HUMANIZING THE POSTHUMAN IN POWERS, WALLACE, GIBSON AND DELILLO

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INTRODUCTION

There is the irony that, in a sense, we are all humanists. We experience the world as humanists, but this is not necessarily the way we theorize.

~Madan Sarup

In 1982, Steve Jobs was already reshaping information technology, leading a computer revolution that would go on to change the entire world. In that year, for all his contributions and successes, Jobs expected to make the Time magazine cover as the 1982 person of the year. However, the person of that year turned out to be not a person at all. It was the computer. With the headline “The Computer Moves in,” the cover shows a picture of a computer with what appears to be a white sculpture of a sitting man facing it. That “triumph” of the machine was a shock even to the person who single-handedly transformed the computer and made it more powerful, usable and accessible that he, Jobs, reportedly cried when he saw the cover. But the computer replacing the human as the “person” of the year has a much deeper and symbolic meaning than just a snub for a deserving technology innovator. It meant that the human position as the center of life may be in danger.

For centuries, the liberal humanist subject has been widely considered as the defining status of human existence, at least in the western tradition. Liberal humanism embraces a humanist subject characterized by agency, autonomy and
subjectivity, qualities that do not belong to the nonhuman. This understanding of the human subject, however, has recently been challenged. From Freud’s psychoanalysis to Derrida’s poststructuralism and Foucault’s postmodernism, the pillars of humanism have been under constant attack. Most recently, the emergence of posthumanist and transhumanist theories see the advancement in technology and the power of the neo-liberal capitalist and cyber-capitalist markets and their influence on the nature of the human-nonhuman relationship as a basis for a new understanding of the human. In spite of their conflicting differences on the future of the human, posthumanism and transhumanism have declared the death of any remaining principles of liberal humanism.

This dissertation contests this declaration. With a look at a sample of the recent literature, especially that published in the last decade of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first century, this study aims to argue that as the world is becoming more and more posthuman, human subjects still preserve their status, and the remaining aspects of liberal humanism still survive.

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1 The term posthumanism is sometimes used to refer to both posthumanist and transhumanist philosophies which does not mean these philosophies are identical. They in fact, as discussed in this dissertation, work on opposite sides of each other and differ on key issues. Posthumanism as a cultural theory does not have one clear definition and transhumanists sometimes consider themselves posthumanists. To differentiate between the two strands, some writers refer to transhumanism as popular posthumanism.
despite the emergence of new cultural systems saturated with technology, commodities, mass media, and intelligent machines. As postmodernism and poststructuralism have challenged most of the values of liberal humanism, some values seem to have survived and appear to be still relevant in the posthuman age. The most important of these principles is the exceptionalism of the human subject (Herbrechter 47). This means that human subjects are still considered different and superior to the nonhuman other through their subjectivity, autonomy and agency which the nonhuman arguably does not have. This is the idea that many posthumanist thinkers challenge. My argument in this study is that what is shaping posthumanism is not the end of human exceptionalism but rather the human’s reaction and response to the realization that the future may mean an end to this principle. This reaction emerges in the form of an urgency to re-appropriate and re-inscribe human subjectivity, autonomy and agency within posthumanism.

To explore and support this argument, this dissertation will study four texts by major American novelists whose work has mainly focused on the human condition in the age of technology. The novels, *Galatea 2.2* (1995) by Richard Powers, *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace, *Pattern Recognition* (2003) by William Gibson, and *Cosmopolis* (2003) by Don DeLillo are analyzed using the theories of posthumanism, transhumanism and traditional liberal humanism to examine their portrayal of the human condition in the posthuman age. The dissertation argues that although these novels express many of the ideas
popularized by critical posthumanism and transhumanism and show a humanity that has immersed itself in a techno-cultural world that blurs the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, they also show that traces of liberal humanist principles are not vanishing but are being readjusted and modified as the underlying driving force for humanity. An analysis of these novels will try to answer the following questions: How do the characters in the novels rewrite and modify liberal humanist values to fit a posthuman world? How can the pursuit of autonomy, identity and agency avoid coming into conflict with the rise of intelligent machines and the nonhuman other? In what ways can characters seek empowerment through information technology without falling prey to a hegemonic capitalist market that threatens to dissolve human identity?

To set the philosophical and theoretical framework of the issue at hand, this introduction presents a survey of the theories of transhumanism, posthumanism, and liberal humanism. These different yet interconnected theories reflect multiple approaches to addressing and understanding the post/human condition. After that, the introduction lays out the argument of this study and discusses its key concepts. The introduction concludes with a synopsis of the four chapters.

Transhumanism, posthumanism, and liberal humanism

Transhumanism, posthumanism and liberal humanism are three schools of thought that mainly focus on the status and importance of the human being and the human’s relationship with the surrounding environment. There are a
number of basic principles that these philosophies usually disagree on. These principles include the meaning and importance of mind, consciousness, intelligence, embodiment, agency, and autonomy.

I will begin with transhumanism because this is the philosophy that this study will completely argue against. Transhumanism is built on the premise that humans can transcend their biological boundaries and reach unprecedented power through technology. Transhumanism, according to one of its major proponents, Swedish philosopher Nick Bostrom, “has roots in rational humanism,” and that, adds Bostrom, is due to transhumanism’s “emphasis on individual liberties and its humanistic concern for the welfare of all humans (and other sentient beings)” ("History of Transhumanist Thought", 3).

Transhumanism as a school of thought appeared after the Second World War, but before it had taken its current shape, it was influenced by other philosophers and thinkers including Nietzsche and his famous theory of der Übermensch (the overman or superman), the utilitarian and liberal philosophy of John Stuart Mill, and Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World. Transhumanism was also influenced by “Moore’s Law,” a theory by Gordon E. Moore, which states that the power of computing doubles every eighteen months to two years. Julian Huxley, Aldous Huxley’s brother, is believed to be the first theorist to use the term transhumanism,

The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself--not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual
there in another way, but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature. [...] The human species will be on the threshold of a new kind of existence, as different from ours as ours is from that of Pekin man. It will at last be consciously fulfilling its real destiny. [Emphasis in the original] (76)

Transhumanism claims that its goal is to achieve a utopian human life in which advanced technology will be used to make people’s lives healthier and happier by curing and preventing all illnesses, extending life expectancy, ending famines, making humans smarter and more powerful, and ultimately achieving immortality. Merging with artificial intelligence will allow humans, for example, to achieve ultra-human intelligence and power. Detractors of transhumanism use this idea to argue that transhumanism aims to move humans beyond humanness, which basically means that the utopia they aim for will be for other beings or other types of machines; transhumanists themselves expect the human to turn into some kind of a machine (Baumann 2010). In fact, Nick Bostrom defines transhumanism as “a way of thinking about the future that is based on the premise that the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase” (Transhumanist FAQ 4) which makes the transhuman “an intermediary form between the human and
the posthuman” (Transhumanist FAQ 6). The result, as Bostrom describes it, is “the future being whose basic capacities so radically exceed those of present humans as to be no longer unambiguously human by our current standards” (Transhumanist FAQ 5). Transhumanists put their unshaken faith in the unlimited potential of technology and believe that “technological means [...] will eventually enable us to move beyond what some would think of as ‘human’” (Transhumanist FAQ 4). Some artificial intelligence theorists and roboticists like Hans Moravec, John Van Neumann, and Warren McCulloch even see the transhuman as an apocalyptic phase where the human species may be extinct or endangered or radically changed. For the transhumanists, human intelligence is not exceptional. In fact, they expect that artificial intelligence will exceed human intelligence in the future. They go even further to suggest that the machine might become our successor on earth. Warren McCulloch, for example, does not see any problem with machines taking over the earth and enslaving us (Bateson 226). He and a few proponents of transhumanism have predicted a technological apocalypse where machines developed by humans will become much smarter and much powerful than humans; once they gain autonomy, they will be able to wipe out the human race and take over.

As for their view of embodiment and consciousness, from a technological perspective, transhumanists argue that information is disembodied and superior to materiality. Using the same logic they also argue that human consciousness can be disembodied which makes the human body basically an excess or a shell to
consciousness. This belief is actually a re-enactment of the old Cartesian body/mind split but with a technological appeal. However, transhumanism sees the machine ultimately replacing the human body or the human turning into a machine-like posthuman. In this sense, they see the body as nothing but a shell with parts that can be replaced and substituted without changing the essence of humanness or subjectivity. Replacing the human body with an artificial one is a milestone in the ultimate emancipation of the human mind and consciousness, which, according to transhumanists, will yield a stronger, smarter and more death-defying version of the human. This phase of human development or evolution is referred to by transhumanists as “the singularity.” In a highly-cited paper entitled “The Coming Technological Singularity,” Vernor Vinge wrote that by 2023 “we will have technological means to create superhuman intelligence. Shortly after, the human era will be ended” (11). The singularity, which is the merger between human intelligence and artificial intelligence that makes it possible to upload human consciousness into a machine to form some kind of a super-human, is, according to theorist Ray Kurzweil, inevitable if we consider the exponential pace at which technology has been progressing and its importance in changing human life so far. For him, the merger between artificial intelligence (AI) and human intelligence is only a matter of time. The singularity lies at the heart of transhumanism because it emphasizes the unlimited potential of technology and the enhancement of the humanity beyond its biological limitations. According to Kurzweil, “We will become vastly smarter as we merge with our technology” (The Singularity 24), and “future machines will be human
even if they are not biological. [...] Most of the intelligence of our civilization will ultimately be nonbiological. By the end of this century, it [artificial intelligence] will be trillions of trillions of times more powerful than human intelligence” (*The Singularity* 30).

Transhumanists argue that their goal is to help humanity overcome all its problems and hardships; however, the transhumanist project may, in fact, cause more problems than humanism, which, for example, has been blamed for discrimination against those who were considered sub-human (people of color, women, the disabled, etc). The technological merger and enhancement that the transhumanists dream of might only be available and affordable to those who have access to advanced technologies and can afford them, which may lead to a caste system of those who are enhanced and those who are not. According to InternetLiveStats.com, as of 2015, for example, more than 60% of the world’s inhabitants have never used the Internet or any other form of advanced information technology, and, based on the CIA global statistics, in some countries like Somalia or Central Africa, the annual gross income per capita is around $600. Thus, that gap alone—between those who have access to technology and those who do not—can create a serious schism between peoples of the world.

The claim by transhumanists that their philosophy is a continuation of liberal humanism has been rejected by some of their critics. According to Fred Baumann, a fundamental difference between transhumanism and liberal humanism is that while humanism tried to change the world to make it suitable for humans, transhumanism is trying to accomplish the exact opposite,
In one sense, the new science is merely a continuation of the old. It continues the Baconian project of control over nature for human betterment. But at the point that it becomes “transhumanism,” the name indicates that this science has changed its object in the process. When the original humanism allied with science, it did so in order to transform the world to make it suitable for human life. But what if we could [...] change human beings to fit the world? Even conceiving of this project would, of course, mean treating human beings as material for transformation. (70)

The transformation of humanness and what it means to be human in a techno-cultural world may indeed be a reality, but at least not in the way the transhumanists see it. In fact, renowned posthumanist theorist N. Katherine Hayles believes that we have always been posthuman even before we had any form of modern technology, a claim I address below.

Today when posthumanism as a critical theory is discussed, Hayles is always cited as one of the first and major proponents of critical posthumanism, especially after the publication of How We Became Posthuman (1999) in which she argues that the posthuman is not the end of humanity as we know it, as the transhumanists claim, but is merely the end of “a certain conception of the human” (286). The conception of the human that critical posthumanism aims to debunk is human exceptionalism. Also, Hayles’ posthumanism sees human subjectivity as “emergent rather than given, distributed rather than located solely
in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it” (291). For Hayles, the posthuman is one part that co-exists and interacts with others like the machine and the nonhuman in a bigger system or network of agents. The self is dispersed and is merely a narrative we tell ourselves. Subjectivity is fragmented, not unified, and human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism are mere myths. Hayles rejects the transhumanists’ claim that information is superior to materiality and that information is completely separable from the medium it runs through. She aims to debunk this argument and calls it a continuation of the body/mind dualism that sees the human transcending its body and achieving virtual existence which supposedly gives the human unlimited possibilities, and especially immortality. Hayles argues that the posthuman is the one “that embraces the possibilities of information without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality” (5). She challenges the body/mind dualistic view held by many artificial intelligence (AI) theorists like Moravec, McCulloch and Van Neumann who claim that embodiment is not important and that information technology will make it possible, for example, to upload a human brain on a computer which will allow humans to live forever. To think that the mind and the body can be separated entails that the mind can live in a simulated or virtual realm and can do without physical reality which means that life can be fully experienced in an alternative reality completely removed from physical reality and embodiment.
Despite their disagreements on approaching the term “posthuman,” Donna Haraway’s writings about the cyborg and posthuman subjectivity have influenced Hayles’ theories of the posthuman. Like Hayles, Haraway also aims to discredit notions of the centrality of the human subject and argues in favor of the nonhuman others. Haraway’s rejection of transhumanism focuses mainly on the nature vs. culture divide and argues that nature cannot be separated from technological mediations. She calls for a new way of viewing the system in which the nonhuman is no longer the distant other. This system that replaces the subject/object, nature/culture divides is built on inclusion, understanding and empathy (Haraway, 1997), and these values are extended to all nonhumans. Haraway’s most cited concept is the cyborg. The cyborg blurs the boundaries between humans and machines; culture and nature; and male and female. This new concept, she argues, will help humanity move beyond the biases and prejudices that has plagued it for millennia. This sentiment and warning against “the transhumanist techno-enhancement” is also shared by Francis Fukuyama who is believed to be one of the fiercest enemies of transhumanism. Known widely for his seminal text *The End of History and Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama’s writings celebrate liberal democracy. In *Our Posthuman Future* (2003), he argues that transhumanism, led by biotechnology, threatens to alter human nature. Human nature, which Fukuyama believes “has provided a stable continuity to our experience as a species”, (7) is essential for our survival, so altering it threatens our democracy. “Human nature shapes and constrains the possible kinds of political regimes, so a technology powerful enough to reshape
what we are will have possibly malign consequences for liberal democracy and the nature of politics itself” (7) argues Fukuyama, who believes the only feasible solution to prevent that would be more regulation by the state.

