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Gothic Traces in the Metaphysical Detective Story: The Female Sleuth in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*

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This essay argues that William Gibson's novel *Pattern Recognition* (the first volume of his Blue Ant Trilogy) borrows from Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* as regards plot, character, narration, structure, imagery, and theme, even as it transforms these elements to reflect a post-9/11 world. The essay particularly focuses, however, on the fear and anxiety experienced by the protagonists, Pynchon's Oedipa Maas and Gibson's Cayce Pollard, who are among the very few female sleuths to appear in postmodernist metaphysical detective stories. It argues that Pynchon and Gibson modeled their narratives on female gothic novels in which a heroine discovers evidence of a conspiracy against her but cannot determine whether it exists or whether she imagined it. The essay thus offers a new context in which to read Pynchon's novel, in terms of both genre and gender, as well as extensive evidence of its impact on Gibson. At the same time, the essay argues, using the examples of Pynchon's and Gibson's novels, that the female gothic genre has been an important influence on the metaphysical detective story, especially its depiction of investigators who project their own interpretations onto insoluble mysteries.

In our introduction to *Detecting Texts*, a volume on the history and theory of the metaphysical detective story published in 1999, Patricia Merivale and I note, rather plaintively, women's relative absence from the genre.[1] Today, there are still few female authors, and even those—such as Joyce Carol Oates, Margaret Atwood, Barbara Wilson, and Carol Shields—might be more accurately described as including aspects of metaphysical detective fiction in works whose generic, thematic, or political concerns lie elsewhere.[2] There are hardly any female sleuths, either. Some classic examples of the genre, such as Jorge Luis Borges's "Death and the Compass," have no female characters; others, including Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, offer only limited roles for girlfriends or *femmes fatales.*

Yet there exist at least two exceptions to the scarcity of female investigators: Oedipa Maas, an amateur sleuth in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, and Cayce Pollard, a "coolhunter" in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition,* the first volume of his Blue Ant Trilogy.[3] (Pynchon's novel *Bleeding Edge*, published nearly half a century after *The Crying of Lot 49*, also features a female detective, Maxine Tarnow,

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[1] Patricia Merivale and I define the metaphysical detective story as a text that "subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure and the reader's role as surrogate reader—with the effect, or at least the intention, of asking questions about being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot." We observe, however, that authors of these texts "are almost exclusively men—a fact made more curious by the notoriously dominant role of women in writing classical detective stories [. . .] as well as women's recent and much-annotated forays into the hard-boiled and police procedural genres." Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, "The Game's Afoot: On the Trail of the Metaphysical Detective Story," in *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 2, 20.

[2] Oates approaches metaphysical detective fiction but focuses on enigmas, not detection; for example, consider Joyce Carol Oates, *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (New York: Dutton, 1984). Atwood prefers other genres, apart from a prose poem and vestiges of crime fiction in two novels: see Margaret Atwood, "Murder in the Dark," in *Murder in the Dark: Short Fictions and Prose Poems* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1983), 29–30; *Alias Grace* (New York: Doubleday, 1996); and *The Blind Assassin* (New York: Doubleday, 2000). Wilson's lesbian feminist detective novels sometimes include metaphysical elements, but they are usually treated comically, as in Barbara Wilson, *Gaudí Afternoon* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1990). Shields's research novel about a dead poet may be the best example of metaphysical detection by a female writer; see Carol Shields, *Swann: A Mystery* (New York: Viking, 1989).

[3] Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966; New York: Harper, 1986); William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (2003; New York: Berkley Books, 2005). Subsequent references to both novels are noted parenthetically within the text.

a fraud examiner in New York City before and after 9/11; the second volume of Gibson's trilogy introduces yet another, investigative journalist Hollis Henry.) As detective figures, Oedipa and Cayce are remarkably similar. Indeed, as this essay shows, Gibson clearly borrowed from Pynchon's novel as regards plot, character, narration, structure, imagery, and theme, even as he transformed it to reflect a post-9/11 world.[4] *Pattern Recognition* revises *The Crying of Lot 49* in terms of the protagonist's identity (Pynchon's Oedipa, a housewife who attends Tupperware parties, becomes Gibson's Cayce, a marketing consultant allergic to advertising); her pursuit of literal and figurative patterns (Oedipa's obsession with the Tristero turns into Cayce's interest in enigmatic footage on the Internet); her mourning for a missing man (the death of Oedipa's ex-boyfriend becomes the disappearance of Cayce's father); her awareness of failed communication (Pynchon's parody of the postal system leads to Gibson's sardonic treatment of online identities); and her apprehension of vast conspiracies (the secret history in *The Crying of Lot 49* metastasizes into the global networks of *Pattern Recognition*).[5] In both novels, these narrative elements emphasize the female sleuth's anxiety as she discovers evidence suggesting that others

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[4] After identifying *The Crying of Lot 49* as a source for *Pattern Recognition* at the 2009 American Comparative Literature Association convention, I discovered that Richard Skeates made this same point in an early book review. He notes that some novels "offer other layers of signification, texts that refer endlessly to other texts, proliferating conspiracies and patterns that defer ultimate meaning. In this and other respects *The Crying of Lot 49* seems to be an important influence, perhaps even a linear precursor to Gibson's work as a whole and *Pattern Recognition* in particular"; see Richard Skeates, "A Melancholy Future Poetic," *City* 8, no. 1 (2004): 138. Skeates does not develop this claim, however, aside from noting that both novels emphasize the city's meaninglessness.

