and neo-exoticism of the world market" marks a postmodern attitude (386–387). He cites Cayce's ability to intuitively know "by the opaque standards of her inner radar" (*Pattern Recognition* 12) whether a logo or brand works as suspending the novel "between Science Fiction and realism [lending] it . . . extraordinary resonance" (390). Brian McHale echoes Jameson's sentiments in saying that all science fiction is paradigmatically postmodern as it is ripe with "intertextual circulation" that is made open and visible (12).

Jaak Tomberg notes that Jameson's claim is mainly based on the general structure and motifs of *Pattern Recognition* and takes the argument one step further by looking at the actual poetics of the late Gibson canon. To him, the Bigend Trilogy does not merely include science fictional and realist elements that exist "side by side," but rather that the novels, even at the level of the sentence, register "as realism and science fiction *at the same time*" and that "the simultaneous feeling of utmost familiarity and utter cognitive estrangement" are at the heart of Gibson's style (267, emphasis original). Tomberg calls for new terminology for this "double vision" (281), but believes that the "contemporary technocultural immanence," which Gibson's novels have always dealt with, must intensify in actuality for such a single perspective to overcome the divide between realist and speculative in criticism (282).

Thematically, Gibson's world is one of hidden structures and influences, which are kept concealed and vague in equal measure by paramilitary stealth and astronomical fortunes. It is populated by unknown oligarchs, well-connected spooks, Special Forces fantasists, arrogant arms-dealers, and, most importantly, Hubertus Bigend, Belgian advertising magnate par excellence. In fact, the trilogy revolves around Bigend, although he hardly is the protagonist in any of the novels. He is a fleet-footed businessman, epitomizing the ideological atmosphere of the late capitalist 2000s and makes the most of global upheavals from a business perspective. The novels' events are hinged on the key historical turns of western society between 2000 and 2010, from 9/11 and the war on terror to, finally, the financial crisis of 2008 – an era characterized by doubts concerning both the European project of unity and increasingly successful global capitalism as a guarantee of prosperity.

The three historical events noted above act as the background for the narratives of the Bigend Trilogy. In *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce Pollard's father disappears in New York on September 11th 2001, launching her on a trajectory that brings Bigend and his advertising agency Blue Ant into her life. The war on terror, on the other hand, rages in the background as Hollis Henry in *Spook Country* becomes involved first with Bigend, then with covert agents, Garreth and the "old man" (239), on a mission to play a billion dollar prank on the security operatives bent on profiting on the Iraq War. In *Zero History*, we meet Hollis again, still grappling with Bigend's "dire gravity" (337), trying to pull herself free and finding it difficult, having lost half of her fortune in the market crash.

Veronica Hollinger suggests that the Bigend Trilogy differs from Gibson's earlier novels in its approach to futurity. For example, *Neuromancer* and *All Tomorrow's Parties* both end in "profound change . . . [a] transformation implied by some radical technological event," the AI Wintermute's attainment of consciousness in the former novel and virtual Rei Toei's emergence as a physical being in the latter, the repercussions of which are not discussed, as if they were impossible to imagine (461). These mark a "technological singularity [that] cuts us off from the historical past, leaving us stranded in difference" (462). Hollinger goes on to say that *Pattern Recognition*, in contrast, is an attempt to address this disjunction, symbolically brought on by 9/11, the events of which Cayce recalls in a chapter titled "Singularity" (462). The singularity thus becomes the starting point of her story, marking the time depicted in the novel as "postmodern time . . . time-after-the-end-time" that represents "our hesitation in letting go of the past and our anxiety that we are, in fact, on the other side of irrevocable change" (463). Later in the trilogy, the war on terror and the financial crisis emerge as the unforeseen repercussions of 9/11. They force the protagonists to navigate a world order they are inevitably unfamiliar with and to discover their capability of agency within it.