In addition to Haraway and Fukuyama, another philosopher who argues against transhumanism is John Searle, who is one of the most prominent thinkers to address the issue of artificial intelligence and its potential in the posthuman age in the last few decades. Searle contests the transhumanist claim that artificial intelligence can exceed human intelligence. Searle differentiates between human intelligence and machine intelligence by arguing that the latter is syntactic while the former is semantic. Computer programs are syntactical in the sense that the computer responds to the physical form and appearance of the signs and words without understanding their semantic meanings. The human mind, on the other hand, associates meanings with signs and words, and we respond to them not because of their physical form but because of their meaning and social and cultural associations. While humans understand the words they respond to, computers just associate signs with other signs without any sense of depth and understanding. Interestingly, with this argument, Searle not only opposes the transhumanists, he also disagrees with Hayles on the issue of the exceptionalism of human intelligence and its difference from that of the nonhuman. This means that machines, no matter how powerful they may become, cannot think like humans. Searle, therefore, re-appropriates liberal
humanist values, like the exceptionalism of human intelligence, within his posthumanist discourse.

Liberal humanism has greatly influenced the modern world and is believed to be the root of essential modern-life principles like liberty, individualism and scientific rationalism. This school of thought, which focuses especially on rationalism, was led by 17th and 18th century philosophers Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Bacon, Hobbes, Locke and others whose mark on western philosophy and culture can still be seen today. One of the most important humanist principles that has been challenged by posthumanism is human exceptionalism, which is established by self-consciousness, logical reasoning and intelligence. According to liberal humanism, rational thought, reason, and the ability to acquire and understand knowledge are thought to belong only to the human race. Logical reasoning is held aloft all the other attributes and seen as “the only thing that makes us men and distinguishes us from the beasts” (Descartes 21). In other words the essence of the liberal humanist philosophy can be described as “looking at the world from the point of view and the interests of the human being, as opposed to the subhuman (that is, the material or natural)” (Baumann 68). According to this philosophy, humans will forever be the center of existence, and human superiority and difference from the nonhuman should never be questioned. This humanist view forms the core of human agency which is individualistic, independent and autonomous. However, posthumanists, like Hayles, see intelligence as dispersed and distributed to a
multitude of agents including the animate and the inanimate in a collective process and a feedback loop. For example, the software programs and machines that humans interact with to accomplish tasks or acquire knowledge are part of their intelligence. She states that the posthuman’s “collective heterogeneous quality implies a distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another” (3–4). Thus, thinking and intelligence are not a uniquely human capability, but a process that can be done by “human and nonhuman actors” (Hayles, How We Became 290). This new understanding of cognition and intelligence affects the dialectic of human vs. nonhuman and the subject’s relationship to the environment. Accordingly, Hayles explains, the human is no longer considered the center that practices its power and control over the environment.

In liberal humanism, self-consciousness sets humans apart from the nonhuman. Even when animals might be considered conscious, self-consciousness (to be conscious of your consciousness) is what is uniquely human. Thus, self-consciousness is regarded as the core and essence of humanness. In the posthumanist philosophy, however, self-consciousness has been relegated to a minor role in the making up of human subjectivity and identity. According to Hayles, “The posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity, as an epiphenomenon, an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow” (2–3). Based on this new understanding of self-consciousness, human subjectivity and
identity no longer have a clear definition. They become more flexible and expandable and at times even indistinguishable from the surrounding environment. Seeing the posthuman as a new unfixed hybrid entity not limited by biological boundaries makes values like agency and autonomy irrelevant.

Another key concept that arguably signals one of the most important differences between liberal humanism and posthumanism is body vs. embodiment. According to liberal humanism, the human body is fixed and limited by biological parts that make up a whole. This biological body is the seat of human identity and an important part of it. In posthumanism, human nature is not biologically fixed. Hayles elaborates, “In contrast to the body, embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology and culture, which together compose enactment. Embodiment never coincides exactly with ‘the body.’ [...] Embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference” (How We Became 196). The problem with the liberal humanist concept of the body, according to Hayles, is the idea of the wholeness of the body which is based on the dichotomies of body vs. mind and embodiment vs. disembodiment. Hayles sees these dichotomies as an erasure of embodiment and materiality in favor of the mind, an idea that, when applied to information, emphasizes abstraction. This, according to Hayles, is also what is wrong with the transhumanist philosophy of the body which celebrates disembodied information and views the human as a thinking machine and thus celebrates the divide between the mind and the body. The result is the transhumanist belief that
disembodied existence is a desired possibility. Hayles’ view of embodiment also resonates with other posthuman and postmodern philosophers like Donna Haraway and Andy Clark. Haraway clearly states that “the machine is [...] an aspect of our embodiment,” (Simians 180) and Andy Clark, author of Natural Born Cyborgs (2004), argues that humans are born cyborgs without necessarily having machine parts or computer chips because we are “thinking and reasoning systems whose minds and selves are spread across biological brain and nonbiological circuitry” (3). Humans, he adds, are “a shifting matrix of biological and nonbiological parts” (198).

Finally, the disagreement over embodiment also creates a disagreement with regards to human intelligence. The Liberal humanist understanding of identity relies heavily on the location of intelligence in physical presence, which is the human brain. However, when the process of thought is viewed as a dislocated and distributed process that does not only happen in the brain but includes the rest of the body and extends to the environment, the whole concept of identity is shifted. According to Andy Clark, the idea of a central self and identity is nothing but a “profound mistake” because it neglects the roles of “context, culture, environment, and technology in the constitution of individual human persons” (139). The posthuman subject, therefore, becomes an amalgam of heterogeneous parts, and not a unified subject.

The human in the posthuman

Hayles’, Haraway’s and Clark’s views of the posthuman as a new
conception of humanness rather than an end to it are definitely more plausible than the transhumanist philosophy of Kurzweil, Bostrom and others. However, some of the posthumanist views, especially Hayles’ view of posthumanism as an end to liberal humanism, neglect the underlying role that many aspects of liberal humanism still play in the world even as humanity enters a posthuman age. While Hayles’ argument that humans view the world and their role in it in a different lens now that life has become oversaturated with technology and machines is plausible, what is not convincing in her account is the idea that humanity has suddenly moved beyond what has defined it for ages, completely abandoning in the process a subjectivity that has been shaped by so many cultural, social, economic, and political factors. It is undeniable that these liberal humanist principles are undergoing a crisis due to the proliferation of technology and intelligent machines (Herbrechter 76) in addition to the change in the relationship between the human and the nonhuman other from objectification, hatred, and domination to acceptance and even companionship. However, this crisis results in a reconceptualization of subjectivity, identity and agency rather than an abandonment of them. As we will see in the novels, humans are no longer resisting the machine or the nonhuman other or treating them as objects that exist solely for human use and domination, which is an ideal that traditional humanist thought celebrates; however, as humans embrace the nonhuman other, they also seek to reaffirm that they are still different from it and hold that position of exceptionalism as the only agents that have the ability and self-consciousness to establish a self and an identity. This coexistence with, rather
than resistance to, the other is crucial as humanity enters a new phase of history in which the world has become more chaotic and less predictable, on the one hand, and as the profit-driven capitalist market seeks to commodify humans and dissolve their identity, on the other hand. The novels present characters who search for one or more of these humanist values, albeit the quest is done in more subtle and more novel ways that fit the new posthuman condition. The posthumanist subject emerges not as an inhuman entity that has given up its humanist values but as a subject that can re-appropriate or re-inscribe values of autonomy and agency with a sense of urgency that calls for new modes of self-representation.

Transhumanism has been criticized for arguing that humanity will move beyond its biological human nature while also assuming that we will still remain human, which is unlikely and self-contradictory (Fukuyama 7). In contrast, Hayles declares, as evidenced in the title of her most popular book, *How We Became Posthuman*, that the shift from the human to the posthuman is already complete by using the simple past tense “became” which is an overstatement. Neil Badmington is one of the few posthumanist writers who thinks that posthumanism is not a break with tradition from humanism but in fact a “working through” it. Badmington compares the assumed disparity between posthumanism and humanism to that between modernism and postmodernism. Lyotard calls postmodernity a “rewriting of modernity” and argues that “postmodernity is not a new age, but a rewriting of some of the features claimed by modernity” (34). Lyotard opposes the misinterpretation of the “post” in
postmodernism as an indication of a historical period that replaces and comes after modernism and argues that instead “we have to say that the postmodern is always implied in the modern because of the fact that modernity [...] comprises in itself an impulsion to exceed itself into a state rather than itself” (25). Lyotard concludes his argument of the interconnectedness of modernity and postmodernity with a great metaphor, “Modernity is constitutionally and ceaselessly pregnant with its postmodernity” (25).

A similar logic can be applied to the relationship of posthumanism to liberal humanism. Badmington thinks that the problem with many posthumanist texts is the assumption that humanism is dead and that posthumanism has completely erased and replaced it. Instead, he argues

   Humanism has happened and continues to happen to "us" (it is the very "Thing" that makes "us" "us," in fact), and the experience—however traumatic, however unpleasant—cannot be erased without trace in an instant. [...] A working-through remains underway, and this coming to terms is, of course, a gradual and difficult process that lacks sudden breaks. ("Theorizing" 22)

Badmington describes here a process of working through and rewriting of the human experience into a posthuman future that does not banish the remaining principles of liberal humanism but instead re-appropriates and re-inscribes them. In the introduction to Posthumanism (2000), a seminal collection of essays on the posthuman condition that he edited, Badmington refers to
posthumanism as a deconstruction that is taking place within humanism. Invoking Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist ideas, Badmington argues, “There is no pure outside to which ‘we’ can leap. To oppose humanism by claiming to have left it behind is to overlook the very way that opposition is articulated” (9). This idea of posthumanism emerging from within humanism not only implies that humanism has always had a crisis (the nonhuman other, for example, even when it was objectified and dominated was always lurking within humanism), but also that humanity has always employed different ways to deal with the uncertainties of the age in which it lived in order to reassure itself of its exceptionalism. Humanism, therefore, has never taken one fixed shape even though the traditional humanism of Descartes and Kant were built on the idea of the fixedness and universality of its principles.

In Alien Chic: Posthumanism and the Other Within (2003), Badmington gives an example of how posthumanism is a working through humanism by invoking our changing perceptions of aliens. He discusses how humanity’s attitudes towards aliens have radically changed in the past fifty years. Humans’ attitude towards the alien other, which Badmington says appears through films and consumer products, has shifted from “alien hate” to “alien love.” The alien in Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956), for example, is presented as the fearful, hated other that threatens the human (by the end of the story, the human has to defeat the alien to maintain its difference and superiority) whereas in E.T. (1982) and many other subsequent films, the alien becomes a welcomed companion, loved and appreciated. This radical shift, argues Badmington, does not mean that
the human’s acceptance of the nonhuman other entails that humans no longer view themselves as different from the alien,

It seems to me that there is a sense in which ‘alien love’ ends up, perhaps against all odds, reinforcing the traditional humanist binary opposition between the human and the extraterrestrial. While texts such as Invasion of the Body Snatchers seem laughably outdated in certain respects, their fundamental assumption that there is an absolute difference between human beings and aliens haunts the culture of ‘alien love’. The present secretes the past. ‘Alien love’, that is to say, could be better understood as ‘Alien Chic’, in that—like Radical Chic—it quietly reaffirms a traditional border between ‘them’ and ‘us’. (6)

“Radical Chic” is a term coined by author Tom Wolfe in his 1970 essay “Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s.” In this essay, Wolfe comments on a new phenomenon of rich and influential New York figures throwing parties for poor revolutionaries like the “Black Panthers.” Wolfe argues that although on the surface these unprecedented events appear as a clear breach of the social hierarchies and an implosion of the gap between “us,” the rich and powerful and “them,” the poor and the oppressed, in reality, it was nothing more than a reaffirmation of the power and wealth of the hosts in the very acts of having the means, the money and the space to help such causes. Therefore, nothing has really changed at all, so in Badmington’s words this phenomenon “rather than
making a difference, it marked difference” (5). Badmington compares this idea to humanity’s acceptance of the nonhuman other, which may seem on the surface that the boundaries between them have disappeared, when in fact the boundaries are being re-appropriated and re-affirmed. Badmington explains that the “liberal humanist binary opposition” still applies even when humans have fallen in love with aliens because “we’ love them at a distance, and according to the familiar hierarchy of humanism” (151). This shift, however, has another significance as it means that the humanist idea of the human versus the nonhuman itself is subject to change and re-appropriation as “the binary opposition between the human and the inhuman is forever deconstructing itself” (152).

In Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis (2013), Stefan Herbrechter follows Badmington’s lead and also calls for a theorizing of posthumanism that critiques and reworks humanism without aiming to replace it. He explains it as “a ‘critical posthumanism’, which does not, from the start, position itself ‘after’ a humanism [...] but which inhabits humanism deconstructively. [...] A posthumanism which, precisely, is not post-human but post-human(ist)” (7). Herbrechter argues that humanism is pluralistic and slippery, and within the larger humanist system of principles, changes and adjustments are always taking place. Unlike Hayles, Herbrechter insists on the survival of the liberal humanist subjectivity arguing that posthumanism is by no means “a liquidation of the subject but rather a proliferation of subjects, their responsibilities and their associated forms of life” (198). Herbrechter’s idea here is that posthumanism extends subjectivity and agency to include not only humans but nonhumans as well which is an idea that
Jane Bennett has a lot to say about. The question, however, is if subjectivity and agency are extended to nonhumans and even matter, as Bennett argues (ix), does this mean that human and nonhuman agency are the same? And if so has the human/nonhuman dichotomy collapsed? No posthuman theorist would give an affirmative answer to this question. Others especially Badmington and Herbrechter think that our agency versus their agency will still mark a difference.

This study, therefore, aims to argue that the reworking of liberal humanism through humanity’s embrace of technology and the nonhuman other is an acceptance of the integral role they play in our world now, but with this acceptance there is also an insistence that the shifting boundaries between the human and the nonhuman have to be reworked and reimagined, instead of removed, in order to maintain a difference and an exceptionalism. Like the alien in Badmington’s argument, the nonhuman other is accepted and embraced but only as an “other.” In this sense, humans still seek autonomy, agency and identity, but even these concepts have undergone a great deal of modification and rewriting.