  Pynchon himself may have also noticed Gibson's homage to *The Crying of Lot 49*. As if to return the compliment, he includes enough allusions to information technology, gaming, hacking, web design, and especially virtual reality in his later novel, *Bleeding Edge*, that Michael Jarvis remarks, "Reading *Bleeding Edge* feels at times very much like reading a pendant to William Gibson's recent 'Blue Ant' trilogy (*Pattern Recognition, Spook Country, Zero History*), works in which the chronological present of the in-touch early adopter comes to resemble a science-fictional future." Jarvis goes on to point out, however, that *Bleeding Edge*, unlike the Blue Ant trilogy, qualifies as historical fiction. See Michael Jarvis, "Pynchon's Deep Web," review of *Bleeding Edge,* by Thomas Pynchon, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Sept. 10, 2013, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/pynchons-deep-web/.

[5] Gibson explicitly alludes to Pynchon's novel in *Pattern Recognition* when a collector of vintage calculators admits to being fond of *Konvolut*, "the German word for auction lot," because it suggests entanglement (216).

are plotting against her. By focusing on such nebulous fears, not only does *Pattern Recognition* refer to *The Crying of Lot 49*, but both novels recall an earlier genre that preceded detective fiction altogether.

1

The gothic, a popular narrative tradition that first appeared in the late eighteenth century, is "a literature of fear and nightmare which shows special interest in the underside of humanity: the evil within the psyche and the disintegration of subjectivity."[6] Typically, it features ancient dwellings, brooding villains, persecuted heroines, supernatural occurrences, familial curses, and shadowy secrets from the past that haunt the present. It was the direct antecedent of detective fiction, as the setting of the very first detective story—an antique mansion where Edgar Allan Poe's protagonist, the eccentric C. Auguste Dupin, resides in artificial darkness—clearly suggests.[7] Poe was well versed in gothic devices, tropes, and themes. "The Man of the Crowd," which immediately preceded that initial detective story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," even features a narrator who cannot solve "the hideousness of mysteries that do not suffer themselves to be revealed," despite approaching them as a detective. Poe's later tales of ratiocination systematically explain such enigmas, however.[8]

Whether or not those mysteries *could* be elucidated had been an issue in gothic literature from the beginning. Positions on this question diverged according to the author's gender. The male gothic was typified by Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, which anticipated contemporary horror by emphasizing blood, violence, and physical disgust.[9] The female gothic was

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[6] *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (New York: Routledge, 2010), 208–209. In this essay, I focus on gothic fiction rather than on other cultural manifestations of the gothic.

[7] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), in *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 397–431. Gothic settings appear in later detective stories, too, from the stately homes of the Golden Age to the Sternwood mansion (with its stained-glass window depicting a medieval quest) in Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939; New York: Vintage, 1998). On other links between these two genres, see Catherine Spooner, "Crime and the Gothic," in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Charles Szepka and Lee Horsley (Chichester: Wiley, 2010), 245–257.

[8] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), in *Poetry and Tales*, 388.

[9] On the male and female traditions, see Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 99–107.

exemplified by Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which focused instead on feelings of inexplicable terror. Radcliffe was especially interested in whether such dread could be justified by reality. Walter Scott was the first to notice that her novels' endings often disclose natural causes for mysterious incidents in the plot—a technique, dubbed "the explained supernatural," which he found anticlimactic.[10] Catherine Spooner argues persuasively that this technique anticipates the kind of dénouement found in detective fiction.[11] Radcliffe's explanations, however, are always provided by an omniscient narrator, not deduced by the protagonist. The heroines themselves remain unable to understand the strange phenomena they encounter; instead, like investigators in metaphysical detective stories, they project their own uneasiness onto the world around them.

Radcliffe's posthumously published essay, "On the Supernatural in Poetry," contrasts the amorphous psychological dread evoked by such literature with the explicit horror aroused by Walpole's or Lewis's novels. "Terror and horror are so far opposite," she declares, "that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the second contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them."[12] The reason for this disparity, Radcliffe implies, is that the mind can find no rational basis for its sense of foreboding: "where lies the great difference between terror and horror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, which accompanies the first, regarding the dreaded evil?"[13] Terror produces a sublime effect precisely because it is inexplicable, forcing the mind to devise various scenarios to justify this feeling although it is unable to confirm any of them.[14] Indeed, the female gothic usually features a heroine who discovers evidence of sinister machinations against her, but whom no

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[10] Walter Scott, *Lives of the Novelists*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Carey and Lea, 1825), 224.

[11] Spooner, "Crime and the Gothic," 248.

[12] Ann Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural in Poetry," *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 16, no. 1 (1826): 149. As Devendra Varma explains, "Terror creates an intangible atmosphere of spiritual psychic dread, a certain superstitious shudder at the other world. Horror resorts to a ruder presentation of the macabre: by an exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting, against a far more terrible background of spiritual gloom"; Devendra P. Varma, *The Gothic Flame* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), 130.

[13] Radcliffe, "On the Supernatural," 150.