Gibson's protagonists, in contrast to the shadowy movers and shakers of his world, are somewhat commonplace and not as privy to the "world's hidden architectures" (*Zero History* 18). In *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce Pollard is hypersensitive to the special something that makes brand imagery effective, working as a freelance "piece of human litmus paper" to fashion designers and companies (13). She ends up working with Bigend to find the maker of mysterious film-footage segments surfacing online – a phenomena she has already followed through Fetish:Footage:Forum, an online community of enthusiasts. Similarly, in *Spook Country*, Hollis Henry is on the Blue Ant freelance payroll as an aspiring journalist (and former rock-singer), employed to find a cargo container sailing the seven seas and filled with \$100 bills, adrift and lost on their purported journey to rebuild Iraq. In *Zero History*, Hollis returns to Bigend's employment to find whoever designs and markets Gabriel Hounds denim, successfully "copying some of [Bigend's] weirder marketing strategies . . . improving on them" (100) to help him in "military contracting" (197). Both Cayce and Hollis start to work with Bigend willingly, much due to their own financial and professional needs, but quickly become aware of his unnerving practices of surveillance and his seeming

incapability of taking no for an answer. These practices are at the heart of Bigend's approach to power relations between free individuals: he consciously seeks to manipulate them to promote his own, usually hidden, agendas, restricting the freedom of his cooperatives in the process.

Wielding Power: Foucault and Gibson

In his afterword to Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow's *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Foucault summarizes several features of his understanding of power that I employ in my analysis of the Bigend Trilogy. First, he makes the distinction between power relations and relations of constraint. To Foucault, power is not unidirectional, nor is it an object possessed by someone wielding it and lacked by its target. Rather, power is always a relationship between individuals in which "actions modify others," that is, "power only exists when it is put into action" (219). As a result, power is always exercised over free subjects and true power relations can only exist between them – if one of the counterparts were not free, the relation would be that of constraint, or slavery (221). This does not mean that violence and coercion (or consent at the other end of the spectrum) would be wholly absent from power relations, but to Foucault they are results or instruments of power, not its essence (220). As power exists only in the active interplay between subjects, it can open up "a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions" (220). This field is marked by the intertwined nature of power's insistence and "freedom's refusal to submit" (221) that leads to "agonism . . . [that is] less of a face-to-face confrontation which paralyzes both sides than a permanent provocation," a relation of reciprocal struggle (222).

All in all, it would seem that different agents in the Bigend Trilogy seek to turn true power relations into relations of constraint and oppression. This is definitely the case with Dorotea in *Pattern Recognition*, when Cayce is antagonized by her as a competitor for Bigend's favor. She intrudes on Cayce's privacy by using information stolen from the records of Cayce's therapist to trigger her phobia of Bibendum, the original Michelin Man (96–98) and later sends "Prada clone[s]" (153) to follow and scare her away from working with Bigend's agency, Blue Ant. Dorotea's actions are aimed at incapacitating Cayce and restricting her actions in the interplay of power, in their case enacted in both the realms of fashion and advertising as well as that of the Fetish:Footage:Forum, to which both Cayce and Dorotea contribute.

A similar tendency is visible in Milgrim and Brown's relationship in *Spook Country*, but in their case, one has already oppressed the other. Brown is a security operative, working under an unnamed government agency, tasked to intercept coded text messages that could reveal the whereabouts of the precious shipping container which Bigend and Hollis also track. He has captured Milgrim, a translator of Russian turned prescription drug junkie, to help crack the codes in return of a steady supply of anxiety medicine.

To Foucault, "[w]hat makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse" (*Power/Knowledge* 119). If this were not the case, there would be no motivation to obey its impulses. With Milgrim, it would first seem that he is utterly devoid of any meaningful ways to oppose his captor. He spends most of *Spook Country* leashed to Brown, doing as he is told on their hunt for the container. Much of his interaction with Brown consists of nodding or remaining silent, even if he manages to consider escape fairly early: "How long was one expected to live one's life in the tautly strung fug of Brown's curdled testosterone?" (66). Gradually, his distaste for Brown grows and he attempts to flee when Brown's attention wavers, as he, too, gets closer to the secrets behind the container. Eventually Milgrim succeeds in regaining his freedom, accidentally attracting Bigend's surprisingly benign attention in the process (which becomes central in *Zero History*).