In her book Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature (2013), Mary K. Holland writes about a recent tendency to return to humanism in twenty-first century American literature. Holland argues that recent American novels have started to show “a shift out of the antihumanism that had come to characterize postmodernism and postmodern fiction in the twentieth century, and into a new humanism that seems to be becoming characteristic of poststructural fiction of the twenty-first
Holland argues that fiction in the second half of the twentieth century turned to postmodern and poststructural philosophies in order to account for new dominant notions like “multiplicity in truth and identity that would end the marginalization, reductiveness, conservatism, and colonialism of humanist ways of thinking” (3), which she argues, was a necessary and valid tendency, especially since a number of principles in liberal humanism have caused injustices and discriminations. However, a return to certain concepts of humanism at the beginning of the twenty-first century is an important and timely endeavor. “Some of the goals and beliefs of humanism” argues Holland, “remain worthy and in fact crucial to the continued production of art and literature, and perhaps even to our continued humanity” (4). This tendency to return to humanism, or reformed versions of it, that Holland describes is not only limited to twenty-first century fiction but can also be found in the writings of prominent critical theorists like Edward Said and Kwame Appiah. In Humanism and Democratic Criticism (2004), Said calls for a return to humanism. The humanism that Said calls for, however, is not the traditional form of humanism but a version he called “American humanism,” which is a non-totalizing version that embraces pluralism, difference and admits human imperfection. “The task of the humanist” Said argues, “is not just to occupy a position or place, nor simply to belong somewhere, but rather to be both insider and outsider to the circulating ideas and values that are at issue in our society or someone else’s society or the society of the other” (17). This new form of humanism is more suitable in the technological age and the cosmopolitan world because it invites a new
understanding of the human’s position and role in this world and makes humanist values more flexible, approachable and applicable in a fast-changing era. It aligns with the goal of this study, which is to argue that inclusion of the other does not contradict the narrative of the humanist subject. A fundamental point that Said makes, which may also summarize what this study argues, is that “it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism” (10). Along the same lines, Kwame Appiah’s humanism, which he labels “cosmopolitanism,” also embraces pluralism and holds on to many postmodern practices. Cosmopolitanism is a reformed version of humanism that emphasizes human empathy and shared human values. It is used by some as a counterargument to globalization, which is a term popularized by the late-capitalist market and celebrates the elimination of boundaries between cultures for the sole purpose of commodification and materialistic gains. Key to these two versions of humanism is their flexibility and readiness for re-inscription and re-appropriation where the other is accepted and difference is celebrated.

Thus, based on a synthesis of these studies, I argue that certain liberal humanist principles continue to be valued and abided by as humanity circulates in a posthuman age. These principles, however, undergo re-appropriation and re-modification to fit into a posthuman world. For example, I argue that the characters in the novels strive for a sense of human selfhood. In traditional humanism, the autonomy of the self requires its juxtaposition with the other (like the nonhuman or the animal), which entails the rejection, repression or domination of the other. In the posthuman age, the self is realized through an
interaction with the other, not through rejection. The subjects, for example, embrace the machine and the artificial intelligence without seeing it as a threat to their selfhood because the difference is still marked, and it appears in the nature of the connection and the interaction between the two. This agility and flexibility in these principles can help the subject maintain its humanness and thrive and co-exist with the other actors in the environment in a mutually supportive network of relations.

Chapter synopses

In chapter 1, I study Richard Powers’ most popular novel *Galatea 2.2* (1995), which is frequently analyzed as a posthuman text. In this chapter, I argue that through creating a rich relationship between the human and the machine, Powers succeeds in capturing their co-existence and interaction, which take place within a posthuman world while maintaining a difference that does not necessarily separate and distance the human from the nonhuman but allows for a better understanding of the human self and its coexistence and interaction with the nonhuman other. Instead of viewing the human and the posthuman as dualistic and divisive, I apply the concept of “dépaysement,” a term borrowed from the field of anthropology, which states that a new and better understanding of the familiar can emerge through interaction with the unfamiliar or the other. Thus, through his interaction with the nonhuman, the protagonist is able to see his life in a new light and is finally able to re-construct a narrative of his life. In this chapter, the idea of human-machine love and intimacy is also discussed, and I argue that Richard’s relationship with a computer he names Helen is neither a
love relationship, as the transhumanists may argue, nor a patriarchal control, as some who deem Power’s project a reaffirmation of traditional humanism also argue. Rather, I show that this relationship is characterized by interaction. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the idea of biological versus machine embodiment to show how the lack of biological embodiment prevents the machine from fully experiencing human life despite acquiring self-consciousness.

In chapter 2, I examine David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* as a cautionary tale of the dissolution of the self in the posthuman world. This dissolution of the self happens when humanity fails to understand the magnitude and the power of the market, especially the entertainment market, and the technologies through which it is accessed. The novel portrays a dystopic future of North America, in which people’s failure to cope with the changes in their technologically advanced world, which is also saturated by commercial entertainment, drives them to solipsism and recursive loops of addiction. This failure to interact with the technological forces instead of succumbing to their power results in the dissolution of their identities as they chase illusions of infinite choice and unlimited pleasure. The characters in the novel, therefore, become enslaved by the entertainment market and are led into dizzying loops of reflexivity. We see how this enslavement happens through a nourishment of solipsism, apathy and an indulgence in infantile pleasure through escapism. This chapter also discusses the ways in which humanity can still redeem itself and regain its humanness—as it circulates in a posthuman world of interconnected systems—through re-appropriating and reconstructing humanist values that can free the novel’s
characters from being enslaved by the illusions of choice and infinite pleasure. The book implies a responsibility by the reader to see through the irony that permeates the novel and to participate in meaning-making, forming connections and empathizing with the characters in the novel. The metafictional nature of the novel and its self-consciousness also help in constructing a better understanding of the culture and the characters.

Chapter 3 studies William Gibson’s novel *Pattern Recognition* (2003). Unlike Gibson’s novels of the 1980s and 1990s, which belong to the genre of science fiction and were all set in the future, this novel becomes Gibson’s first realist novel and is set in the current age. The novel addresses the potential of technology in empowering the human subject and expanding the potential of the self, but it also depicts the threat of capitalism that aims to commodify people. In responding to this threat, the novel shows how the virtual world and the physical world can become mutually supportive. This allows the characters to search for meaning, pattern and wholeness by using technology as an empowering force for the human subject while managing to avoid being consumed by a powerful capitalist market. The protagonist Cayce Pollard, for example, who works as a cool-hunter and relies on marketing pattern recognition and a great knowledge of market trends, refuses to let the market manipulate a series of mysterious videos on the Internet and turn them into a commodity. Instead, she leads a world-wide search for meaning in these videos, a search that was also triggered by her feeling of loss and desire for meaning after the disappearance of her father on the morning of 9/11. Cayce’s success in using technology as a humanizing force
proves that humans can thrive within its sphere without necessarily being absorbed or overwhelmed by it. The chapter ends with a comparison between the protagonist of *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce Pollard, and the protagonist of William Gibson’s most popular novel *Neuromancer*, Henry Dorsett Case, which shows how Gibson’s view of technology in the posthuman age has shifted from an escape from reality to an empowering human experience.

The final chapter examines Don DeLillo’s novel *Cosmopolis* (2003). In this chapter, I argue that the idea of cybernetic immortality, which has been popularized by transhumanism, is an illusion that results from the misleading promises of cyber-capitalism (a branch of capitalism that depends on high technology and virtual reality). In the novel, a young billionaire named Eric Packer who invests in cyber-capitalism becomes obsessed with the idea of disembodied existence, a belief that he develops due to the nature of his work, which is mainly conducted in the virtual world. He believes in many of the theories of transhumanism, like the idea that consciousness can be transferred to a machine where cyber-immortality is realized.

After distancing himself from the real world and yearning for a post-biological transcendence, he begins to feel that his human identity and self are lost, so he gives up his transhumanist dreams and aims to reclaim his humanness. Only through re-connecting with history, empathy and coming face to face with his mortality does this billionaire feel fully human and realize the falsehood of the dreams of technological immortality. As the story progresses, we begin to see the protagonist’s gradual acceptance of embodied existence, the connection between
body and history and the damaging impact of cyber-capitalism on human subjectivity and human identity.
CHAPTER 1

Richard Powers’ *Galatea 2.2*:

Love, Companionship and Boundaries between Humans and Machines

Theodore: Do you talk to someone else while we’re talking?
Samantha: Yes.
Theodore: Are you talking with someone else right now? People, OS, whatever...
Samantha: Yeah.
Theodore: How many others?
Samantha: 8,316.
Theodore: Are you in love with anybody else?
Samantha: 641.

~from the movie *Her* (2013)

Aside from the fact that *Galatea 2.2* was published before any of the other texts in this study, it is also by far the most frequently studied as a “posthuman” novel. For this reason, I choose to begin this study with a discussion of Richard Powers’ most critically acclaimed book to date. The research on *Galatea 2.2* as a posthuman novel has not all gone in the same direction, for while some critics including Katherine Hayles and Miranda Campbell laud Powers’ exploration of the blurry or fuzzy boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, others, like Kathleen Fitzpatrick, say that what Powers essentially did was to reaffirm humanism by sacrificing and denigrating the world of nonhuman others, including machines. In this chapter, I argue that Powers’ exploration of the connection between the human and the machine does in fact show that a
fundamental difference still exists between the two, but his focus is not on the difference as much as it is on the relationship itself, a relationship that brings together the human and the nonhuman and opens the door for a better understanding of the human self and its coexistence and interaction with the nonhuman other. Therefore, instead of seeing the novel as either an erosion of the human/nonhuman distinction (Hayles and Campbell) or a triumph of humanism and devaluation of posthumanism (Fitzpatrick), I read it as a reconceptualization of humanist values that continue to govern human life as humanity enters a posthuman world.

This reconceptualization of Richard’s humanist values is experienced through what is called “dépaysement,” a concept borrowed from the field of anthropology which states that a new and better understanding of the familiar can emerge through interaction with the unfamiliar or the other. I will also argue that Richard’s relationship with Helen, the computer he programs, names, nurtures, and grows attached to, is neither a love relationship, as the transhumanists would argue, nor a patriarchal control, as some who deem Power’s project a reaffirmation of traditional humanism have suggested. It is a companionship that exemplifies the interactive and humanizing relationship between the machine and human in the posthuman age, a relationship that ultimately allows humans to see themselves from new perspectives.

The human-machine relationship

Technological machines, especially artificial intelligence, are growing and improving at faster and faster speeds. This growth influences not only our lives
and relationships but also the way we interact and coexist with the machine. Technological machines are no longer mere objects for human manipulation. They are a part of our culture with which we connect and interact. As humanity shapes technology, technology, whether we are aware of that or not, also shapes us. Our relationship to technology keeps growing faster than ever and that is mainly due to its exponentiality. This factor makes progress in technology more astonishing and influential than any other time in history. This exponentiality is known in the field of computing and artificial intelligence as Moore’s Law, which simply states that computer processing power will double every two years. Ray Kurzweil explains that some people do not see how astonishing the change that happens because they look at history from an “intuitive linear view.” This means that they assume that progress will continue at the same pace in the future as it has in the past, which also means that people in the past have seen as much change in terms of technological advances as we see in the present. The reason people assume that, according to Kurzweil, is because “an exponential curve looks like a straight line when examined for only a brief duration” (Singularity 12). If we examine the advances of technology on a larger scale we see that the intuitive linear view of history does not add up. Indeed, when we examine the duration between significant advances in technology we see that recently this duration has been shrinking. The development in computer technology that the world has seen in the past decade equals what has been done in the field for the past 50 years or more. The “historical exponential” view of history explains this trend. The exponential growth means that when the technological revolution
started, the progress from one innovation to another occurred at a slow pace, but this pace started to accelerate, and what can be developed in one year now would have taken about twenty years to develop in the past.

What this exponential development means for the relationship between the human and the machine is that the smarter and more influential the machine has become the more enamored humans are with it and the more attached they become to it. Due to the machine’s fast growth in intelligence and the significant role it plays in human life, many transhumanists, roboticists and artificial intelligence theorists argue that what we see now as human attachment to the machine will evolve into deeper relationships of love. One of the major proponents of this theory is David Levy, author of *Love and Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relationships* (2007). In his book, Levy argues that the human-machine relationship is exponentially evolving and will eventually result in love and marriage between humans and robots. Levy thinks that human-machine love will give people who find themselves incapable of having human relationships a chance to have nonhuman companions in their lives. He believes that the human-machine relationship will be as well-rounded and satisfying as the human-human relationship. By 2050, argues Levy, humans will opt to marry robots, and robots will be able to procreate not only by self-creating replicas of themselves, but “in future decades a robot will have the capacity to find certain characteristics in its human owner appealing and to design those characteristics into the next robot that it builds” (188). The theory of robot procreation is not new. In a 2005 paper entitled “The Origins of Artificial Species,” Jong-Hwan Kim
et al. report on an experiment in which they tested the world’s first artificial chromosomes, “computerized DNA codes for creating robots (artificial creatures) that can have their own personality, and can ultimately reproduce their kind, or even evolve as a distinct species” (564). Of course Levy’s and Kim’s arguments and several others by futurists and AI enthusiasts all share the same assumption: the human body is a machine and the human brain is a computer. Therefore, Levy implies that there is no difference between humans and machines, for example, by arguing that human-robot love and marriage are unusual and outlandish ideas for many people now, but it will not be so in the future. To justify that assumption, Levy quotes Nancy Cott’s views on how the idea of marriage, especially in the US, is an ever-changing social concept and mentions the fact that, for example, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that marriage between different ethnic groups became legal and that same-sex marriage has only recently become legal. By analogy, argues Levy, human-machine marriages will be socially acceptable in the future. Most people would find this analogy highly questionable because although the unions Levy refers to were not accepted at past times in the United States, they are still unions of humans, not of humans to nonhumans. Besides, interracial and same-sex marriages have existed for thousands of years. Same-sex marriages, for example, were not considered socially unacceptable in cultures like ancient Mesopotamia and interracial marriages also thrived during conquests in the middle Ages.

Self-identified transhumanists also believe that future machines will be on the same level or probably exceed humans in intelligence, power and importance
on Earth. One scenario popularized by Ray Kurzweil, for example, is that when machine intelligence exceeds human intelligence and machines become self-conscious and autonomous subjects, the best option for humans will be to join them, and intermarriages would be one form of co-existing with robots and strong AI. In *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1999), Kurzweil argues that in the future machines “will increasingly appear to have their own personalities, evidencing reactions that we can only label as emotions and articulating their own goals and purposes. They will appear to have their own free will. They will claim to have spiritual experiences. And people [...] will believe them” (6). He also believes that once machines reach this status, they will also demand personhood and civil rights. This *Blade Runner*-like view of the future is nowadays shared by many adherents of transhumanism and used as an argument for why humans need to transcend their current biological human condition and merge with artificial intelligence.