[14] The "sublime" inspires awe because it is ineffable, irrational, even uncanny; see Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

one believes. Unable to verify the pattern that she has deduced, she cannot help doubting her sensations as well as her sanity.

Oedipa and Cayce experience this same terror in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Pattern Recognition*. Traces of the gothic persist within the detective story, after all, like secrets from its past that no obsession with logic, methodology, and intellect can completely suppress. Even the terms "mystery" and "mystery novel," often used as synonyms for detective fiction, hint at the earlier genre's influence. In this essay, I argue that the female gothic's shadowy fears re-emerge in metaphysical detective fiction—especially in both Pynchon's exemplary novel, teeming with paranoid delusions typical of the Cold War and the counterculture, and the first volume of Gibson's Blue Ant trilogy, which bristles with threats from global syndicates, paramilitary forces, viral marketing, and domestic surveillance.

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The gothic heroine's plight, in particular, anticipates the dilemmas confronting Oedipa and Cayce. In every instance—from *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to variations such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre,* Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw,* or Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*; formulaic bestsellers like Victoria Holt's *Menfreya in the Morning*; and postmodernist revisions like Atwood's *Lady Oracle*—the protagonist of a female gothic pieces together evidence of a conspiracy against her. Other characters dismiss her fears, leading her to doubt her perceptions and her judgment. The plot she discerns does turn out, in fact, to be a delusion—usually because, like the investigators in many metaphysical detective stories, she expects actual mysteries to resemble those in books. Yet while her conclusions may be mistaken, she is indeed in danger.[15]

David Punter—who in 1980 described *Gravity's Rainbow* as "Gothic for our time, in that its apparatus is modern, its fictional tactics self-consciously and

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[15] The heroine's perception of such plots has been variously labeled as hysterical, masochistic, passive-aggressive, or proto-feminist. See, for example, Andrew Smith and Diana Wallace, "The Female Gothic: Then and Now," *Gothic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2004): 1–7; Michele Massé, *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

often ironically modernist"—may have been the first to identify gothic elements in Pynchon's fiction.[16] Since then, other critics have noted that Pynchon's novels often parody the gothic, among several other popular narrative genres, either by alluding to the urban gothic, set in a nightmare post-industrial city,[17] or by including aspects of the male gothic such as monstrosity and horror.[18] No one has noticed, however, that *The Crying of Lot 49* depicts Oedipa's detective quest in ways that evoke the *female* gothic.[19]

One characteristic of this genre, for example, is that gothic heroines tend to travel, either roaming through wild and picturesque countryside or exploring tunnels, attics, and hidden chambers in gloomy old buildings.[20] Accordingly, Pynchon sets his sleuth adrift in an unfamiliar place: the city of San Narciso, which gives her the impression, when she first arrives, that "a revelation [. . .] trembled just past the threshold of her understanding" (24). Throughout the novel, Oedipa moves from one place to another: the Echo Courts Motel, a bar called The Scope, an island, a theater presenting Richard Wharfinger's *The Courier's Tragedy*, an aerospace corporation, a bookstore, a nursing home, a publishing house, the Berkeley campus. She spends an entire night meandering around San Francisco, visiting a gay bar, an all-night restaurant, a laundromat, Golden Gate Park, the airport, and other places before following a stranger on foot "for hours along streets whose names she never knew," boarding

[16]   David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions 1765 to the Present Day* (1980), rev. ed., 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2013), vol. 2: *The Modern Gothic*, 134.

[17]   For a brief reference to *The Crying of Lot 49* in the context of urban gothic, see Laura Marcus, "Detection and Literary Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 248.

[18]   See, for example, Thomas Moore, *The Style of Connectedness:* Gravity's Rainbow *and Thomas Pynchon* (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 1987), 227; Allan Lloyd-Smith, "Postmodernism/Gothicism," in *Modern Gothic: A Reader*, ed. Victor Sage and Allan Lloyd-Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 2006), 6–20; and Jerrold E. Hogle, "Modernity and the Proliferation of the Gothic," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–19.

[19]   The closest acknowledgment of its influence is a description of *The Crying of Lot 49* as "a controlled exercise in hysteria"; Allan Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004), 62.

[20]   Ellen Moers, "Traveling Heroinism: Gothic for Heroines," in *Literary Women* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 122–140.

a random bus, and then ending back where she started (130). The changing locations create a vertiginous effect. During her wanderings, moreover, Oedipa keeps finding evidence—often as graffiti scrawled on bathroom walls, fogged-up windows, or sidewalks—of an underground communication system called the Tristero, apparently used by countless networks of alienated individuals. Discovering what it means becomes her quest.