Brown's reliance on the threat of violence and "saying no" (as Foucault puts it in *Power/Knowledge* 119), leads to rebellion in the subject, as such tendencies of coercion do in the case of power relations between free individuals in the trilogy. The fact that Brown possesses coveted anxiety medication is what keeps Milgrim submissive, "makes power accepted" in Foucault's words, because, in this case, it "induces pleasure" (119). Still, Brown's overwhelming denials lead to Milgrim's resistance despite the pleasure, because it exists independently of his relation to Brown. Thus, the constraint is not productive, remaining "open to loopholes and resistances" (119) and it becomes possible for Milgrim to dream he "could . . . snag . . . Brown's bag, wherein . . . would be found the brown paper bag of Rize. And walk away" (234). In the end, when a chance presents itself after Brown crashes their car, he manages to "pocket the bubble-packs [of the drug]," in turn say "No" to Brown's order to stay put, and flee (419).

Bigend is by far the most important of all the characters invested in the global power relations that launch Cayce, Hollis, and Milgrim on their adventures. He too, even if not directly antagonistic to any of the protagonists, employs several means to keep them under surveillance and participates in introducing coercion into the power relations between him and those he works with. Their cell-phones ring at all hours as he checks up on them, he appears in hotel lobbies to hear reports, and his employees follow them around on motorbikes, on planes, and via radio-controlled drones. On top of that his chief of security taps cell-phones and hacks laptops, first under Bigend, then joining his enemies in the same capacity. Such measures impose a "lack of autonomy" (*Pattern Recognition* 171) that furthers the protagonists' dislike of Bigend.

Importantly, Bigend's all-encompassing surveillance network starts to resemble Foucault's Panoptic system in the course of the trilogy. In his genealogical account of the developments of disciplinary power, Foucault presents Jeremy Bentham's 18th-century notion of an ideal prison as the epitome of disciplinary power over individuals as docile bodies (*Michel Foucault* 134–135, 188–190). This model of the Panopticon, where a guard is positioned so that he is able to survey all the inmates without them knowing whether they are watched or not, results in the prisoners adopting ways of behavior where they essentially keep watch on themselves – even if no actual surveillance occurs at a given time. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault sums up the benefits of such a system as follows: "There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze . . . each individual . . . interiorising [it] to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself" (155). Such a system is unavailable to Dorotea and Brown, whose techniques of power are limited to forms of violence, but to Bigend with his legions of henchmen and vast capabilities for technological surveillance, the whole world seems to become a part of his private Panopticon as regards Cayce, Hollis, and Milgrim. The invisibility of his surveillance apparatus has all protagonists repeatedly question their privacy and induces paranoia that they have to overcome in order to retain their agency and freedom. Bigend's Panopticon thus seeks to alter the basic foundation of the relation of power between him and the protagonists: to reduce it into a relation of constraint without the freedom Foucault holds prerequisite for true power relations.

This project of reduction compromises the protagonists' sense of personal integrity and security. While they begin to cooperate with Bigend of their own volition, both Cayce and Hollis come to find that the price of his patronage is too high. As Cayce gets closer to the maker of the footage, she realizes "how working for Bigend . . . has skewed her relationship to . . . the footagehead community" (*Pattern Recognition* 173), her tribe, so to speak, of like-minded people. Even her closest friends do not "know what she's up to, who she's working for" (173). In Hollis's case, she finds that Bigend's "capacity for risk-taking . . . [makes] him . . . so peculiarly dangerous to be around" (*Zero History* 23) and, when she first finds out that Bigend tends to keep secrets, that "[t]here was something about this, suddenly, that she really didn't like, and in some entirely new way. She imagined the bed a desert of white sand. Something circling, hidden, beneath its surface"

(*Spook Country* 44), likening him to the frightening Mongolian Death Worm “[o]ut there in the dunes” (453). According to Foucault, such impulses brought on by an acting power relation result in provocation and struggle, a refusal to submit (*Michel Foucault* 221–222), in other words, acts of resistance.