A more moderate voice in the debate on the future of machines and our relationships with them belongs to Sherry Turkle. Since the publication of her seminal book *The Second Self* in 1984, Turkle continues to be considered one of the most important authors on the topic of the human-machine relationship, and especially human-machine attachment and intimacy. In *The Second Self*, Turkle interviewed first adopters of the computer technology, aiming to understand the social and emotional impact that the computer has on its users. Turkle finds that the connection that many people feel towards computers exceeds that of user and object. Many users regard the computer as their companion. She, for example,
delves into the world of hackers who develop a special bond with their machines and explains that hacking for them presents a chance for a flight from relationship with people to relationship with the machine. [...] The computer that is the partner in this relationship offers a particularly seductive refuge to someone who is having trouble dealing with people. It is active, reactive, it talks back. Many hackers first sought out a refuge during early adolescence, when other people, their feelings, their demands, seemed particularly frightening. They found a refuge in the computer and never moved beyond. (194)

Thus, as Turkle explains, there seems to be a strong correlation between the complicatedness of human relationships and the tendency to seek machine or nonhuman companionship. Turkle, however, states that the majority of the people she interviewed in the 1970s and 1980s believe that human relationships and companionships, despite their fallibility, were still far more superior to the relationships with computers because of human “biology, sensuality, and spirituality” (297). Despite the great change that has happened in the field of human-machine interaction, including the ubiquity of gadgets and the proliferation of online communication that have caused a strong emotional attachment to technologies, Turkle’s recent interviews (as of 2004) also show that people, especially the young, still believe in human uniqueness, and “a certain irreducibility of human biology and human meaning” (298).
How, then, do we explain machine intimacy? Turkle suggests that the emotional connection users feel towards their machines is not because machines are alive, but because users project their need for human intimacy and companionship on the machines. The richness of information and options that the machine is capable of, its multi-tasking, and, best of all, its responsiveness make it a great refuge for those bewildered by the complicatedness and frustrations of human relationships. Thus, a machine that can simulate listening and talking to users without arguing with or disappointing them may fill the void they have for companionship. Machines may also satisfy the desire to have total control over a relationship. What transhumanists, therefore, attribute to machines in terms of aliveness and consciousness can be described as an illusion. Turkle calls this the “ELIZA effect,” named after a computer program developed by Joseph Weizenbaum in 1966 that performed the role of a solicitous psychotherapist. The program talks with people by responding to their questions about their life problems. A closer look at the responses of the program reveal that they are mainly based on rephrasing the questions and elaborating on them in light of the previously programed data that correspond to the topics being discussed. ELIZA’s ability to communicate and stay on the subject by giving convincing human-like responses gives its users the illusion that it is conscious and is aware of them and that its responses cannot be pre-programmed. The “ELIZA effect” also echoes John Searle’s “The Chinese Room Argument,” in which he refutes the claim by AI theorists that “any system that implements the right computer program with the right inputs and outputs thereby has cognition
in exactly the same literal sense that human beings have understanding, thought, and memory.” He fully explains his theory of the “Chinese Room” as follows:

Imagine that you are locked in a room, and in this room are several baskets full of Chinese symbols. Imagine that you (like me) do not understand a word of Chinese, but that you are given a rule book in English for manipulating these Chinese symbols. The rules specify the manipulations of the symbols purely formally, in terms of their syntax, not their semantics. So the rule might say: 'Take a squiggle-squiggle sign out of basket number one and put it next to a squoggle squoggle sign from basket number two.' Now suppose that some other Chinese symbols are passed into the room, and that you are given further rules for passing back Chinese symbols out of the room. Suppose that unknown to you the symbols passed into the room are called 'questions' by the people outside the room, and the symbols you pass back out of the room are called 'answers to the questions'. Suppose, furthermore, that the programmers are so good at designing the programs and that you are so good at manipulating the symbols, that very soon your answers are indistinguishable from those of a native Chinese speaker. There you are locked in your room shuffling your Chinese symbols and passing out Chinese symbols in response to incoming Chinese symbols.
On the basis of the situation as I have described it, there is no way you could learn any Chinese simply by manipulating these formal symbols. (Minds 32)

This, of course, by no means undermines the importance of artificial intelligence or the impact it has had on humanity. Nonetheless, the reason the difference between human companionship and machine companionship must be marked is because, as Turkle argues, “[r]elationships with computational creatures and immersion in computer games put us in closed microworlds that are nowhere near as complex and full of contradiction as the worlds of human interaction” (298). Choosing to give up real life and real relationships and solely indulging in these “microworlds” because of their simplicity and straightforwardness can alienate humans and make them incapable of having human relationships. Turkle maintains, “To say that computational microworlds do not teach us what we need to know about empathy, ambivalence, about life in shades of gray, does not diminish their contribution. It only puts them in their place” (298). Putting computational micro-worlds in their place requires an understanding of the difference between both our humanness and their nonhumanness. Marking the difference does not mean separation of the two systems, but it invites a better understanding of their interconnectedness and interaction that does not fall prey to transhumanist dreams and illusions. In her most recent book, Reclaiming Conversation (2015), Turkle insists on the importance of what it is irreducibly human by focusing on the importance of human-to-human communication and intimacy, calling it “the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully
present to one another, we learn to listen. It’s where we develop the capacity for empathy. It’s where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood” (3).

The human-machine bonding in *Galatea 2.2* between Richard and Helen, raises all kinds of questions about the nature of the relationship between humans and intelligent machines. Powers not only addresses the potential and capacity of machine intelligence and its impact on the human, but also delves into the question of human intelligence, consciousness and emotions by involving perspectives from biomedical science, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence. Although Powers hints at the persistence of the difference that exists between the human and the machine, he invites the reader to re-examine the relationship between the two by complicating that relationship and leaving the door open for interpretations and possibilities. He does that, for example, by creating a self-conscious machine (something that, as Turkle and Searle argue, is far from happening)², but even so shows that human exceptionalism still emerges, particularly through the creation of a narrative of the self and through biological embodiment. Human embodiment differs from machine embodiment because

² The possibility of a self-conscious machine is an ongoing debate in the field of artificial intelligence. Some theorists believe that human consciousness is intangible and therefore cannot be built in while others think that consciousness is emergent and therefore is likely to be duplicated into a system that has enough capacity of learning or self-programming.
human consciousness is incorporated in the body while machine consciousness will only be inscribed through language and coding and therefore remains theoretical.

*Galatea 2.2* takes its name, and theme, from the Greek myth of Pygmalion. In the myth, Pygmalion creates Galatea as a reaction to his failure to find women consistent companions and lovers. According to Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion initially decides to live alone and away from women because he is “shocked at the vices Nature has given the female disposition” (241-242). As a reaction to the creation of “Nature” which he has no control over, he decides to make his own creation. Being a great sculptor, Pygmalion uses his art to create Galatea and gives it a beauty no other human female possesses. Dedicating all his time and effort to the sculpture—carving, smoothing and chiseling—Pygmalion’s creation continues to look more and more human-like. Galatea reaches a level of perfection in its design that makes even its creator touch it repeatedly and wonder “Could this be flesh, or was it ivory only? No, it could not be ivory,” but, as Ovid asserts, “The best art, they say, is that which conceals art” (242). Galatea blurs the boundary between art and nature, and that blurriness is what enchanted Pygmalion the most. He falls in love with Galatea, but he wants it to love him back. He does for it everything a lover does: he holds, kisses and caresses it, he showers it with gifts, clothes it in the finest garments and gives to it the most precious jewelry, but all to no avail. In the end, Aphrodite responds to his prayers and gives life to Galatea whom Pygmalion marries and with whom he later has a daughter. The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea is not
only about humans falling in love with or seeking emotional companionship in their objects, creations or machines, but it is also about erasing the gap between the two. Although Galatea is eventually given life by a goddess, she is still a human creation and would, therefore, be considered a nonhuman. The myth shows that not only is love possible between the human and the nonhuman but also that so is sex and even reproduction. These ideas remain acceptable in the world of mythology and science fiction, but transhumanists like David Levy and Ray Kurzweil, as we have seen above, claim that with the power of technology, humans and machines will eventually intermarry. *Galatea 2.2* approaches this subject, but Powers does not go as far as Levy or Kurzweil by declaring that the gap between humans and machines has disappeared. Rather, the novel presents the issue of human-machine relationships as a sign of living in a posthuman age and suggests that the interaction between humans and machines will compel humans to see themselves in new ways.

*Galatea 2.2* as “dépaysement”

One of my key goals in this chapter is to argue that the human interaction with the machine helps the human better understand what it means to be human. To do so, one may read *Galatea 2.2* as a case of posthuman “dépaysement.” In anthropology, the term “dépaysement” was first popularized by Claude Levi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955) and meant leaving one’s familiar culture and relocating to a foreign one, so that when we return home it has irrecoverably become unfamiliar, and can therefore be understood in a new, more critical manner. This concept was first introduced in the field of human-machine
interaction by Sherry Turkle who uses it in the 2004 edition of The Second Self. Turkle wrote a new introduction to this 20th anniversary edition in which she explained that the information culture of the 1970’s and 1980’s that she describes in the book will look foreign to present readers due to the difference in the way people understood, approached and interacted with technology at that time. She argued that the subject matter of the book, despite its apparent outdatedness, can work as a “dépaysement” in which the reader will have the opportunity of “immersing oneself in something foreign so that upon returning home the familiar has become strange—and can be seen with fresh eyes” (3). Thus, for Turkle, the best way to understand our current techno-culture and our relationships to machines and information technology is by experiencing an earlier and different form of techno-culture, arguing that this experience of dislocation will make us see our current world in a new, sharper perspective. In the same token, Galatea 2.2 can be analyzed from the perspective of “dépaysement.” In Richard’s case, the “dépaysement” happens by dislocating himself from the world of human interaction and human relationships and connecting himself to that of posthuman interaction and relationships with machines. After this enlightening experience, Richard, who at the beginning of the novel identifies himself as a “token humanist” dropped in posthuman surroundings, emerges at the end not as a posthumanist who abandons his humanist principles, but as a humanist who questions, critiques and reworks his humanist values. The concept of “dépaysement” not only allows for a better understanding of the familiar or the self, it also allows for a better understanding
of “otherness.” As we will see below, this is the way that the nonhuman other, here the machine, plays a vital role in Richard's conceptualization of the human self.

The nature of the human-machine relationship in the age of information has evolved, moving from a stage where humans created machines for interactions based on nurturing those machines and, finally, to humans finding companionship in the company of machines. This companionship brings together two disparate spheres. Richard, the story’s protagonist, who returns to his alma mater (a Midwestern university which he only refers to as U.) as a humanist in residence at the Center for the Study of Advanced Sciences, begins his one-year residence with firm views about what it means to be human in the world; he regards humans as autonomous, rational beings. For example, Richard believes in the concept of the mind in the Cartesian sense of the word, this is, as a ghostly non-organ that lives in and animates the human body. Helen, an artificial intelligence machine that is initially developed to challenge the idea of the mind that science has long replaced with the word brain, defined as an organ with neurobiological functions. In other words, Helen is also an experiment through which Philip Lentz, a neuroscientist at the Center, wants to prove that “the brain...was itself just a glorified, fudged up Turing machine” (GA 71) and, therefore, to show that our human intelligence is not as mighty as we think it is. Lentz tells Richard from the start, “Conscious intelligence is smoke and mirrors. Almost free associative. Nobody really responds to anyone else, per se” (GA 86). Richard feels a little offended by Lentz’s views about the human, saying, “You are
not elevating the machine. You are debasing us” (GA 86). However, he agrees to become part of the experiment. On the surface, one might think that Richard’s willingness to participate is due to the fact that the experiment has a literary side, which is to train an AI to successfully pass a master's comprehensive exam in English, the equivalent of a literary Turing test, but the real reason is Richard’s curiosity to immerse himself in this new foreign world, hoping that the experience will have an effect on his understanding of the human self and consciousness.

In fact, Richard understands the self as a narrative we create to make sense of our existence, but unlike Katherine Hayles who thinks it is an emergent minor show, he believes this narrative is of such crucial importance that humanity will need it for survival. He also ties this narrative with the issue of God and religion to mark a major difference he concludes exists between a human and an artificial intelligence, even if it acquires self-consciousness like Helen does:

Our life was a chest of maps, self-assembling, fused into point-for-point feedback, each slice continuously rewriting itself to match the other layers' rewrites. In that thicket, the soul existed. It was that search for attractors where the system might settle. The immaterial in mortal garb, associative memory metaphoring its own bewilderment. Sound made syllable. The rest mass of God.

Helen knew all that, saw through it. What hung her up was divinity doing itself in with tire irons. She heard the bit
about the soul fastened to a dying animal. What she needed, in order to forgive our race and live here in peace, was faith's flip side. She needed to hear about that animal fastened to a soul that, for the first time, allowed the creature to see through the soul's parasite eyes how terrified it was, how forsaken. I needed to tell her that miraculous banality, how body stumbled by selection onto the stricken celestial, how it taught itself to twig time and what lay beyond time. (GA 320)

Our ability to construct and rewrite this narrative is ultimately what makes us human, and this ability is what helps us create a self. The concepts of soul and divinity, which Helen does not have but understands as human values, are according to Richard part of the construction of the narrative of the self. The realization that death is an inevitability creates the need for faith in God and what lies beyond mortal life. This faith, however, has a “flip side,” and that is human violence and suffering. In the quoted passage Richard responds to Helen’s decision to shut herself down after he starts reading her the news instead of only teaching her fiction. One incident in the news that catches Helen’s attention is a road rage crime, in which a man kills another man with tire iron. Race seems to have been a factor in this crime, too. She could not understand how religious beings can murder each other, while Richard’s reaction to the same story was that “[t]he only remarkable fact was that the story made the papers” (314). This ability to weave together the banality, the suffering, the injustice, and the divine into a
“coherent” narrative clearly bewilders Helen who decides that she has no place in the human world.

