

The Economics of Beauty in “The Painter of Modern Life” and *Pattern Recognition*
by Karen Rustad

In his essay “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire describes the ideal modern man—the *flâneur*—as one who “set[s] up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite” (9). Baudelaire lauds the *flâneur* for his ability to keep up with the quickening pace of life as society underwent the upheavals of industrialization and modernization. In a much later work, William Gibson’s 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition* follows a post-industrial *flâneur* figure, or rather *flâneuse*: Gibson’s heroine Cayce Pollard. Instead of exhibiting the joy and vitality of Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, however, Cayce follows the trends dispassionately and finds the hectic tempo of her life to be alienating and disturbing. As capitalism speeds up the pace of passing fashions and trends, alienation and the search for the eternal supersede the glamour of transient aesthetics but not the capitalist system itself.

Baudelaire’s essay recognizes both timeless and temporal components to the concept of beauty, but puts greater emphasis on the transitory. Baudelaire explains his view of beauty in “The Painter of Modern Life”: “Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element...and of a relative, circumstantial element,...the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions” (Baudelaire 3). Baudelaire recognizes that beauty has a universal, timeless aspect to it. However, in his essay he clearly revels most in the temporal. He declares that humans would be unable to interface with eternal beauty without it being partially rooted in time because it “would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation, neither adapted nor suited to human nature” (3). Perhaps by way of proving his own argument, Baudelaire does not even try to specify the nature of this “eternal

beauty,” but instead focuses on its temporal trappings (through his extended example of Monsieur G’s experience) for most of the essay. Baudelaire thus identifies transience as the modern age’s ideal aesthetic standard, while paying mere lip service to eternal beauty.

Baudelaire’s aesthetics reflect the influence of modern Western society’s emerging capitalist development. The European economy during Baudelaire’s time rode the wave of the industrial revolution as technology advancements and increasing urbanization continued to change citizens’ daily lives. The speed at which daily life progressed increased with the frenzied whirr of new machines in factories. There were more products to buy, more goods to sell, more resources to exploit, and more ideas about how to make a profit. This robust economy also created a burgeoning bourgeoisie, known also as the “leisure class.” Both these economic dynamics created Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, a cosmopolitan “passionate spectator” who observed daily life invisibly from within the milling, busy crowd (Baudelaire 9). The *flâneur* was exclusively an upper-class figure; members of the lower class did not have the leisure time to freely wander through parks, boulevards, and *café-concerts* during the daytime. The modern aesthetic, embodied by the *flâneur*, also valued the transience of beauty and fashion as a sign of the vitality and productivity of modern, urban life. Through artwork such as that as Baudelaire’s “Monsieur G,” the *flâneur* presented impressions of fleeting urban scenes in sketches and watercolors, allowing others to observe “[i]f a fashion or the cut of a garment has been slightly modified, if bows and curls have been supplanted by cockades”; at the same time, the *flâneur* was himself a public, transitory figure—there for a moment, then gone (11). The economic and social changes engendered by

industrialization thus shifted Western society's concept of beauty from the timelessness of classical art to the glamour of the fashion plate.

This aesthetic of transience is taken to the extreme in the postmodern, post-industrial era as portrayed in Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*. The strong capitalist economy that created modernist conceptions of beauty requires constant growth in order to retain and attract investors. Thus, capitalism seeks to discover and create new markets, increase productivity, and follow trends as perfectly as possible. Cayce's role as a professional *flâneuse* fits into this second, post-industrial stage of capitalism as she collects information telling companies what goods to produce and how to make people want to buy them. The economy in which she works operates permanently on high gear as she tracks the swift course of the "cruel boot of fashion" (Katz). Her job moves so quickly that Cayce's psyche cannot keep up as she experiences "soul-delay" at each step of her intercontinental journey (Gibson 143). The ubiquity of brand names and marketing that results from corporations trying to maximize sales makes the degree of image intake previously reserved for the leisure class available at all economic levels. Cayce encounters visual marketing culture everywhere she goes, from Tommy Hilfiger displays in a London mall to a "BEAUTY BRAIN'S FABULOUS FANNY" sign in Tokyo's Sleepless Castle district. Even the children of poor Asian sweatshop workers are familiar with the logos of transnational corporations, "chalk[ing them] in doorways before they knew [their] meaning as a trademark" (12). With logos appearing everywhere and advertising campaigns coming and going, postmodern society proves to be in fact a hypermodern society, fulfilling the modernist ideal of transience and vitality far beyond anyone of Baudelaire's era could have dreamed.