Different entities and individuals in the Bigend Trilogy further their hegemonic agendas by the coercive techniques of power. Some, like Dorotea and Brown are restricted to literal constraint and different degrees of violence in so doing. They do not have access to a Panoptic system, where a gaze would be enough to manage its targets, reducing them to docility. Their approach works to a point, but is not, as Foucault predicts, sustainable. Milgrim escapes with his drugs of choice, while Cayce succeeds in everything Dorotea tries to prevent. With Bigend and the invisible Blue Ant surveillance network, the need for direct violence is nearly eliminated. The protagonists can never be certain whether they are being watched and need to consider their actions with that in mind. However, the experiences of constraint and loss of autonomy that result from the all-encompassing nature of the system lead to the unease which lies at the heart of their ultimate opposition.

Characters as Agents and Pawns

The source of Cayce's and Hollis's resistance is the threat to their personal security and sense of self. Henthorne, however, does not see this as the most significant struggle in the trilogy. Rather, he interprets the protagonists' opposition in terms of Bigend's overall project, emerging in the course of *Zero History*, to discover “the order flow” (*Zero History* 177), the state of the markets at any given moment, the knowledge of which would result in control of the future (at least as far as doing business goes). To Henthorne, Bigend's ultimate success in this megalomaniac scheme marks the birth of a dystopia in which Gibson's characters lose their ability to resist domination. In Henthorne's interpretation, “agency itself is lost and all possibility of change is closed out” (51) and “gestures of resistance . . . become impossible . . . and people like Bigend obtain unprecedented power” (37).

However, this pessimistic interpretation of the loss of agency and the impossibility of change warrants closer scrutiny. First, it should be noted that Henthorne's view on power can be viewed through the Foucauldian ideas discussed so far. If we understand Bigend's obtaining of near-ultimate power as an increased capacity to turn real power relations between free individuals into relations of coercion (as his Panoptic impulses attempt to do), then, certainly, resistance becomes more difficult. Is Bigend really capable of attaining such a measure of force in relation to the protagonists, to Gibson's heroes, of the trilogy? The answer seems to hinge on the reading of agency as regards Cayce, Hollis, and Milgrim, respectively. Can it truly be said that they, as main protagonists of the three novels, end up in dystopia and lose their agency altogether?

In *Pattern Recognition*, Bigend insists on calling Cayce's cooperation with him “a partnership” (191), but theirs is an asymmetric relationship from the start. Still, while working with Bigend to discover the maker of the footage, Cayce realizes her complicity in the Blue Ant project that “gradually makes London and New York feel more like each other, that dissolves the membranes between mirror-worlds” (194) and leads to Bigend's triumph at the end of *Zero History*. After finding out that Bigend is creating interest in the footage for marketing purposes, Cayce feels “not foreign but alien, made so by this latest advent of something that seems to be infecting everything. Hubertus [Bigend]” (88). To protect the footage from this infection, she decides not to tell Bigend when she finally finds the Volkova sisters behind its production and instead warns them of him: “I won't be working for him, now. But others will, and they'll find you, and you have to be ready.” Cayce consistently tries to uncover, challenge, and resist the coercive system that tries to dominate her. When, without Bigend's knowledge, Cayce sends her first message to Stella Volkova

she has a “sensation of existing at some still point around which all else revolves” (257). The power dynamic shifts instantly as a consequence of her actions, but also becomes visible as she realizes the potential weight of her agency, even if her attempt at protecting what she holds dear fails and Bigend is able to turn the footage Cayce loves into an elaborate scheme to sell shoes, as becomes clear in *Spook Country* (139).

While the identity of the Volkovas and the integrity of the footage are compromised, many of Cayce’s various conflicts do get resolved at the end of *Pattern Recognition*. She reaches closure as regards the fate of her father, befriends the Volkovas in learning their role behind the footage, and shakes off her allergy to Bibendum and other symbols of corporate identity. This last resolution ends her career as the coolhunter-savante she has been, because it effectively deactivates her quasi-paranormal abilities that have made her so useful to Bigend and his pursuits. The end result is bitter-sweet: for the moment, she retains her independence and shakes off Bigend’s attempts to control her, but has to see the footage she values turned into a banality of advertising.