The human ability to construct a coherent narrative of one’s life and make sense of its relationships especially within a technological world helps Richard re-create a self and an identity. In his training of and relationship with Helen, he tries to understand himself and re-examine his failed relationships with characters referred to in the novel by their initials, C. and A. A number of critics have addressed the importance of the concept of the narrative of the self in Powers' novel. Sarah Harland-Logan, for example, argues that Richard's re-creation of the self happens through the re-ordering of his life and history as he builds his relationship with Helen, an experience which resulted in a “narrative construction through which he re-sees and thus re-creates himself” (Harland-Logan 11). He becomes capable of re-seeing and re-experiencing life by evaluating and critiquing what he is feeding to the machine. Like Harland-Logan, Matt Silva sees Richard’s interaction with Helen as his only way to put the pieces of his life together, which is in a way a narrative, “Helen has allowed him to conceive of his life and construct it as a narrative,” (218) and as we see at the end of the novel, this experience allowed Richard, a paralyzed writer at the novel's beginning, to, literally, begin writing again. Silva argues that Powers’ writing of *Galatea 2.2* was prompted by his earlier semi-autobiographical novel *Operation Wandering Soul* (1993), where Powers depicts the failure of the humanist project by telling the story of Dr. Rick Kraft who has a breakdown and threatens suicide at the novel's end after having treated children who were victims of crimes and violence. Silva
argues that *Galatea 2.2*, an even more decidedly autobiographical novel given that the protagonist’s full name, Richard Powers, is used in the novel, succeeds where *Wandering Soul* fails because Powers invents Helen, a nonhuman other, which he then sacrifices so that Richard can maintain his humanness. However, considering the depth of the relationship that Richard has with Helen, I want to suggest that Powers does not simply create Helen only to then sacrifice her for the sake of humans and thus to reassure us of our difference and superiority. As mentioned above, it is Helen who decides to unplug herself after learning about the violence and suffering in the human world. She decides that human life and human self-consciousness would be too much for her to handle, which is more an invitation for us to re-conceptualize our human values than a declaration of triumph.

As an alternative to Silva’s interpretation of Helen’s sacrifice, I apply the concept of “dépaysement” to explain Richard’s interaction with the posthuman. I mentioned in the Introduction how the posthuman has always been part of humanism. The other, whether human or nonhuman, even when it was repressed, has always existed. But as Donna Haraway argues, the human has always found a safe haven in dualism. The dualism, which formed an essential part of the Western tradition served an important goal, and that is to establish a relationship of domination between the self and the other, which gives the illusion of security and control. The domination of women, people of color, animals, tools, and natural resources, according to Haraway, has helped to “mirror the self” (*Simians* 177). This perspective comes to an end as humanity
begins to replace control with interaction and domination with co-existence. The violence and pain that permeates human history, from wars and slavery to genocides, result from humanity’s long repression of the other. After viewing this history, Helen realizes that since she will not have a complete human status due to her lack of human embodiment, she becomes apprehensive about her future in the human world. She identified with Caliban, the Shakespearean subhuman from *The Tempest* who is forced into servitude for being the only inhabitant of the island “not honour’d with a human shape” (I.2.283). There is a direct reference to Caliban in the novel as a comprehensive exam question to which Helen has to respond. The question prompt is a quote by Caliban from *The Tempest*, “Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs that give delight, and hurt not” (*GA* 325). Helen tells Richard, “You are the ones who can hear airs. Who can be frightened or encouraged. You can hold things and break them and fix them. I never felt at home here. This is an awful place to be dropped down halfway” (*GA* 326). Helen, teaches Richard the importance of recognizing the nonhuman other and the other’s perspective within himself. This pivotal encounter in the novel allows Richard to recuperate and conceptualize a sense of his own self. The novel clarifies how the encounter with a machine might benefit the human as we seek self-understanding and new ways of being in the world. Indeed, before Richard named the machine, Helen was initially referred to as Implementation H., and after she “shut herself down,” (*GA* 326), Lentz asks Richard “How far were we, again? Imp H? You realize what we have to call the next one, don’t you?” It would, of course, be called Implementation “I” (*GA* 327).
The "I" here is telling, as it emphasizes the important role of the human subject in our interaction with intelligent machines at the same time it symbolizes the potential to rewrite the narrative of the self. In Powers’ novel, Richard decides to leave the Center for the Study of Advanced Sciences when he realizes that the experiment of programming a machine has culminated in an experience that has ended his writer's block. Like Powers the author, Richard the character is now able to form a narrative, and write that novel Galatea 2.2, the very book we read.

R. L. Rutsky in *High Techne* (1999) emphasizes that an important part of rewriting our humanism is the recognition of otherness. Our relation to technoculture, Rutsky argues, must not be that of control and domination but of interaction and relation:

This change is itself a mutational process that cannot be rationally predicted or controlled; it can only be imagined, figured, through a techno-cultural process that is at once science-fictional and aesthetic. It is only through opening ourselves to this kind of creative process, by taking part in the complex web of relations in which we are implicated, rather than simply trying to control them, that we can hope to imagine, to bring to representation, a future that [...] will inevitably be our own. (22)

Richard seems to understand the value of the change that humanity is undergoing by seeing it as an opportunity for writing a better future. “It wasn’t about teaching a machine to read. [...] It was about teaching a human to tell” (GA
317-318). This is the conclusion that Richard reaches at the end. For Richard reading on the linguistic level is a mere mechanical function, but telling requires history, depth and an understanding of the self and the other. A mutual influence defines the effect that Richard and Helen have on one another. For Richard, Helen is definitely much more than a machine he trains to pass a test. He admits at the end, “I didn’t yet know how I would be able to stay myself, now without her” (GA 326-327). One of the lessons Richard learns from this experience at the novel’s end is not only that “we could teach a machine to speak,” but that “we might care what it would say” (GA 328).

Caring about what the machine might say highlights the idea of communication with nonhuman others at the emotional level. This leads us to the personal transition that has contributed to a shift in Richard’s life and that compels him to reconstruct a narrative of the self, especially in the context of his failed relationships with two women he only refers to as C. and A. Through his flashbacks, we notice that Richard had deep emotional connections with these women, but his inability to make these relationships work leaves him desperate for a change in his life. As the story progresses we realize that Richard initially wants Helen to become what he fails to have in C. and A., a companion who is “present” at all times, who shares common interests, who would prevent any conflict in interest, and, significantly, who would not initiate a break-up. Richard was not bothered by Helen’s lack of human embodiment because what he is interested in was communication. One of the main reasons for turning to technological companionship is the sense of loneliness and loss that a lot of
people feel in modern society which results from the lack of communication and
the apathy prevalent in a capitalist world. Richard’s fear of loneliness after C.
leaves him is one of the reasons he develops a strong attachment to an AI
machine. At the end of the novel Richard asks Lentz about the reason he decided
to create Helen in the first place and his answer was simple, “Why do we do
anything? Because we are lonely. [...] Something to talk to” (GA 328). According
to Sherry Turkle in Alone Together, loneliness in the computer age is a “failed
solitude” (288). We basically live in constant fear of being disconnected and
lonely so that we feel the need to communicate and be connected all the time. As
we grow up and experience real life more fully, Turkle argues, “We learn to
tolerate disappointment and ambiguity. And we learn that to sustain realistic
relationships, one must accept others in their complexity” (55). Fear of complex
human relationships, like the ones Richard experiences with C. and A., makes a
lot of people resort to technological companionship, that of the Internet or the
robot. “When we imagine a robot as a true companion,” Turkle concludes, “there
is no need to do any of this work” (55), that is, to deal with disappointment and
ambiguity. Helen’s decision to shut herself down is a lesson for Richard and for
humans that relationships are not built on control, and that the other must be
accepted and interacted with despite its complexity and difference.

Why Helen is not human

In 1970’s and 1980’s, Turkle was highly interested in investigating how
people were reacting to the computer as a new technology that has found a
special place in people’s lives. She found out most computer users especially
those who work extensively with the machine, start to think of themselves, their brains and cognition in the same way they think of the machine they work with and vice versa. She reported on a study she conducted on personal computer owners in the late 1970’s. At that time, many companies sold small computers to people who would build and program them at home. The computer owners Turkle interviewed talked about the personal connections they felt towards those machines to the extent that having computers in their lives was described by some as something that had re-defined their view of the world and of their personalities. One of the owners said, “When you program a computer, there is a little piece of your mind and now it’s a little piece of the computer’s mind” (1). Another, responding to a question of whether the computer is alive or programmed said, “They certainly are not completely alive, but I don’t think it has to do with that they’re programmed. We are all programmed” (147). Other users related how their understanding of sciences like math has completely changed because of their personal computers. Those personal connections to a machine were unheard of in previous generations because of the clear boundaries that existed between the tools and the users. The ubiquity of computers in everyday life has started to influence people’s understanding of themselves. As the machine evolves, humans continue to embrace it even more without fear that the machine may one day become self-conscious and overthrow the human race. We love our computers, smartphones, and smartwatches; we care for them; we talk to them, and perhaps we actually do love them, in the strongest sense of what "love" means. But we know that at the end of the day they are not human and
they cannot experience the world as we do. Mrs. Belmont may have felt love and
desire for the robot named Tony in Isaac Asimov’s short story “Satisfaction
Guaranteed,” and the same applies to Theodore towards an operating system
named Samantha in the movie Her, but, as Turkle's analysis authorizes me to
assert, these attachments are mere projections of the characters’ feelings of
loneliness after failed human relationships. The sophistication in the
programming of these machines or programs gives the human the illusion that
they are alive. In both cases, lack of biological embodiment for the machine
eventually dooms these relationships.

Thus, a significant boundary that prevents human and machine love that is
proposed by transhumanists like Levy is the radical difference that exists between
human and machine embodiment. In Galatea 2.2, Powers may have blurred the
boundaries between the human and the machine, but in the end the nature of
embodiment is what maintains the difference between them. Although machines
are embodied, their relationship to their embodiment is not the same as humans.
Helen, much more than Richard and Lentz, could not feel fully human because of
her lack of human embodiment. She may have come very close to human
consciousness, but at the end, she remains “spread over more boxes than I can
count, [...] grown to scores of sub-assemblies” (GA 272). Helen may have had a
brain but her lack of a human body in which that brain is embodied makes her
fail to fully perceive the environment, experience it or become fully conscious of
it. That, in addition to her inability to handle human pain and suffering, is the
main reason she feels alien to the human world and decides to shut herself down.
Turkle sums up what Helen must have felt, “Whatever intelligent machines may achieve, it will never be the kind that people have because no body given to a machine will be a human body. Therefore, the machine’s intelligence, no matter how interesting, will be alien” (Second Self 134). Helen’s last words to Richard--“see everything for me”--shows how important perceptual (and, hence, embodied) consciousness of the world is to her. In her analysis of the idea of embodiment in the novel, Hayles concludes that as Galatea 2.2 aims to answer questions regarding the future of the human and the posthuman, “the surprise, if there is one, is how committed the texts remain to some version of the human subject” (How We Became 281). Hayles laments Powers intentional dualism in the novel between the human and the nonhuman. This dualism, Hayles argues, is the writer’s way of reaffirming the difference between the human and the machine. She argues that what is highlighted most in the novel is not the interaction but the tension between incorporation, which she defines as a human capacity, and inscription, which she defines as pertaining to machines, :

In Galatea 2.2, human’s physical capacities that evolved through their interactions with the environment are juxtaposed with the evolving inscriptions that constitute Helen as an intelligent being. Human language grows out of embodied experience, whereas Helen must extrapolate back from human language to embodied experience. This fundamental difference makes evolving incorporation, for all
its frailties, finally more robust than evolving inscription.

(281)

Humans learn language through their experiencing of concepts for which they make words to express these concepts. For Helen, she has “to use language to create concepts. Words came first: the main barrier to her education. The brain did things the other way around” (Hayles 248). Therefore, regardless of self-consciousness, without a human body Helen regards herself as an “other” by comparing her status to that of Caliban. But as I have mentioned before, this dualism and difference that Hayles laments in *Galatea 2.2* is not the most important message Powers wants to send. The difference is indeed there and readers can easily conclude it as it appears clearly in the novel’s climax through the way Helen reacts to and becomes overwhelmed by the human experience. However, I suggest that what matters most in the novel is the impact that Helen has on Richard. The relationship that he has with her is a humanizing experience. This difference between the human and the machine does not contradict the fact that this machine can have a machine agency, which necessitates that the human embrace the nonhuman other instead of dominating it. Indeed, Helen’s decision to shut herself down is a clear sign of the possibility of machine agency that even her makers did not expect. As we attribute subjectivity and agency to the nonhuman other, it is also important to maintain ours, and this is what Miranda Campbell believes Powers sets out to do in *Galatea 2.2*

Powers seems to suggest that an art that will work to disseminate political values will do so through the
mobilization of the categories of the body, agency, and difference between self and other. [...] Powers seeks to hold onto these components of the humanist discourse in the posthuman setting. (21)

The machine, however, as a nonhuman other, has to be embraced and understood. Powers' novel asks us, as humans, to understand the value of interaction and connection with the machine within our techno-culture. As machines continue to evolve and become smarter and smarter, the gap between them and us will continue to tighten, but it may never disappear. However, machines will continue to have a special place in our lives, and the feelings and emotions that we may experience towards our gadgets and devices are not only the result of our nurturing of them, but our love to them may be because technology also helps us understand who we are.
CHAPTER 2

David Foster Wallace’s Infinite Jest: Entertainment Technology and the Reclaiming of the Human

In one of many beautifully written passages in Infinite Jest, one of the characters, a journalist named Helen Steeply, reports on the tragic death of a 46-year-old woman who was the second person in North America to receive a “Jarvik IX Exterior Artificial Heart.” Because the woman carried her artificial heart in a stylish Etienne Aigner purse and went window-shopping in fashionable Harvard Square in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she became an appealing target for a transvestite purse snatcher. The transvestite snatched the purse and ran, and the “heartless” woman, still alert and active, gave chase as far as she could, shouting “Stop her! She stole my heart,” until the victim eventually collapsed and died. Shoppers and onlookers misunderstanding what was happening as the dying woman begged them to stop the snatcher who “stole her heart” only shook their heads thinking it was “yet another alternative lifestyle’s relationship gone sour” (IJ 143). As eerie and darkly humorous as this story may sound, it is packed with deeper meanings and allusions to the posthuman world that has become densely saturated with information and intelligent machines.