Like a gothic heroine, however, Oedipa lacks trustworthy male guidance. The plot commences with her discovery that she has been named executor of the estate of an ex-boyfriend, "one Pierce Inverarity, a California real estate mogul who had once lost two million dollars in his spare time but still had assets numerous and tangled enough to make the job of sorting it all out more than honorary" (9). Neither Oedipa's depressed husband nor her paranoid attorney offers any help. Nor does her co-executor, a lawyer more interested in seducing her than in settling the estate. From the moment they meet, in fact, Oedipa suspects him of engineering "an elaborate, seduction, *plot*," one that might even involve paying the local television station to run a movie in which he starred as a child (33). She feels "rattled," "conned" (34), and "more and more angry" as his seduction proceeds (35). Female gothic heroines often suspect that men who claim to protect them are actually exploiting them, so much so that Joanna Russ titled her classic essay on this genre "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband." Indeed, most of the novel's male characters either abandon Oedipa or betray her. At one point she muses, "They are stripping away, one by one, my men," and summarizes their fates: her psychoanalyst goes mad; her husband turns on to LSD; her co-executor elopes with a teenager; and the director of *The Courier's Tragedy,* her "best guide" to the Tristero, kills himself (153). The first to forsake her, however, is Pierce, who serves as the novel's Byronic hero—a literary archetype, partly derived from a character in Radcliffe's *The Italian,* that appears again and again in the female gothic. Accordingly, Pierce is a powerful, charismatic male figure with ambiguous motives. Every manifestation of the Tristero that Oedipa discovers leads back to his estate. She even speculates that he may have concocted, or perpetrated, its existence in order to frighten her, trying "to survive death, as a

paranoia; as a pure conspiracy against someone he loved" (179). This disturbing dynamic reappears in Pynchon's later novel, *Bleeding Edge*, where the female detective becomes sexually and emotionally involved with an even more sinister male figure—a CIA agent, assassin, and torturer whom she nevertheless pities, and whose death plays an important role in that novel's structure as well.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Pynchon's strategy for conveying Oedipa's thoughts also recalls the female gothic. Because narrating a detective story is a delicate matter, authors have experimented with various techniques, including Poe's pioneering use of a first-person observer, Agatha Christie's subversion of this same device in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* Dashiell Hammett's external third-person narration of *The Maltese Falcon,* and the sardonic first-person voice that Raymond Chandler introduces in *The Big Sleep.* Metaphysical detective stories often employ deceptive first-person narration like Christie's. Pynchon, however, uses a third-person narrator with access only to Oedipa's consciousness, as he also does in *Bleeding Edge*. Such narration is more typical of the female gothic, which, as Anne Williams explains, "generates suspense through the limitations imposed by the chosen point of view; we share the heroine's often mistaken perceptions and her ignorance."[21]

This technique places readers of *The Crying of Lot 49* in the same position as the protagonist, unable to determine whether the Tristero "did exist, in its own right," or "was being presumed, perhaps fantasized by Oedipa" (109). In other words, she faces the gothic heroine's archetypal dilemma: has she discovered evidence of a sinister plot against her, or has she simply imagined it? The anonymous narrator warns readers, in fact, that Oedipa—rather like Catherine Moreland in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*—has often viewed her own life in terms of just this kind of gothic text, picturing herself as "a captive maiden" who is trapped by "magic, anonymous and malignant, visited on her from outside and for no reason at all," and with no means to comprehend it but "fear and female cunning" (21). Now, as she tries to settle Pierce's estate, Oedipa responds to "clues,

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[21] Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 102.

announcements, intimations" of the Tristero's possible existence in the same fash-
ion (95). Pynchon's novel implies that this predicament amounts to paranoia—a
condition also evoked by other characters' delusions and by references to a band
called "The Paranoids" (27), to "the true paranoid" (128–29), and to "relative para-
noia" (136). *Bleeding Edge* casts its female investigator, and its readers, in a similar
situation. Although Maxine is shrewder and brasher than Oedipa, telling a client
early in the novel that "paranoia's the garlic in life's kitchen, right, you can never
have too much," she too worries about invisible pursuers, anonymous commu-
nications, and secret intentions. At one point, Maxine even compares herself to
the quintessential gothic heroine, the inquisitive young bride who finds herself
trapped inside "Bluebeard's Castle."[22]

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa's amateur detection is hindered by her inability
to confirm such suspicions. When she asks the director of *The Courier's Tragedy*
why his production mentioned the Tristero, for example, he refuses to explain,
warning that she "could put together clues, develop a thesis, or several," "waste
[her] life that way and never touch the truth" (80). Oedipa nevertheless tries to
"project a world" by connecting pieces of ambiguous evidence, even though in
the process she seems to "bring something of herself" to the mystery (82, 90).
Ultimately, she devises four "symmetrical" explanations for her data, but realizes
that "Either way, they'll call it paranoia. They." Maybe the Tristero is real, she tells
herself. "Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you [. . .]
so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you are
fantasying some such plot" (171). At the end of the novel, she still cannot decide
whether there is "[a]nother mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none. Either
Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero" (182). This
profound indeterminacy, which utterly undermines her sense of reality, resembles
nothing so much as the sublime obscurities of terror that Radcliffe identified with
the female gothic.

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[22] Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 11, 193. On "Bluebeard" as anticipating and epito-
mizing gothic novels, see Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 38–48.