Cayce is met again in *Zero History*, in circumstances that bring out another element to the interpretation of her opposition’s success. She has become the designer of the Gabriel Hounds jeans Bigend has Hollis looking for and actually beats Bigend at his own game. She turns her “secret brand” (32) into a success story, but manages to keep it hidden from Bigend who is the true expert on guerrilla marketing. When Hollis finally finds her, Cayce is ready to go public with her designs, having enjoyed obliqueness long enough to keep Bigend at bay, so much so that “not being on [Bigend’s] side has actually become a big part of who she is” (346).

The importance of this existential quest of personal integrity debunks, in Cayce’s case, Henthorne’s pessimistic argument on the loss of agency. True, Cayce does not stop Bigend from succeeding in his most important project, that of discovering the order flow, but that is not, in fact, the most important enactment of resistance for her. Defeating Bigend’s pursuit for global leverage is never on Cayce’s agenda, really. Rather, she has chosen a strategy of avoidance to protect her own integrity. She maintains her agency and freedom, even using Bigend’s own strategies of obfuscation to her advantage, and is not forced into constraint in the new world order, remaining the Gabriel Hounds designer rather than a pawn on Bigend’s board.

In this respect, Hollis’s perpetual provocation resembles that of Cayce’s as she, too, feels a need to avoid Bigend and the influence he represents rather than oppose his overall schemes for control. Even when working on his projects, first trying to track down the elusive cargo container in *Spook Country*, she tries to convince herself that she is but a journalist and refuses to “think of herself as Bigend’s employee” (182) invested in “[t]he Bigend version” with “[p]irates, their boats, CIA maritime units . . . a shipping container” (183). Her likening of Bigend to the Mongolian Death Worm is much like Cayce’s idea of him as a creeping infection.

Hollis’s moments of resistance are also linked to her existential ideas of independence and, importantly, altruism. When she finally finds Cayce to be the designer of the Gabriel Hounds, she does not let her reveal her name, saying that “if you don’t tell me . . . I can continue to tell Hubertus that I don’t know your name” (*Zero History* 334). Earlier, Hollis sums up her stance on her employment, while explaining that she will not sacrifice someone else’s privacy to benefit Bigend: “Look, this is just a job for me, one I wish I didn’t have. Not even a job. Just Bigend bribing me to do something for him” (229). At this point, the power relation between her and Bigend has taken such characteristics that the pleasure or benefit of monetary income is not enough for Hollis to submit to Bigend’s will. As a result, Bigend never learns of Cayce’s identity behind the Gabriel Hounds, her integrity protected both by her own resistance and Hollis’s strategy of withholding information. Ultimately, then, Cayce resists the commodification that the footage succumbs to at the end of *Pattern Recognition*. The omission of her name marks her success in remaining outside Bigend’s Panoptic, reductionist system. It is also linked to what Jameson views as the core conflict in *Pattern Recognition*: the struggle between “postmodern nominalism” (387), the impulse to name

and commodify, and “systematic effacement” (389) of branded identity, resulting in Cayce's triumph at the end of the trilogy as she remains unnamed and in control of her integrity.

Hollis's volition to protect her own individuality reaches its apex when Bigend has his order flow project compromised after Gracie, his self-appointed adversary, kidnaps Bobby Chombo, the programmer responsible for the technological aspects of the venture. Bigend then decides that Milgrim has become expendable and plans to hand him over to Gracie (who harbors personal vengeance against Milgrim), but Hollis intervenes. She takes advantage of Bigend's momentary lack of leverage, threatening to bring the police and “the *Times* and the *Guardian*” upon him (281). She resorts to contacts she first met at the end of *Spook Country*, Garreth having become her love interest in the interim between the two novels. Garreth possesses the skills, the technology, and the contacts which Bigend desperately needs as Sleight, his chief of security, has shifted allegiances. Hollis promises Garreth's aid to Bigend if he agrees to spare Milgrim, terminate his search for the Gabriel Hounds, and relinquish her from his service. The three terms are “the least attractive” to Bigend, but he accepts nonetheless (387). This way, through her adamant opposition, the three conflicts that most seriously threaten Hollis's integrity and agency result in utter triumph of those values she finds the most important.