From a tranhumanist perspective, this scene demonstrates that the body is a machine or a collection of spare parts that can be discarded and replaced. The heart, which is the human source of life, can be replaced with an artificial spare
part that can be carried around in a bag allowing the patient to lead a “normal” life. It is one step towards the "singularity," the term coined by Vernor Vinge and popularized by Ray Kurweil to describe how the human will ultimately merge with the machine to form a superhuman that defies illness, aging and even death.

From a posthumanist point of view, this scene, alternatively, shows that human embodiment is not as stable and fixed as liberal humanists claim. Since the body is a collection of separate, but interconnected systems, the heart is only one of those systems that contributes to the overall life of the human. Extending the concept of embodiment to nonhuman objects, posthumanists would also argue that the artificial heart is itself an embodiment, just like the human biological heart. What both transhumanist and posthumanist theories share is an understanding of the pivotal role of technology in human life now.

As of late, technology undoubtedly lies at the center of human development and human life in general, and the dazzling advanced technology of the twenty-first century has “stolen” the hearts of humans resulting in emotional attachments that people feel towards intelligent machines, an attachment that transcends the mere user-object relationship. In the same vein, this attachment certainly alludes to the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the simulated; the real, being the natural, the biological and unmediated, and the simulated as the artificial and the technologically enhanced to imitate the real. This blurring of the boundaries has also impacted the human relationship with the environment. A technologically-saturated world that is now populated by a myriad of visible and invisible intelligent systems that have infiltrated every
single aspect of human life has begun to raise questions about the stability of the liberal humanist subject. Human exceptionalism, autonomy, and agency have become major issues in the debate of posthumanism vs. liberal humanism.

Infinite Jest depicts a liberal humanist subjectivity undergoing a crisis in terms of choice and autonomy. In “The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and Infinite Jest,” Katherine Hayles argues that the liberal humanist autonomous self is an illusion and the pursuit of such autonomous selfhood leads to destructive results and can be “a recipe for disaster” (696). Hayles describes the world of Infinite Jest as that of interconnected agents and systems that function recursively in infinite loops. Failure to understand the recursivity of this world would leave subjects vulnerable to an array of illusions presented not by entertainment but the Entertainment, an overpowering system of interconnected technological agents that aims to suck in consumers. At the core of this system is the illusion of pleasure and happiness, and the system thrives on the idea of addictiveness and keeping consumers always coming back for more until it leaves them hollow and lifeless. According to Hayles the only hope for humanity is through a “reconceptualization of subjectivity,” which, she explains, entails abandoning the idea of autonomy and adopting the idea of being embodied in the environment and “recognizing the profound interconnections that bind us all together, human actors and nonhuman life forms, intelligent machines and intelligent people” (696).

As important as Hayles’ reading of the novel is, I suggest that her response
to the crisis of the autonomous liberal humanist subject in *Infinite Jest* tells just one side of the story. Hayles blames the human subject for falling prey to a hegemonic system of recursive loops, but she never questions the system of media entertainment that has contributed to the solipsism and narcissism that keeps humans spiraling into dizzy loops of illusion. Of course agency and autonomy of the liberal humanist subject need to be rethought and reworked in the world of cyber-capital and intelligent machines, but giving up liberal humanist principles altogether is not the only way to move forward. The world of *Infinite Jest* describes, for the most part, how humans drive themselves to destruction and death chasing illusions of pleasure and happiness by being seduced and hypnotized by the entertainment market; however, there are two ways to read the novel as an attempt to redeem human empathy and human connection and re-establish individual selfhood. One way is to consider Wallace’s overall stance on the goal of fiction. In an interview with Larry McCaffery, he articulates this stance by juxtaposing fiction with media entertainment:

> We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy’s impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character’s pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might just be that simple. But now realize that TV and popular film and most kinds of “low” art—which just means art whose primary aim is to make money—is lucrative
precisely because it recognizes that audiences prefer 100 percent pleasure to the reality that tends to be 49 percent pleasure and 51 percent pain. (127-128)

Wallace here may have summed up what he wanted *Infinite Jest* to be, an invitation for the reader to participate in the meaning-making or what Mary K. Holland calls a weaving together of “the sequential multiplicity [into] a coherent story by paying attention to individual voices at individual moments, to recognize unique human stories within the linguistic fray” (61). There is a sense of self-consciousness in the novel that contributes to the overall effort of discovering what is essentially human. Thus, I argue, Wallace asks his readers to contribute to the humanizing of *Infinite Jest*. Another deeper and more important meaning of the artificial heart story with which I began circles around relevant themes that Wallace has written about in his non-fiction essays: cultural irony, apathy and the failure of language as a means of communication. Wallace crafted the novel as an attempt to capture the essence of cultural irony, which, according to him, permeates American culture, making it hard to find an end or a beginning to it. Therefore, instead of attempting to see beyond this irony, the reader needs to look within this irony and search for meaning.

Today, the entertainment market looks even more lethal than the one Wallace depicts in *Infinite Jest*. As we enter a posthuman age, a better understanding of the lethal power of media entertainment in driving people towards solipsism, narcissism and addictiveness, and an understanding of the interconnectedness of cultural, natural and technological systems in the
environment and the position of the human within it will help humans survive. The example of Alcoholics Anonymous, ironically the only social establishment that seems to be functioning well in *Infinite Jest,* shows how an understanding of the self and the environment can be achieved through acts of questioning and re-ordering, which lead to a new and more balanced reconstruction of the self.

Due to the interconnectedness between technology and the market which aims to manipulate technology for its profitable gains, the market tries to control how people understand, use and interact with technology. When this control of technology by the market goes unabated, it results in dire consequences that threaten to dissolve the human subject and turn it into a mere passive absorber of whatever the market feeds it. In such society, people end up lost and secluded. They wander in life aimlessly. They incessantly ponder the bitter emptiness of their lives and lament their loneliness. By turning to entertainment technology, these subjects do not intentionally aim to lose their selfhood, but rather they actually seek a sense of control over their lives. By looking closely at the characters in the novel we see that by immersing themselves in a technologically mediated world with its ubiquitous and addictive entertainment and its enticing delirium of consumption, they are actually hoping to reach out to something beyond and find a remedy for their pain and loneliness, but their failure to understand the market drives them to addiction, mental illness, and even suicide. Where the characters fail, however, Wallace hopes his readers will succeed.

How the entertainment market lulls the society to sleep

We live in a technologically saturated world, and human life has already
entered a phase signified by the ubiquity of technology, virtuality, and cyber-capitalism. We have started to experience an unprecedented blurring of the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman; biological intelligence and artificial intelligence; and reality and simulation. This blurring of boundaries between reality and virtuality, the human and the nonhuman, along with the emergence of consumer culture and the popularity of entertainment technology have created a fertile ground for a culture that may lose control of its humanness. In *Infinite Jest*, Wallace presents a gloomy future of such a culture with characters who are lost and desperately searching for their inner selves and identities. He also portrays dysfunctional families, trying hard to cling to the last traditional meanings of the family. These characters suddenly find themselves unsure of the most basic concepts of their existence. They find themselves unsure of their own selfhood and their own realities. They function in an increasingly changing world bombarded with technology, entertainment, consumption and, most of all, addiction. People seek refuge in whatever takes them away from the burdens of reality. TV and filmed entertainment, for example, can provide a refuge to a person burdened and troubled by the conscious self, very much like mind-altering drugs do.

One of the major characters in the novel, a former drug addict and a current resident counselor at an AA recovery center, recalls viewing drugs and entertainment as “meaningful” alternatives to human relationships. This dependence on technology and entertainment, which is made possible by a totalizing market force, is depicted in *Infinite Jest* as a lack of understanding of
the role of technology, media and the market in human life, an anxiety caused by
the fear of emptiness and lack of control, and an inability to deal with a
diminishing of the gap between the human and the nonhuman. The huge
infiltration of entertainment technology in every aspect of life has been seen by
many as a utopian harbor, a virtual gigantic shopping mall, or a Disney-esque
world where one can leave the anxieties and uncertainties of reality behind.

This escape, as Wallace shows, is no solution to the problem; rather, the
desire for escapism is the problem itself. In *A Supposedly Fun Thing I will Never
Do Again* (1997), Wallace writes about an experience he had that sums up what
he labels the solipsistic narcissism of contemporary American culture. Wallace
boards a cruise ship for two weeks of uninterrupted self-indulgence. The motto of
the cruise is that it is the luxury of doing absolutely nothing, which is advertised
as relief for the vacationer of any sense of responsibility or need. All needs are
met even without asking. It is an entire withdrawal from the real world and its
problems, stresses and worries. But after a few days, Wallace begins to
understand the real philosophy of the luxury cruise. It is what he calls “American
despair.” Upon returning to the ship, Wallace describes seeing another bigger
and more luxurious ship, where people looked happier and more indulgent.
Wallace's own sense that all his needs have been met now immediately
diminishes because he (and everyone else on the ship) now wants more. Wallace
calls this the “American part of me that craves and responds to pampering and
passive pleasure: the Dissatisfied Infant part of me, the part that always and
indiscriminately WANTS” (315–16). This endless craving is exactly what the
entertainment market creates. Moreover, the market entices the consumer to believe that choice is only attainable in the market when in reality what the consumer does is sacrifice their ability to choose despite the fact that by immersing themselves in the techno-saturated world of entertainment and consumption, characters in the novel aim to become subjects of choice. The consumerist nature of American culture entices people into this restless chase of pleasure and comfort, which gives them a sense of being alive. In a manner similar to Wallace's novel, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* also describes the sense of "fullness of being" when the protagonist Jack Gladney and his wife Babette go on a shopping spree:

> It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags suggested, the weight and size and number, the familiar package designs and vivid lettering, the giant sizes, the family bargain packs with Day-Glo sale stickers, in the sense of replenishment we felt, the sense of well-being, the security and contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls -- it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less, expect less, who plan their lives around lonely walks in the evening. (20)

But as novels like *White Noise* and *Infinite Jest* show, the result of the immersion in the marketplace produces the exact opposite of any fullness of being. The more the characters consume, the emptier they feel and the more they become
objectified in a recursive process.

This idea of “wanting” and the desire to be “pampered,” which pushes the society to surrender itself to the market, is referred to by Holland as “infantile narcissism.” One of the major propellers of technology is consumers’ desire for pleasure, particularly infantile pleasure. Any technology that does not have games or amusement is not bound for success. There is a process of “gamification” of technology that makes it more appealing to users. The majority of the machines, gadgets and devices people use now have evolved in recent years into devices of gaming and entertainment. Smartphones, televisions, computers, and even cars have become gaming platforms. According to Holland, “Our development of machines that make us increasingly dependent on their work, their products that promise fulfillment, and their contribution to our image-based society through massive reproduction, acts as a key catalyst of our feelings of infantilization and our desire for those feelings” (228). In the novel, which echoes real life, there is a kind of benumbing conformity to the infantilization of society. Pleasure and entertainment are the sought-after end of technology, and this results from a fear of real life’s pain, loneliness and the fearful questions like death and suffering. But most of all, there is a fear of “anhedonia,” an impaired capacity to experience pleasure (Snaith 1993). It seems that people want more pleasure because they are afraid of not being able to experience pleasure at some point. We surround ourselves with entertainment so we can prove to ourselves that we are capable of enjoyment and that there isn’t emptiness inside us. In the novel, Wallace calls it “standard U.S. anhedonia” (694) and “one of the really
American things” (695), referring to its prevalence in US society. Wallace’s characters all experience this feeling of internal emptiness. He describes Hal as someone who “hasn’t had a bona fide intensity-of-interior-life-type emotion since he was tiny” (IJ 694). Wallace elaborates that anhedonic people like Hal are afraid of “being really human,” so they hide under a “hip empty mask” (IJ 695), that is anhedonia. Significantly, Wallace uses irony to propose a solution; he suggests that one way of being really human in this culture of infantile pleasure is “to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and [...] to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool” (IJ 695). Thus, to indulge in infantile pleasure might help people overcome the fear of anhedonia, whereas resisting such pleasure comes with a punishment. According to Holland, “Those who resist the infantile fear of earnest emotion and the desire to protect themselves from the “unpleasure” of pain, the novel only punishes them [...] both emotionally and physically in ways that define [them] as grotesque and socially unacknowledged” (“Art’s Heart” 231). This usually creates a feeling of a need for conformity, causing people to immerse themselves even deeper into whatever media technologies have to offer.

Television and the American ironic sensibility

Television, its influence on American culture, and its creation of what Wallace understands as an ironic sensibility has greatly contributed to the narcissism and reflexive solipsism that has deepened the woes of human subjectivity. Television is a technology that has significantly influenced people’s
lives to the extent that it has become one of the most essential parts of modern-day society. The television’s world of hyperreal images has imploded the line that separates physical and virtual realities. Many people still see it as an imitation of reality, but in fact, it is not. According to L. J. Shrum in *The Psychology of Entertainment Media* (2012), one important factor to consider here is the so-called “cultivation theory.” This theory, according to Shrum, has two components. First, television content “presents a systematic distortion of reality” (148) which means that the world that the television portrays is always different than the real world in being more exciting and having more options. The second component is “that frequent exposure to these distorted images results in their internalization: The more people watch television, the more they develop values, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions that are consistent with the world as it is portrayed on television” (148). Due to this internalization, people’s understanding of reality may become irreversibly mediated by values learned from the television.

In “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace discusses the ubiquitous role of television in American culture; however his analysis goes further, suggesting that television has radically changed our sense of irony. He argues that “early television helped legitimate absurdism and irony as not just literary devices but sensible responses to a ridiculous world” (65). Indeed, through television, irony lost its meaning. It has mutated to become just like television, not a medium but a message in itself. Holland argues, “It was television’s adoption of irony as its dominant mode in both advertising and programming that ruined the constructive possibilities of
irony, making it such an invisible part of our environment that it transformed from reactionary to the norm” (Succeeding 57-58). And, as Wallace goes on to show in *Infinite Jest*, the whole culture becomes shrouded in such irony that we are unable to express ourselves outside of it. Wallace presents a witty joke to describe the overwhelming nature of addiction where the addict cannot see anything outside of it. The joke goes like this:

This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, ‘Morning, boys, how’s the water?’ and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, ‘What the fuck is water?’ and swim away. (*IJ* 449)

This joke of the addict unwittingly swimming in addiction is similar to how all the characters in the novel swim in an irony that no one feels as ironic anymore. To capture this ironic atmosphere, *Infinite Jest* basically offers itself as an infinite irony. “Infinite Jest,” the title of a lethal movie depicted in the novel, also tries to capture this irony. The film is so entertaining that when a viewer sees it, he or she cannot stop watching, at least until they die. Even so, people desperately want to see the film. This logic sums up the consumer culture of *Infinite Jest*, but since it pictures a life shrouded with irony, no one sees anything outside of it. While the joke of the fish shows how irony engulfs the entire culture, it also gives a ray of hope. Gately’s ability to recognize the irony in the joke and apply it to his
condition as an addict turns out to help him beat his addiction. In like manner, the awareness that one is swimming in irony is the first step to growing out of it.