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Gibson's novel is influenced by this tradition as well.[23] From the very beginning of *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce, like Oedipa, finds herself enmeshed in the same shadowy dread that Radcliffe described. In the opening paragraph, she is afflicted with jet lag, which she experiences as "the dire and ever-circling wolves of disrupted circadian rhythm," and as separation from her soul, now "leagues behind her, being reeled in on some ghostly umbilical down the vanished wake of the plane that brought her here" (1, 2). Although her jet lag passes, Cayce also suffers from an odd anxiety disorder resembling Oedipa's heightened sensitivity to the Tristero, which the narrator of *The Crying of Lot 49* compares to the onset of an epileptic seizure (95). More specifically, Cayce panics whenever she encounters overexposed brand names, emblems, and advertising icons like the Michelin Man. She speculates about how anonymous Asian workers might be affected by a logo they sew onto clothing: "Would it work its way into their dreams, eventually? Would their children chalk it in doorways before they knew its meaning as a trademark?" (13).[24] She becomes ill after seeing a display of Tommy Hilfiger fashions, since his clothes, imitations of Ralph Lauren's, are "simulacra of simulacra of simulacra" (18). On another occasion, she stares at a triptych of "big-eyed manga girls," their almost translucent images conveying "the uneasy hallucinatory suggestion of panic about to break through" (57).[25] Ironically, this "morbid and sometimes violent reactivity to the semiotics of the marketplace" is the very thing enabling Cayce to succeed as a coolhunter who can spot popular trends in advance (2).[26]

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[23] Some critics call Gibson's novels "techno-gothic" or "cyber-gothic"; see Lloyd-Smith, *American Gothic*, 62. Others analyze his monstrous bodies and disturbing images; see Tatiana G. Rapatzikou, *Gothic Motifs in the Fiction of William Gibson* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004). No one has noticed aspects of the female gothic in his work, however.

[24] This ambiguous logo chalked on doorways may allude to the symbol of the muted post horn that appears on urban surfaces throughout *The Crying of Lot 49*.

[25] This triptych, and its effect on Cayce, alludes to a similar triptych by Remedios Varo—featuring girls with "heart-shaped faces" and "huge eyes"—that makes Oedipa weep in *The Crying of Lot 49* (21).

[26] Whereas Oedipa attends Tupperware parties and listens to Muzak while shopping, Cayce advises clients on street fashion, consumer trends, and marketing; as a detective, she reads signs of the future instead of clues from the past. Pynchon himself further revises the idea of a housewife detective in

Cayce's phobic response to branding also explains her obsession with the fresh, timeless images in "the footage," snippets of exquisite moviemaking anonymously released onto the internet. Like the Tristero in Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*, "the footage has a way of cutting across boundaries, transgressing the accustomed order of things" (20). Its haunting images are forwarded as email attachments, analyzed on discussion boards, plastered onto city walls. It attracts followers around the globe, to the point that they "comprise the first true freemasonry of the new century" (20). It generates so much speculation about its provenance that the "footageheads" form factions, including "Completists," who believe the snippets come from a completed film, and "Progressives," who believe they are a work in progress (49).[27] Just as Oedipa tracks the Tristero, then, so Cayce follows the footage.[28] Indeed, she is hired by Hubertus Bigend—who runs the Blue Ant advertising agency and is intrigued by the footage's marketing possibilities—to find its source. Although she distrusts Bigend, she takes the job because she cares deeply about the footage.

Cayce's pursuit of the elusive filmmaker, which takes up most of the novel, parallels Oedipa's search for the Tristero, including encounters with specific individuals.[29] Just as Oedipa wanders along the California coast, so Cayce travels the globe

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Bleeding Edge. Maxine Tarnow, going undercover at a strip club, tells the owner she needs to audition that day instead of on MILF Night because "Tuesday's my Tupperware party" (220). On stage, she "improvise[s] a MILF-night routine" while scanning the clientele for her suspect, even "taking from her purse a dispenser of Handi Wipes and with housewifely thoroughness disinfecting the pole, slowly fondling it up and down while casting demure glances along the bar" (221).

[27] These factions recall the various groups that communicate via *The Crying of Lot 49*'s W.A.S.T.E. network.

[28] Both detectives discover alternative modes of discourse that offer liberating possibilities, even as they expose communication's inherent instability. Just as Oedipa discovers a trail of muted post horns and forged stamps, so Cayce learns how electronic communication is susceptible to faked identities and hacked computers. Just as Oedipa finds mass media alienating—as when her husband calls her "Edna" in a radio interview, explaining that he's allowing for distortion on the audiotape (139)—so Cayce notices how email correspondents "sound" different on a telephone (148–49). On flawed communication in these two novels and other metaphysical detective stories, see my essay on "Crime and Postmodernist Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. Catherine R. Nickerson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 163–77.

[29] Oedipa meets Mike Fallopian, a paranoid conservative, Emory Bortz, a literary historian, and Genghis Cohen, a philatelist, who help her in her quest; similarly, Cayce interacts with Hobbs Baranov, a paranoid ex-spy, Voytek Biroshak, a Pole who makes sculptures from old computers, and Taki, a lovesick

from New York to London to Tokyo to Moscow. Like Oedipa, Cayce is hindered by untrustworthy men. She too works with a male partner—a computer specialist hired by Bigend to discover the footage's encryption—who seduces and deceives her. (Among other things, he bugs her phone and laptop.) She also contends with Bigend himself—a virtually omnipotent entrepreneur, like Pierce in *The Crying of Lot 49*, who plays a similar role in this novel as a charismatic Byronic hero with dubious motives. Cayce has been abandoned in a more fundamental way, however. Like many gothic heroines—including Emily St. Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*—she is an orphan. Her father, a retired Cold War security expert, mysteriously vanished on 9/11; like Pierce, he may have died or simply chosen to disappear. Just as Oedipa's pursuit of the Tristero is inseparable from her role as Pierce's executor, so Cayce's quest for the footage reflects her attempt to learn what happened to her father. Indeed, she first discovers the footage immediately after his disappearance. Like *The Crying of Lot 49*, then, *Pattern Recognition* combines a detective plot with an elegiac narrative. In both cases, the heroine's investigation follows from (and substitutes for) her efforts to remember, comprehend, and mourn the missing man.