The hypermodern transience of fashion generates a counter-aesthetic that prioritizes the eternal aspect of beauty. Styles go in and out of fashion so quickly that it becomes impossible to identify oneself with any of them. Because one must constantly be refreshing one's wardrobe, redecorating one's home, and rewriting one's lexicon, this extreme transience creates a profound alienation between the subject and his or her culture. In Pattern Recognition, this alienation takes physical form in Cayce's allergy to trademarks. Cayce is disgusted with Tommy Hilfiger because it is "simulacra of simulacra of simulacra," a commercial, soulless derivative (17). This alienation with temporal beauty spawns a new cult of authenticity and timelessness. Cayce refuses to wear any clothing besides "Cayce Pollard Units": nondescript, logo-free clothing that "could have been worn...during any year between 1945 and 2000" (8). She avidly follows a series of mysterious segments of movie footage that have appeared the Internet, at least in part, because their time period is a puzzle:

They are dressed as they have always been dressed, in clothing Cayce has posted on extensively, fascinated by its timelessness... He might be a sailor, stepping onto a submarine in 1914, or a jazz musician entering a club in 1957. There is a lack of evidence, an absence of stylistic cues, that Cayce understands to be utterly masterful. (23)

Within a capitalist economy and culture that encourages constant turnover, individuals such as Cayce who are overexposed to fashion must look outside their own field for longer-lasting artifacts of beauty with which they can identify. The disenchantment with fashion-plate aesthetics thus spurs a return to Baudelaire's "eternal beauty."

The aesthetic of timelessness seems to rebel against the postmodern economy; however, capitalism has commodified it as well. Minimalist clothing has been a trend in fashion for a long time. While in Tokyo, Cayce goes shopping at Parco and buys some

new, high-end clothing that, with only the removal of a few labels, does not inflame Cayce's allergy. Hubertus Bigend, the founder of a marketing firm in *Pattern Recognition*, sees the spreading obsession with the online footage segments as "the most brilliant marketing ploy of this very young century" and seeks to discover the footage's creator in order to exploit this advertisement strategy (65). This phenomenon is also apparent outside of the novel. Many music fans grew tired of polished, overproduced pop music marketed by music industry behemoths and thus turned to "indy" labels that seemed more "genuine". Paradoxically, this migration has resulted in several "indy" bands, such as Modest Mouse and Radiohead, being played on mainstream radio and becoming popular themselves. The logic of capitalist society means that corporations will commodify whatever a sufficient number of people desire. Thus, the purveyors of the temporal aesthetic actually profit off of their own anti-values; rejecting transience becomes yet another fashion.

Baudelaire and Gibson each paint portraits of society at two different stages of capitalist development—industrialization and post-industrialization. Baudelaire's essay marks the birth of the idealization of transience and the cutting edge; Gibson's novel demonstrates that ideal's disorienting logical conclusion. The development of capitalism has pushed the pace of fashion faster and faster. The question is whether this relationship works in reverse. Gibson chooses not to answer to this question; as character Bigend states, "For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have sufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile" (57). Only time will demonstrate whether postmodern alienation from transient aesthetics will result in a new, permanent aesthetic ideal or if

what we call postmodernism is merely a particular fashion produced by the hypermodern capitalist machine.