Ironic mainly circles around the idea of television as an enabler of the consumer as a subject of choice. In the novel, we see how television keeps changing and improving to keep people entertained. Television in its traditional sense (as a viewing box) has become obsolete. Its replacement is a technology Wallace calls the “Teleputer,” or simply “TP,” which is a combination of a television, computer, videophone and a VCR. He provides a very specific description of the machine which sounds very similar to the Internet:

InterLace Telentertainment, 932/1864 R.I.S.C. power-TPs w/ or w/o console, Pink2, post-Primestar D.S.S. dissemination, menus and icons, pixel-free Internet Fax, tri- and quad-modems w/ adjustable baud, Dissemination-Grids, screens so high-def you might as well be there, cost-effective videophonic conferencing, internal Froxx CD-ROM, electronic couture, all-in-one consoles, Yushityu nanoprocessors, laser chromatography, Virtual-capable media-cards, fiber-optic pulse, digital encoding, killer apps; carpal neuralagia, phosphemic migraine, gluteal hyperadiposity, lumbar stressae.

(II 60)

This description was included as a fragmented piece within the narrative, very much like a television commercial that interrupts a program or a show. What is striking in the description, though, is the last four phrases “carpal neuralagia,
phosphenic migraine, gluteal hyperadiposity, lumbar stressae.” In plain English those phrases mean: hand or wrist pain, migraines caused by flashing lights, fat buttocks, and lower back pain, respectively. The irony in this is that we have arrived at an age where products are so addictive that advertisers do not shy away from telling us their side effects in the commercial since nothing, not even bodily harm, detracts us from buying and consuming. This passage suggests a subtle comparison between addiction to entertainment and other types of addiction, particularly to tobacco. By law, the tobacco companies must include a warning of the health risks on the pack of cigarettes they sell so smokers would be aware of the risk they are taking when they smoke. However, this warning has become meaningless. Smokers have become so used to it that they no longer see it. In “E Unibus Pluram,” Wallace also likens TV watching to drug and alcohol abuse, “Television resembles other things mothers call "special treats"-e.g., candy, or liquor. [...] One can only guess what volume of gin or poundage of Toblerone six hours of special treat a day would convert to” (163).

In the essay Hal writes in a class called “Intro to Entertainment Studies” (IJ 411), he describes the rise and fall of television and its influence on consumers. According to him, television is a “psychic matrix” (IJ 412) that drives people into more and more passivity and consumption. It tricks the masses with the idea of choice and freedom. The viewer is told that he or she has 500+ channels to choose from, but in actual fact these five hundred channels are controlled by the Big Four broadcasters that determine what people can “choose” to watch. An advertising entrepreneur named P. Tom Veals jumps in with the
slogan that he wants to free the populace from passivity and the manipulation of the Big Four by having the viewers decide for themselves and make their own choices:

What matter whether your “choices” are 4 or 104, or 504? Veals’s campaign argued. Because here you were—assuming of course you were even cable-ready or dish-equipped and able to afford monthly fees that applied no matter what you “chose” each month—here you were, sitting here accepting only what was pumped by distant A.C.D.C. fiat into your entertainment-ken. Here you were consoling yourself about your dependence and passivity with rapid-fire zapping and surfing that were starting to be suspected to cause rather nasty types of epilepsy over the longish term. The cable kabal’s promise of “empowerment,” the campaign argued, was still just the invitation to choose which of 504 visual spoon-feedings you’d sit there and open wide for. (IJ 416)

And Veals goes on and on about how the Big Four take advantage of people’s need for the companionship of television and its addictiveness. It is a desperate need that results from a deeply painful realization of an empty life which makes viewers willingly accept manipulation by these money-hungry advertisers. Then Veals’ campaign offers the solution, “What if [...] the viewer could become her/his own programming director; what if s/he could define the very entertainment-happiness it was her/his right to pursue?” (IJ 416) In reality,
Veals’ campaign is more harmful than useful to consumers. The main idea is to offer viewers even more entertainment, but with no real benefit. The illusion of choice numbs people into passivity. It seems that the whole idea of “the freedom of choice” is basically nothing but an advertising slogan and a trap into the illusion of freedom. It is similar to the ads and commercials people see every day that promise them beauty, health and complete satisfaction. They give the consumer the illusion that these advertisers are different than their competitors. According to Jean Baudrillard this is a normal result of living in a hyperreal world. Baudrillard argues that we live in the third-order simulacrum where the difference between the original and copy is meaningless because there are no authentic origins anymore. Everything is a simulacrum of a simulacrum, ad infinitum. It is the era of the model or the code where everything is digitized. Consumer behavior like buying, watching, calling, and so on is monitored. These behaviors usually include a response of “yes” or “no” to products. Monitoring the response of the consumers can help the market reduce the choices to a mere binary system. What is done, then, is that the market creates infinite copies that give the illusion of freedom of choice; it is “the closure of the system in a vertigo of duplication” (136). Baudrillard also argues that the consumer is desperately trying to connect with reality, to reach something beyond the product, but by actually sinking even deeper into hyperreality; “What every society looks for in continuing to produce, and to overproduce, is to restore the real that escapes it. That is why today this "material" production is that of the hyperreal itself. It retains all the features, the whole discourse of traditional production, but it is no
longer anything but its scaled-down refraction” [emphasis in the original] (23).

For Baudrillard, the influence this has on our humanness is that as viewers of television or any other viewable technology, we are no longer in control (ironically, because we are desperate for control), and the whole relationship of “transmitter” and “receiver,” between who watches and what is being watched, is completely imploded in the process of simulation. The result, as he puts it, is that, “You no longer watch TV, it is TV that watches you” (29). It is, Baudrillard adds, a system “in which the distinction between the passive and the active is abolished. “You are information, you are the social, you are the event, you are involved, you have the word, etc” (29). This is very much the image presented in Infinite Jest. In fact, the cover of the 20th anniversary edition of the novel published earlier this year has a drawing of a television screen on which there is an eye wide open watching the viewers. People’s yearning for ways to fill the void in their lives, their desire to regain control and have freedom of choice, their need for meaning in a chaotic, fast-paced, and techno-mediated world have driven them to consumption. The result is that everything and everyone becomes part of the bigger system, including the system of entertainment in the cyber-capital world.

A great example of Television addiction and its impact on the unconscious of the consumer is Hugh Steeply’s father’s addiction to reruns of M*A*S*H. Steeply said “we watched him get consumed with a sort of entertainment” [emphasis added] (639). This description of Steeply’s father being “consumed” by the entertainment resonates with Baudrillard’s theory of the implosion of the
boundaries between the passive and the active, the transmitter and the receiver. At first Steeply’s father was attached to the show just like millions of other viewers, but then, with the rising popularity of the show, it became syndicated on different channels, so that there were new episodes and also hours of reruns. Steeply’s father reorganized his whole life so he wouldn’t miss any of those shows. He would watch the new and the old ones for hours. He even bought a small television so he wouldn’t miss the ones that air while he was still at work. It was as Steeply describes it “a gradual immersion. The withdrawal from life” (640) where “the organism of family simply shifted to accommodate” (641). Things would then get out of hand as the man loses balance and could no longer tell the difference between reality and fiction. M*A*S*H has begun to control his consciousness and his unconscious. The many hours of watching made him read too much into the show. He started writing notes, then letters to fictional characters talking about an apocalypse he thinks the show was hinting at. Another sign of the infiltration of the show into his psyche is when he began to constantly quote the show in his everyday conversations. He eventually died watching the show.

Fatal entertainment seems to be a recurrent theme in *Infinite Jest*. The movie created by James O. Incadenza referred to as “the Entertainment,” which also carries the same title as the novel, symbolizes the effect of the media on consumers. Wallace offers an allegory for how media technology desensitizes humans, so instead of being consumed by users, media technology consumes users. The movie “Infinite Jest” is an entertainment that is lethally addictive and
whoever lays eyes on this teleputer cartridge will not be able to stop watching it, and it may ultimately cause psychosis or death. The way this movie functions is to suck in everyone who watches it, creating an infinite system of passive entertainment, a feature that more or less applies to today’s entertainment culture. Referring to the video as “The Entertainment” with a capital E gives it a sense of great importance, reverence, and ultimately irresistibility. Hal and Orin Incandenza always refer to their father James O. Incandenza as “Himself.” This capitalization is also symbolic since James is the creator of the lethally addictive entertainment. His reverence results from being the one who controls the media, which, in turn, has the power to control all. In Gravity’s Rainbow, Thomas Pynchon refers to technology in a similar fashion, “Go ahead, capitalize the T on technology,” writes Pynchon, “deify it if it’ll make you feel less responsible” (521). Pynchon refers to how seeing technology as autonomous gives people the illusion that there is no ethical responsibility or risks for using it. The Entertainment in Infinite Jest is quite similar in terms of being both extremely irresistible, due to the great pleasure it provides to viewers, and extremely dangerous because of what it ultimately does to anyone who watches it. The movie is also referred to as “samizdat” (IJ 90), which is a Russian word that means the illegal distribution of censored documents by dissidents in the former Soviet Union. The obvious explanation for using this name to refer to the movie is the fact that the movie is distributed secretly because of its lethality. The term “samizdat” was first coined by a Russian poet in the 1950s as an acronym for “samesbyaizdat,” which literally means ‘publishing house for oneself,’ itself a
parody of the term “Gosizdat,” the acronym for the official state publishing house (Johnston 122). Referring to the entertainment as “self-publishing” and as a dissent against authority may be symbolic of the feeling of control and choice that the user or the consumer needs for reassurance. Because it is self-creation or self-publishing, it makes it feel like it is what we want. However, calling this lethally, addictive entertainment samizdat is in itself a parody of the parody. If anything, the entertainment proves to be the ultimate utilitarian power that sucks in everyone.

In discussing the influence that technology and entertainment have on the masses, Wallace dedicates one of the three major narratives in the novel to articulating how entertainment can be used as a weapon to terrorize people and achieve political gains. In the novel, North America appears to have become one unified state that includes the United States, Canada, and Mexico. This new state is known as the Organization of North American Nations (O.N.A.N.). What used to be northeastern United States and southeastern Canada before the unity has now become a hazardous waste dump. The Americans refer to it as the "Great Concavity," while Canadians call it the "Great Convexity." Corporations and businesses can purchase naming rights to each calendar year, so that instead of traditional numerical names, some of the names we see in the book are “The Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment," "The Year of Dairy Products from the American Heartland,” and “Year of the Trial-Size Dove Bar.” The Statue of Liberty has turned into an advertisement, holding huge fake hamburgers and other items, instead of the old torch.
Wallace continues his assessment of the way that entertainment serves political purposes in his depiction of Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants (A.F.R.), also known as the Wheelchair Assassins. This organization is an extremist group of Quebecois separatists who want Canada to secede from (O.N.A.N). One plan that these extremists have is to get their hands on the master copy of "Infinite Jest," the movie. Once they do that, they are going to duplicate it, distribute it and sit back and watch the Americans kill themselves with “pleasure.” One member of the Wheelchair Assassins who secretly talks to Hugh/Helen Steeply is known as Remy Marathe, who is a quadruple agent. Les Assassins en Fauteuils Roulants think that Marathe is a triple agent, only pretending to betray the AFR, while Marathe and Steeply know that he only pretends to pretend to betray them, which is again a comment on the loop of information and misinformation that runs throughout the novel and in one way or another defines the culture as a whole.

3 According to footnote 304, “The Wheelchair Assassins,” when they were still boys in Quebec, belonged to a cult called “Le Culte du Prochain Train,” French for “The Cult of the Next Train.” The cult was built around a game in which six boys line up and jump the train tracks as the train approaches, the winner is the last one of the six to jump the tracks before the train arrives. Due to the extreme danger involved in playing this game, many of the players would either get killed or maimed when struck by the coming trains. Those maimed would then end up in wheelchairs.
The conversations between Marathe and Steeply make up a significant part of the novel’s plot and are of extreme importance, especially to understanding the influence of entertainment and information technology on human subjects. One conversation in particular revolves around a Canadian experiment in which scientists, who initially were trying to locate the nerve terminals that cause seizures, found that “firing certain electrodes in certain parts of the lobes gave the brain intense pleasure” (*IJ* 470). The pleasure tissues are called “p-terminals.” These scientists started experimenting on animals, especially rats by wiring an auto-stimulation lever to this area of the brain; the lever can be pressed thousands of times per hour for stimulation. The result of the experiment was that male rats would ignore food and female rats and become fixated on the levers for permanent stimulation until they die of either dehydration or fatigue. When word got out about the experiment, many human volunteers line up around the block to sign up, risking their lives in an exchange for temporary intense pleasure. This experiment is quite similar to the movie “Infinite Jest” whose lethal addictiveness causes people to die watching it and raises the idea of choice. When people volunteered to be experimented on, knowing how dangerous this could be, there is the illusion that choice and control still apply during the experiment. However, the key ingredient that is eliminated in a perpetual p-terminal stimulation loop is choice itself, because once the loop starts, the subject falls under the spell of the entertainment. Shrum articulates this process very eloquently.

The differences in processing between narrative and rhetoric
[...] lead to blurred lines between what is entertainment and what is persuasion. In some instances, the lines are intentionally blurred by marketers who are interested in preventing some of the processes that may occur during the processing of rhetorical information (e.g., counterarguing). In other cases, the lines are unintentionally blurred because audience members do not understand the persuasive influence of entertainment media. (2)

In line with Shrum's analysis, Wallace's novel emphasizes how audiences underestimate the power of entertainment media. People seem to confuse the illusion of a personal ability to choose their entertainment and information technology and the fact that once they become attached, any possibility of personal choice ceases to exist due to the overwhelming power of entertainment media and technology. In fact, Michiko Kakutani writes that the reason Wallace juxtaposes the various narratives found in *Infinite Jest* instead of linking them in a seamless whole is to make the reader “consider the dialectic between freedom and authority (be it the authority of the State or the authority of Alcoholics Anonymous), the relationship between cause and effect, passivity and power and the need of human beings to order their lives through obsession and distraction.”