As in a female gothic novel, Cayce's quest is accompanied by suspicions that someone—not unlike the mysterious "They" whom Oedipa invokes—is plotting against her. *Pattern Recognition* recounts her growing trepidation as her clothes are damaged, her apartment invaded, her telephone used, her email read, her computer borrowed (by an intruder who visits a site proclaiming "SEE ASIAN SLUTS GET WHAT THEY DESERVE!"), and her body attacked (40). Even worse, someone knows about her terror of commercial mascots, especially the Michelin Man, and uses it to frighten her. Cayce's dread and panic are closely linked to her role as detective. (The trilogy's second and third volumes feature a similar protagonist engaged in similar quests, who pictures her own inchoate fears in the form of the Mongolian Death

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Japanese game designer who reveals the footage's encryption. Just as Oedipa encounters the Nefastis machine—which supposedly runs on telepathic communication with Maxwell's Demon—so Cayce discovers the first handheld calculator, which operates "mechanically, employing neither electricity nor electronic components" (29).

Worm, "a sort of mascot of [her] anxiety").[30] Cayce's inability to resolve such misgivings recalls earlier gothic heroines who cannot decide whether someone is plotting against them, or whether they are imagining it. At first she does not want to believe that somebody broke into her apartment, for example: "It seems bizarre, and impossible, and yet horribly, if barely, possible. Or is it all too very possible?" (42). Once Cayce convinces herself it did happen, she realizes that in trying to confirm her suspicions—by pressing "redial" on her telephone and visiting a strange website in her browser history—she has erased the only evidence of an intruder.

Gibson emphasizes his detective's plight, as Pynchon does, by using third-person narration limited to her consciousness, in the manner of the female gothic. Indeed, *Pattern Recognition* conveys an even greater feeling of uncertainty because, like Pynchon's later novel *Bleeding Edge*, it is told in the present tense, without any retrospective frame. Here, too, such narration confronts readers with the same predicament as the protagonist: perceiving a pattern, but not knowing whether it is real or one's own projection. As the title *Pattern Recognition* suggests, Gibson considers this condition in terms of how the brain processes data, rather than in terms of mental illness. Pattern recognition is a branch of cognitive science; Gibson uses it as an overarching metaphor throughout his narrative, just as Pynchon uses paranoia in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Early in Gibson's novel, Bigend remarks that "Homo sapiens are all about pattern recognition" (23); he also explains that noticing patterns is the only way humans can deal with a volatile present (59). The term usually refers to the process of discerning a pattern, not to whether or not one exists.[31] Later,

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[30] Gibson, *Spook Country* (2007; New York: Berkeley Books, 2008), 453. Hollis Henry, a former rock singer, is also hired by Bigend to track something down and finds the experience disturbing. In the last novel of the Blue Ant trilogy, Cayce herself tells Hollis that their situations were remarkably similar: "Identical arrangement. [. . .] There was something he wanted, the missing piece of a puzzle, and he talked me into finding it"; see William Gibson, *Zero History* (2010; New York: Berkley Books, 2011), 335. In Hollis's case, the assignment drives her to a darkened bedroom for hours, overwhelmed by "a sudden stab of weird fear," a sense of being enmeshed in "something that might be at once hugely and esoterically dangerous." Eventually, curiosity induces her to pursue the mystery: "Whatever this was that Bigend was involved in, she thought, it was deep. Deep and possibly central. To something, she couldn't yet know what"; Gibson, *Spook Country*, 227, 254.

[31] On the significance of pattern recognition in human evolution, see Brian Boyd, "The Art of Literature and the Science of Literature," *American Scholar* 77 (2008): 118–127.

however, Cayce remembers that her father once defined faulty pattern recognition as "apophenia": "the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things" (117), or, more succinctly, "an illusion of meaningfulness" (118). Just as Oedipa worries about becoming paranoid, so Cayce is wary of experiencing apophenia like her mother, who believes in Electronic Voice Phenomena.[32] Although such misguided reasoning is endemic among characters in both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Pattern Recognition*, it seems to threaten the female protagonists in particular.[33]

Significantly, this same faulty thinking occurs in every metaphysical detective story. As Patricia Merivale and I explain in *Detecting Texts*, metaphysical investigators are always confounded by "the ambiguity, ubiquity, eerie meaningfulness, or sheer meaninglessness of clues and evidence."[34] They have trouble distinguishing a mystery's actual solution—if it even exists—from their subjective interpretation of data. In other words, their perceptions and projections come between them and the "truth," whatever that might be. This trope may be the most distinctive aspect of metaphysical detective stories. I argue, however, that it originated in the female gothic.