Despite Bigend's manipulative tactics, Cayce and Hollis remain unpredictable individuals whose force is embedded in their sense of integrity and independence. Bigend sees them primarily as “wild card[s]” who are exempt from “mediocrity inherent in professional competence” (*Zero History* 24) and thus best qualified for whatever enterprises he plans to execute. This potential is also at the heart of their capability to resist. Garreth, more privy to “the secret machineries of history” (154) than Hollis, summarizes this potential of opposition: “[Y]ou and the others . . . have formed a rogue wave without meaning to, and none of it could have been predicted” (347). What Bigend and his kind do, in turn, is to “try to surf” (347) that wave to their advantage, but, as noted in Cayce and Hollis's case, only partially succeed.

The examples of Cayce and Hollis show that even if we accept Henthorne's analysis of the world as dystopia at the end of the Bigend Trilogy, its ramifications are not as drastic to the protagonists as he claims. Even though global, and in this case capitalist, power relations shift and transform, there is no reason to posit that this results in the impossibility of agency and resistance. Rather, Bigend's success in controlling the world markets and making them serve his curiosity is a normal turn in the dynamic of power – an action on actions, resulting in a network of other possible actions and agonistic provocation. In fact, Henthorne appears to step into what Foucault calls the “‘theory’ of the weakest link” (*Power/Knowledge* 144), because it seems that to Henthorne resistance is successful only when it targets a component of the power structure whose destruction leads to the collapse of the system as a whole. In the context of the Bigend Trilogy, it seems unreasonable to expect that heroines like Cayce and Hollis would engage in such campaigns against the whole structure of the late capitalist relations of power and coercion represented by Bigend – and then succeed unconditionally. Nor should this be considered a failure to challenge and resist on their part.

Milgrim's situation is slightly different from Cayce and Hollis's, as his story begins in coerced captivity and he only gradually gains a sense of himself as a subject capable of making decisions of his own. In the course of *Zero History*, Milgrim is, with Bigend's help, in the better stages of withdrawal and pulls off maneuvers of greater caliber than he does in *Spook Country*. First, he cooperates with Sleight, Bigend's security specialist, in as asymmetric a relationship as he had with Brown earlier. However, it is Milgrim who realizes that Sleight uses Bigend's technological capabilities against him and joins his enemies. Milgrim independently succeeds in leading one of Gracie's goons into the rough arms of Russian bodyguards, managing to surprise Bigend and have him reevaluate Milgrim's capability to be proactive: “You're supposed to be relatively circumspect . . . Or, rather, not that you're supposed to be, particularly, but that I expect it

of you, on the basis of experience . . . You're changing . . . I'll factor it in, in the future" (266). In part, when Milgrim takes the initiative into his own hands, it escalates Bigend and Gracie's conflict, but also leads into Milgrim staying with Blue Ant by choice and working according to his capabilities – a result that he appears to find desirable, unlike Cayce and Hollis. This hardly appears as loss of agency or impossibility of change, as Milgrim's narrative, as a whole, is about change, a gradual opening from the confines of drug addiction to productive existence, where Milgrim voluntarily chooses to remain in Bigend's service. For once, he is not coerced into servitude as the trilogy ends, even finding out that the pills he has taken for the last months as part of his rehabilitation have been but vitamins and placebo, signifying a final release from constraints.

Henthorne's dystopian interpretation does not find much textual evidence when viewed at the level of the protagonists in the Bigend Trilogy. Rather, it seems that the characters' most important conflicts do not concern defeating such global shifts of power structures as that of Bigend's discovery of the order flow. Their most important struggles are about retaining agency, even when dealing with entities who would rather strip it from them and reduce them to Foucault's docile bodies. The world losing all possibility of change along with Bigend's success does not seem plausible either. On the contrary, his triumph remains but an action, even if a major one, on actions in the complex mesh of power relations. It does not halt the dynamics of power or make change impossible. Rather, it opens up a field of reactions and responses. Bigend does not appear as a sovereign, ruling with an invincible iron fist at the end of the trilogy. Even though his actions definitely create a new world order, that order is not in any way final or uncontested.

Gibson's Cowboys and the Changing Frontier

The choices the protagonists of the Bigend Trilogy make as regards Bigend's final victory in his order flow project can also be analyzed through John G. Cawelti's theory of heroes in the Western genre. According to Cawelti, Western heroes are typically in "a situation of divided commitment" (35). They align their actions with the order and the progress enacted by townfolk, but do so with the means of the chaotic outlaws of the wilderness. Usually, at the end of their quests, they are offered a choice either to embrace the order they helped ensure and settle down, leaving their days of independent wandering behind, or to ride into the sunset, dismissing the rewards the order and the progress would grant them (53).

With Cayce and Hollis it seems clear that they reject the promise of the new world order Bigend engenders. They rather stay away from the "world of hidden architectures" (*Zero History* 18) he concerns himself with and value independence and privacy. They represent an inverted model of the Western hero, as their skills are those of progress (Cayce's aptitude in fashion and the leverage of Hollis's celebrity, for example), but their settling down, striving for a normal, uneventful lives, can be seen as another rejection of the values of progress Bigend and Gracie represent as agents whose scope of ambition is global and megalomaniac.

Milgrim, on the other hand, ends up at the heart of the new world order where Bigend acquires Bond villain "ekranoplan[s]" (*Zero History* 399), a "great deal of Iceland," and prescience of seventeen minutes of the future of the market (403), but Milgrim's fate does not appear as loss of agency either. Bigend sees skills in Milgrim that no-one else in the Blue Ant agency seems to have, from translating obscure Russian manuals to "thinking like a criminal" (400), and remains indebted to him for unexpectedly playing an important part in rescuing Bobby Chombo. At the end of the trilogy, Milgrim appears as a more literal version of the Western hero, with his capabilities of the criminal world in the service of Bigend's new world order, opting for the opposite than Cayce and Hollis. Milgrim leaves his chaotic existence as an outlaw addict behind to embrace the change Bigend promotes.

In Cawelti's terminology, Bigend most closely resembles a "banker-villain," representing "decent ideals of the pioneer gone sour," for whom "individual wealth and power" have become the most important values (33). There are important caveats to consider, however. First, while the banker-villain presents a threat to the existence of the orderly, progressive society, this does not ring quite true in Bigend's case. Much of it has to do with his goals which are parallel to those of the society in the Bigend Trilogy. In this context, unlike on the Western frontier, the amassing of individual power is synonymous with progress and order – in fact, paradigmatically the only way forward as a society. Without a doubt, Bigend is also a pioneer, breaking into new territory with his outlandish marketing strategies and his interest in the more obscure phenomena of globalized culture, from locative art in *Spook Country* to the footage in *Pattern Recognition*. He is the one-man dream team of late capitalist society, the ultimate self-made man, and a banker-villain whose villainy can be excused, for it epitomizes and promotes everything a consumption-obsessed world holds dear.

It could be argued that Bigend is not originally very invested in manipulating or dominating the late capitalist frontier, but rather is interested in its niche phenomena, like the footage and the Gabriel Hounds, out of curiosity. Certainly, dabbling in what could be called independent cinema or ultimate hipster jeans does not appear very nefarious. However, there is more to Bigend's curiosity than the mere pursuit of peculiarity for his aim is to unleash the potential he sees in such unique enterprises. The footage is turned into a successful marketing scheme, locative art is interesting as it shares technologies with espionage, and the excellence of design of the Gabriel Hounds appears as a key element in Blue Ant's venture to get into the market for military clothing in the United States. Bigend's curiosity appears sporadic, but its targets all serve to grant him control over different aspects of the frontier he roams. The precognitive ability he gains by discovering the order flow is not his ultimate goal – instead, it is a vehicle to ensure that the projects driven by his curiosity succeed.