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Although Oedipa's and Cayce's quests are similar, they conclude differently. In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa never finds the certainty she seeks—at least, not within the novel, which ends shortly before the titular auction. In the final pages, she acknowledges that she may never solve the mystery, let alone determine whether the Tristero exists. Although Oedipa's paranoia evokes the ambiguous terrors of the female gothic, *The Crying of Lot 49* violates that tradition by refusing to resolve matters. Instead, it conforms to the practice of metaphysical detective stories, which emphasize "the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure

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[32] Cayce's mother believes that random noises on blank audiotapes are "the voices of the dead," reporting her findings via email. Cayce is so exasperated by "the banal, inchoate, utterly baffling nature of the supposed messages"—especially now that her mother claims they contain warnings from her father—that she deletes any email from her mother without reading it (192).

[33] Pierce, Bigend, and Cayce's father, however, are all immune to apophenia and able to observe or exploit it in others.

[34] Merivale and Sweeney, "The Game's Afoot," 8.

to the investigation."[35] Indeed, with its self-reflexive references to a mysterious "book bidder" who may represent the author (175); its intimations of apocalypse (the auctioneer raises his arms like "a descending angel"); its circular structure, whereby the last sentence, in which Oedipa awaits "the crying of lot 49," returns readers to the title page (183); its withholding of any explanation; and its insinuation that readers should now take the detective's place, trying to decipher Pynchon's text just as she tried to fathom the Tristero—the novel's ending seems to illustrate all the possible ways of concluding a metaphysical detective story.

In *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce experiences the same hermeneutic anxiety. She remembers her father's warning that unless you allowed for the possibility of coincidence, you were "probably well into apophenia, each thing then perceived as part of an overarching conspiracy. And while comforting yourself with the symmetry of it all, he'd believed, you stood all too real a chance of missing the genuine threat, which was invariably less symmetrical, less perfect" (304). These comments clearly allude to Oedipa's "symmetrical" explanations of the Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Cayce's father cautions, however, that "the actual conspiracy is not so often about us," but about something "larger" (352). Gibson thus suggests, as Pynchon does, that the heroine's predicament involves far deeper mysteries than her own well-being.

Despite its similar emphasis on the protagonist's fearful projections, the ending of Gibson's novel is quite different—so much so that one might ask whether *Pattern Recognition* is a metaphysical detective story after all, or instead a blending of metaphysical detection with several other genres, including the female gothic. Whereas Oedipa discovers no answers in *The Crying of Lot 49*, but only more questions (such as whether or not she is pregnant), Cayce finds exactly what she seeks. The elusive filmmaker turns out to be Nora Volkova, a Russian woman who stopped speaking after being injured by the bomb that killed her parents, leaving a fragment embedded so deeply in her skull that it cannot be removed. This neurological trauma is the source as well as the subject of her art. Nora composes the footage by editing scraps of found video, a process that began with images on a security camera glimpsed

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[35] Ibid., 8.

from her hospital bed. These cinematic scenes map an imaginary city formed like the letter "T"—perhaps an allusion to Pynchon's Tristero—which is the same shape as the fragment in her brain. Cayce not only discovers Nora's identity but even watches her silently working, indifferent to anything but the exquisite images she constructs. The process by which Nora turns her pain into art resembles Cayce's own mourning for her father, which is also resolved in the ending—unlike Oedipa's attempts to understand either Pierce's intentions or his legacy in Pynchon's novel. A secret agent whom Cayce meets during her quest provides enough information about her father's whereabouts on 9/11 that she can finally accept his death, "[h]is very missingness becoming, somehow, him" (362).

In addition to explaining the very mysteries—the heroine's pursuit of an alternate form of discourse, and her attempt to comprehend a man's death—that remain unresolved in *The Crying of Lot 49*, Gibson also provides a melodramatic climax characteristic of the female gothic. Cayce is drugged, abducted, and imprisoned in an asylum, the same fate suffered by her predecessors in tales like Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* or Louisa May Alcott's "A Whisper in the Dark." She escapes, but then almost dies of thirst, wandering alone through the wilds of Siberia. It turns out, however, that Cayce had not actually been in danger, in keeping with the tradition of the gothic heroine's unfounded fears: she had already been rescued, and her apparent prison was a sanitarium where she had been placed until she could recover. Cayce's second rescue, in the Siberian wasteland, coincides with a spiritual breakdown in which her father's voice, whether real or imagined, keeps her alive until she is saved by a man whom she later marries. This episode mirrors the typical climax of a female gothic novel, as Williams describes it: the heroine "experiences a rebirth. [. . .] Indeed, she is often almost literally reborn, rescued at the climax from the life-threatening danger of being locked up, walled in, or otherwise made to disappear."[36]

Whereas Oedipa has lost "all [her] men" by the end of Pynchon's novel (153), Cayce finds her future husband—another follower of the footage—after he rescues her from the threat of such oblivion. In the novel's last line, "She kisses his sleeping back and

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[36] Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 103–104.

falls asleep" (367). Other characters also form romantic or business partnerships, as revealed in a deliberately old-fashioned final chapter, titled "Mail," in which assorted letters and electronic messages resolve any remaining storylines. Completing this sense of closure, it turns out that Cayce has lost her extreme sensitivity to advertising and therefore her ability to work as a coolhunter. *Pattern Recognition* concludes, in other words, like a romance, with problems settled, questions answered, and major characters paired off. It thus conforms to the female gothic tradition, which "demands a happy ending, the conventional marriage of Western comedy."[37] Pynchon's novel *Bleeding Edge* also ends on a surprisingly domestic, indeed maternal, note.[38] Even so, these novels' endings still gesture toward unfathomable mysteries. On the last page of *Pattern Recognition*, for example, Cayce finds herself participating in an excavation of the battlefield at Stalingrad, "her face streaked with tears [. . .] weeping for her century, though whether the one past or the one present she doesn't know" (367).