The ideals of the frontier itself have gone sour in the Bigend Trilogy. Lone wanderers like Cayce, Hollis, and Milgrim are faced with the same choices as their counterparts in the Western genre, but the rules of the game have changed. Whereas the Western hero plays a role in the fate of whole towns on the frontier, Gibson's protagonists are no longer capable of opposing the abusive schemes of banker-villains like Bigend, whose machinations are actually supported by the values and realities of society. Their resistance is thus delegated to the existential level, where the most meaningful choice is to decide whether to take part in the movements that manipulate the power relations of free individuals into relations of constraint and seek to turn the world into a unified whole, subject to the unrelenting gaze of an electronic surveillance network. Such a network is applied both by the fictional Bigend and actually put into use by the governments of the most developed democratic states of the contemporary world. Gibson's protagonists prove that even in the face of such global manipulations of privacy and freedom, agency and individual choice are still possible, and everyone is able to choose their stance in the face of such adversity. Ultimately, the wielders of power in both our and Gibson's world are dependent on the individual. In the right position, at the right moment, it is the individual who has the capacity to expose, resist, and either bring down or elevate those who at times seem invisible and invincible. There is no underestimating the wild, the rogue, as even almighty Hubertus Bigend has to admit.

Conclusion

The power relations in the Bigend Trilogy incorporate several of Foucault's principles. They range from relations of constraint to real power relations between free subjects, where one counterpart attempts to introduce elements of constraint into the relation. These impulses of coercion are linked to the differing possibilities of access to the Panoptic systems of surveillance, which together account for much of the resistive sentiments in the protagonists of the three novels. While Cayce, Hollis, and Milgrim's agency is threatened throughout the trilogy, all of them manage to retain (or in Milgrim's case regain) their independence and successfully oppose the entities bent on domination. However, their opposition should not be analyzed against the success of Bigend's project in creating his new world order, the defeat of which is never an objective for any of the protagonists. On Gibson's frontier, rules have changed as the ideals of progress and order have been infected with the supremacist capitalist schemes of Bigend and his kind. In such a world, the protagonists' resistance becomes existential as they need to reevaluate the degree of their own participation in a world order that strives to coerce free individuals into submission.

The disposition to violent coercion is most pronounced in Dorotea's attempts to frighten Cayce into abandoning her search for the maker of the footage as well as Milgrim's captivity with Brown. Both Dorotea and Brown have only limited access to the Panoptic system Bigend employs and are thus forced to resort to techniques of power that consist of different degrees of violence. Their coercive plans are unproductive and prone to resistance, resulting in their failure, as Dorotea is unable to stop Cayce, and Brown's grasp on Milgrim is tenuous at best, prolonged only by his supply of the controlled substances Milgrim covets. Similar loopholes emerge in Bigend's power relations to Cayce and Hollis, respectively. The more he tries to control them, both openly and without their knowledge, the more they hang on to their independence and end up going rogue. They retain their agency and manage, even at the end of the trilogy where Bigend triumphs, to remain free of the constraint to which Bigend attempts to subject them. Milgrim too, even if his relationship with Bigend starts in constrained circumstances, becomes proactive, an independent agent in his own right, even if his choice is to join Bigend rather than avoid his influence at all costs. His volition replaces the need for coercion and Milgrim becomes, for the first time, a free subject in a real relation of power.

Bigend's triumph in learning the order flow marks another radical technological event Hollinger views as symptomatic for Gibson's earlier novels, an event beyond which it is impossible to glimpse (462). However, with 9/11 as the symbolical singularity at the start of the trilogy, the order flow event does not appear as unknowable as, for example, the AI Wintermute's coming into consciousness at the conclusion of *Neuromancer*. On the contrary, the protagonists of the Bigend Trilogy show that they can retain agency in a time-after-the-end-time, in the utterly changed reality of a post-9/11 world, where power dynamics are visibly in turmoil. Both Cayce and Hollis evade Bigend, the Panoptic overseer, gain a foothold in the new world order, and come to terms with their anxieties, maintaining their freedom, even when the rules of the frontier change again.

No matter how dystopian the Bigend Trilogy might appear, none of the protagonists remain pawns, but agent subjects, players in their own right, on their own terms. As such, the novels stand for the possibility of agency even at the face of the scrutinizing, coercing, and commodifying practices of governments and businesses in late capitalist society. Despite the fact that their overseers would prefer these practices to remain invisible, they have become more and more tangible as we have come to realize how life in the 21st century is starting to catch up with Gibson's speculative visions.

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