The eventual conclusion of Gibson's Blue Ant trilogy, of which *Pattern Recognition* was the first installment, also evokes the female gothic. *Zero History*, the last novel, ties up any loose ends from the first two (including the fate of Cayce, who has become a wife, mother, and clothing designer).[39] Although offering yet another romantic resolution, it too concludes with a sense of uneasiness. Hollis, who plays the same role as Cayce in the first novel, now sleeps snugly with *her* lover, who has not only returned from almost certain death but even proposed marriage to her a few pages earlier. Hollis's sleep, however, is disturbed by a nightmare: "at the far end of a vast,

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[37] Ibid., 103.

[38] As the novel draws to a close, two misfits whom Maxine introduced to each other, and who share a room in her home after being displaced by 9/11, tell her they are moving to Brooklyn, where they will live "together" and "separately"—a "Geek thing," one explains; Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*, 387. The villain's wife, a Persephone figure, escapes his grasp and reunites with the mother from whom she was alienated for years. Maxine's estranged husband returns home, "rediscovering his quasi-ex-wife as an object of lust" (416). Maxine is a mother, too—indeed, one of the few female literary detectives with children—and on the last page her sons set out for school alone, apparently for the first time. This sense of ambiguous domesticity persists in the novel's final words, which can be read as either banal or ominous: "Neither looks back. She can watch them into the elevator at least" (477).

[39] Readers learn, for example, that Bigend eventually created a "viral pitchman platform [. . .] based on pieces of anonymous footage being posted on the Net"; Gibson, *Spook Country*, 139.

perhaps endless room, in a pool of warm light, a figure, seated, in a suit of Klein Blue. As it turns, pale fur, muzzle rouged, the wooden painted teeth—."[40] This grotesque figure blends the human form of Bigend in his trademark suit—Cayce's and Hollis's ex-employer, whose monstrous appetite for knowledge and power expands over the course of the trilogy—with a stuffed, moth-eaten, "sinisterly festive" ferret on display in the lobby of Hollis's hotel.[41] The combination suggests some rough beast slouching toward the future. The last sentence of *Zero History* returns abruptly from this dream to reality: "She wakes beside Garreth's slow breathing, in their darkened room, the sheets against her skin."[42] Yet although her nightmare has ended, Hollis is left to brood over it alone in the dark, like any gothic heroine gripped by the vague fears she has imagined.

5

Oedipa Maas and Cayce Pollard are among the few female investigators to appear in metaphysical detective stories. In both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Pattern Recognition*, however, the woman's position as detective seems to conjure up another genre altogether: the female gothic, which emphasizes women's feelings of being exploited, seduced, persecuted, abandoned, and disbelieved. This phenomenon suggests a tendency in such narrative genres to identify women as victims—and hysterical victims, at that—even if they are assigned roles as detectives. At the same time, it links postmodernist female sleuths with earlier gothic heroines who also gathered ambiguous evidence, organized it into a coherent pattern, and speculated about its meaning. All of these affinities underscore the gothic's lingering influence on detective fiction.

More important, in both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Pattern Recognition*, as in the female gothic more generally, women's attempts to solve the mysteries confronting them are riddled with panic and uncertainty. Indeed, the heroine's predicament—perceiving a plot, but not knowing whether she has imagined it—is the same

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[40] Gibson, *Zero History*, 404.

[41] Ibid., 4.

[42] Ibid., 404. This final one-paragraph sentence echoes the last paragraph of *Pattern Recognition*: "She kisses his sleeping back and falls asleep" (367).

predicament experienced, to some extent, by the protagonist of any metaphysical detective story. Even male detectives like Borges's Inspector Lönnrot, Eco's William of Baskerville, and Auster's Daniel Quinn find it difficult to separate themselves from the mental labyrinths in which they wander. Each of these men is eventually defeated, and figuratively unmanned, suggesting that metaphysical detective stories may draw upon elements of the female gothic in order to mock the ideology of masculinity in classic, Golden Age, and hard-boiled detective fiction. Although Oedipa and Cayce are notable for their disoriented detection, then, it turns out that the protagonist of every metaphysical detective story, whether male or female, also experiences the shadowy fears and projections that afflict gothic heroines. Readers of these texts inevitably encounter such sublime terror, too.

Someday, I hope, the metaphysical detective story will feature more female authors, characters, and protagonists. In the meantime, it continues to manifest the profound influence of a genre inherently associated with women.[43]

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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[43] An earlier version of this essay appears in French as "Traces gothiques dans le roman policier métaphysique: la lumière dans *Vente à la criée du lot 49* de Pynchon et *Identification des schémas* de Gibson," trans. Stéphane Bouquet, in *Le Thriller métaphysique d'Edgar Allan Poe à nos jours,* ed. Antoine Dechêne and Michel Delville (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2016), 91–106. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Orbit: Writing Around Pynchon* for several suggestions that helped to shape the present version.

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