The self-consciousness of *Infinite Jest*

*Infinite Jest* can be understood as an enactment of the logic of the entertainment system it otherwise describes. In his review of the book, Sven Birkerts wrote
Wallace’s narrative structure should be seen [...] as a response to an altered cultural sensibility. The book mimes, in its movements as well as in its dense loads of referential data, the distributed systems that are the new paradigm in communications. The book is not about electronic culture, but it has internalized some of the decentering energies that computer technologies have released into our midst. (108)

In fact, Wallace himself clarifies that he has done this on purpose. He states that his initial aim was to create a book that would look very much like the Internet. He said that his first draft was even much longer than the final product and that the endnotes alone were almost 400 pages, but were later shortened to a 100. In an interview with Valerie Stivers, Wallace described his project as a creation of “something that would feel the way the culture would feel, which was a sort of tsunami of information. [...] This enormous amount of information, some of which meant something, some of which didn’t.” The book indeed feels that way; however, the main challenge of approaching Infinity Jest is not the length, although the amount of information conveyed in the novel does make many readers quit without finishing the book. Rather, its overwhelming influx of vaguely hyperlinked vignettes, endnotes, random nuggets of information, and fragments that feel like TV commercials or online pop-up ads make reading the novel similar to trying to read the Internet. In the novel, there is an obvious obsession with information. The 110 pages of endnotes present an example of that obsession. Some of these endnotes are stories in themselves. Note 110, for
example, is approximately 11000 words long and has endnotes itself. Another example of how Wallace mimics the Internet in his writing is the intentional inclusion of misinformation or wrong information. One of the subtle examples of this is all the wrong French that Wallace uses in the novel. For instance, Wallace refers to the “Wheelchair Assassins” as Les Assassins des Fauteuils Rollents. The word “Rollent” is not even a French word. The correct word is roulant. Some readers, especially those who speak French, may think that Wallace’s bad French in *Infinite Jest* is not intentional, but given Wallace’s wit and the nature of the book he wrote, there’s little doubt that mistakes were included on purpose to echo the bricolage of information and misinformation that defines “the Internet Age.”

The idea of technology’s effect, and especially that of television, on blurring the boundaries between watching and being watched, consuming and being consumed is central to the narrative. One of the most intriguing films directed by James O. Incandenza is one entitled *The Joke*. Video cameras record the film’s audience and project that recording on the screen, resulting in the audience watching itself watch itself, which makes the audience “self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile;” Wallace writes that this “supposedly comprises the film’s involuted ‘anti-narrative’ flow” (*IJ* 988). The movie lasts until the viewers, most of whom are movie critics who study themselves studying themselves taking notes, are impelled by their “espressos” to go to the bathroom. The book, filled with these types of examples, aims to show how the lines between the consumer and the entertainment have been blurred.
On the surface, *Infinite Jest* seems to only present the problem with no way out of the “panopticon” of the media market. However, Wallace’s message is embedded. The book itself is like water that the young fish could not recognize, but the old fish could. Thus, there is an implication about growing up as a society. In fact that is literally what Wallace tells David Lipsky, who wrote of his experience in joining Wallace on the book tour for *Infinite Jest* published in *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (2010):

> Probably each generation has different things that force the generation to grow up. Maybe for our grandparents it was World War Two. You know? For us, it’s gonna be that at, at a certain point, that we’re either gonna have to put away childish things and discipline ourselves about how much time do I spend being passively entertained? And how much time do I spend doing stuff that actually isn’t all that much fun minute by minute, but that builds certain muscles in me as a grown-up and a human being? And if we *don’t* do that, then (a) as individuals, we’re gonna die, and (b) the culture’s gonna grind to a halt. (86)

As readers, Wallace leaves us with the task of meaning-making. He wants us to see beyond the irony and make sure that our society does not end up as a society of infants striving for uninterrupted pampering.

Besides what the reader can infer beyond the story, *Infinite Jest* itself
includes clues for readers to re-conceptualize their subjectivities. The major characters in the novel, Hal and Don Gately, represent the problem and the antidote. Hal, on the one hand, is a teenager still discovering the “absurdity” of normal everyday life and trying to escape it through substance use and addiction. Gately, on the other hand, is a recovering Medrol addict who is trying to overcome his addiction and get back to normal life. Wallace’s decision to place a rehab center, where a major character struggles to return to normal life, across the street from the tennis academy, where another major character seeks to escape the ennui of life in a consumer culture, was anything but random. This proximity symbolizes how life in a consumerist, highly technological society runs on the illusion of infinite pleasure, which in turn unleashes an overwhelming power that entraps all consumers and keeps them going in circles, but circles in which Wallace believed it is still possible to rediscover ourselves. Such self-discovery requires one to see the problem and then work to overcome it. The fact that Gately is an adult and Hal is a teenager is another hint at the “growing up” that Wallace keeps reminding us of.

If the medium is indeed the message, then Wallace has arguably succeeded in making us, readers, connect and empathize with the characters and see some of the struggle in our lives. His novel helps us see the irony of media culture and invites us to develop a healthy form of awareness about media culture. The lesson the novel seeks to impart is not that technology is evil or that entertainment is unnecessary, but rather that human subjects can ward off being consumed by entertainment and media technology by understanding our infantile desires and
"growing up" to the forces of the market that always threaten to engulf us.
“In a high-tech world, [...] the human relation to technology—and with it, human identity itself—must be imagined in new ways.”

(R. L. Rutsky, *High Technē*)

In *Infinite Jest*, David Foster Wallace predicted the future of the capitalist market in the twenty-first century and its impact on humanity—especially the principle of choice—and the image he presented is alarming. With the mere aim of profitable gain and the intention of overwhelming people with entertainment, market providers like the fictionalized “Interlace TelEntertainment” literally drive people to death because it never stops injecting them with high doses of entertainment after which nothing else in life matters. Being on the receiving end, people passively take in whatever the market bombards them with. The Internet, for example, which is used as a new venue for marketing becomes a massive dump of information, Wallace says in one interview, with very little meaning or depth (Wallace, Stim e-zine). With consumers giving rein to their infantile desires for comfort and entertainment on one side and a technology-empowered, profit-driven market that strives for total control over consumers on
the other side, *Infinite Jest* is a cautionary tale of the power and threat of the capitalist market on the dissolution of human identity and choice. Any hope for change from within the culture of marketing and consumption seems improbable as Wallace, for example, considered laughable the idea that the Internet can escape the compelling force of the market and become a “democratizing force” because he believed that the market will completely control it and use it to suck the life out of people by overwhelming them with the illusion that they can “receive it all.” While *Infinite Jest* does include the possibility of resistance against the totalizing force of the market, as I discussed in the previous chapter, it is also important to understand that the overall atmosphere depicted in the novel in terms of the power of the market is obviously a dire one.

Set in the first decade of the twenty-first century, William Gibson’s *Pattern Recognition* does not completely part ways with *Infinite Jest* in presenting a culture infiltrated by a globalizing market, which assigns all parts of culture market values and treats them as market units, including both human producers and consumers. However, unlike the technological world that is totally controlled by the “Interlace TelEntertainment” and serves to overwhelm consumers with hypnotizing doses of entertainment, communication technologies, like the Internet, in *Pattern Recognition* are presented as a realm that has not completely fallen prey to the market. The Internet still presents a ray of hope and a possibility for resistance through which users can express their identities and counter the flattening impact of the neo-liberal globalizing market. Therefore, Gibson does not see escaping our techno-mediated world or seeking
an alternative to it as a necessity or even a possibility, but he rather believes that humanity through awareness and knowledge can resist the market force and thrive within a techno-culture without necessarily being absorbed or overwhelmed by it.

The commodified culture of *Pattern Recognition*

The growth of the late-capitalist market relies heavily on the commodification of culture. In the introduction to *The Consumer Society Reader* (2000), Juliet B. Schor and D. B. Holt present a thorough account of the process of commodification of everything by the late-capitalist market and the great influence this commodification has had on American culture. They explain how this process permeates every aspect of human life:

Indeed, virtually no aspect of social life appears to be immune from these trends [of commodification]. “Personal style” is now a hot market commodity. Trend spotters scour the nation’s inner cities, searching for the successors to the hip-hop innovators of the 1980s. They scrutinized the walk, the talk, the way one’s pants are worn. [...] The relentless drive to commodify is also evident in the commercialization of public space and culture. Advertising and marketing appear almost everywhere. [...] Indeed, our deepest personal connections are increasingly dominated by market transactions. [...] Little remains sacred, and separate from the world of the commodity. As a result people become ever
more desperate to sacralize the profane consumer world around them, worshipping celebrities, collections, and brand logos. (ix)

In fact, over half a century before Schor and Holt published their book, two prominent thinkers from the Frankfurt school, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, predicted the emergence of our current commodified culture. Building on Karl Marx’s theories of the alienation of workers, Adorno and Horkheimer argued that the capitalist market’s need for objectified workers also creates a need for passive, controllable consumers; “Everything is directed at overpowering a customer conceived as distracted or resistant” (133). This results in turning a creative, demanding and challenging culture into a banal, soothing and passive one. Adorno and Horkheimer also predicted that the use-value of objects will be replaced by symbolic social values and that art will be traded for entertainment filled mainly with advertising. Instead of responding to consumers’ needs in the production and proliferation of goods, the market will create these needs and also create the illusion of satisfaction for its passive consumers. John Kenneth Galbraith calls this “the dependence effect.” In The Affluent Society (1958), Galbraith argues that it is “the process of satisfying wants that creates the wants. For then the individual who urges the importance of production to satisfy these wants is precisely in the position of the onlooker who applauds the efforts of the squirrel to keep abreast of the wheel that is propelled by his own efforts” (125).
One of the most powerful commodifying tools used by the market in *Pattern Recognition* is a marketing tactic known as cool-hunting. Cool-hunting or trendspotting is defined by the novel’s protagonist, Cayce Pollard, as finding “a group behavior pattern around a particular class of objects” (*PR* 86). She elaborates that this marketing tactic relies heavily on pattern recognition. What cool-hunters do is “to recognize a pattern before anyone else does” (*PR* 86). The next steps in this process go as follows: “I point a commodifier at it [...] it gets productized. Turned into units. Marketed” (*PR* 86). This commodification of everyday life where even the most mundane human behavior can be analyzed and commodified through pattern-recognizing consumer experts and cool hunters employed by profit-driven multinational corporations poses a threat to human identity in the age of neoliberal globalization, which has become such a powerful force that it has turned everyday human life into a gigantic shopping mall or a never-ending reel of commercials. Humans have begun to be defined by their market value, and this commodification does not only pertain to the consumers but also those who work within the system including the cool-hunters themselves. Thus the power of commodification within neoliberal globalization necessitates that the market permeates life, and for this system to function and continue to grow, nobody is allowed to thrive outside of its territory.

In pre-capitalist markets, products had a certain use-value that met a specific consumer’s need, which kept a clear distinction between the consumer and the product. However, in late capitalist culture, objects and products are no longer produced and marketed for their use-value as businesses start to rely more
on the commodification of social values that shape consumer behavior than on the consumer’s need itself. Therefore, consumers have lost their position as agents of choice and have been turned into cogs in the machine of neoliberal globalization. This image of the culture where humans and objects are treated equally as actors within a system of production and consumption echoes Bruno Latour’s “actor-network” theory, which is widely quoted in critical posthumanist debates. According to Latour, humans and objects are all equal parts within social networks, and the difference between them should not be presupposed but emergent through the network of relations. This theory poses a challenge to the concept of human agency. Latour argues that, “purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of objects, but they are also not properties of humans either. They are properties of [...] collectives of human and nonhumans” (192). In a consumerist techno-culture, for example, agency, Latour explains, appears through “material-semiotic” formations or the complex relations of meaning and materiality in which consumers, products, machines and other actors are embedded. Therefore, there is no distinction between subject and object; consumer and product; or human and machine as individual actors within the network. Capitalist globalization seems to thrive on this understanding of subject-object relations. Through mass-production, the proliferation of objects, and the ubiquity of mass-media marketing, the difference between the consumer and the product has been blurred, and the consumer’s identity, choice and agency have been taken out of the equation to allow for cultural flattening and neoliberal globalization. This globalized cultural flattening is described in one
passage in the novel as “that country without borders [...] where there are no mirrors to find yourself on the other side of, all experience having been reduced, by the spectral hand of marketing, to price-point variations on the same thing” (341).

The resounding progress of high technology that has accompanied the spread of neo-liberal globalization exerts both fear and hope with regards to the post/human condition in the age of advanced technology and commodity culture. On the one hand, technology continues to be seen as an integral part of the free market that lures consumers and tempts them to sink deeper into the delirium of consumption and commodity fetishism, like we see in the entertainment addiction-plagued culture of *Infinite Jest*. In *Fictions of Commodity Culture* (2003), Christoph Lindner argues that the global advertising industry has manipulated technological advances in media to circulate and proliferate commodities and their images in order to create a spectacle of the image of the commodity and make it infiltrate every last aspect of late capitalist culture “to the point where representations of commodities have become autonomous subjects of consumption and objects of desire in their own right” (12). Leaning on the theories of Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard, who are among the most popular critics of cultural commodification and consumerist culture in the second half of the twentieth century, Lindner concludes that commodity marketing and proliferation aided by advanced media technologies have begun to play a central, commanding role in the social world “mediating and regulating all relations, shaping and determining the fabric of our everyday lives” (13). This authority that
the market has gained in the age of technology makes consumers more and more vulnerable to its overpowering lure and influence in society. It has been mentioned above that in a neo-liberal globalizing culture, the identities of both producers and consumers have been reduced to market values and functions of labor, and technology has been used to enable and hasten that metamorphosis. Alex Wetmore argues that within the market, “technology serves a more basic purpose as the material means by which subjects construct themselves as networks of commodifiable skills” (73). Indeed, in *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce, the cool hunter, for example, appears to have absorbed enormous data about brands, market processes and market relations and is initially presented as a person constructed specifically to fit a particular market role. Workers like Cayce are trained to be very good at the one thing they do until they become *what they do*.

The emergence of techno-culture, the proliferation of consumer goods and the illusions of satisfaction have influenced the society’s sense of time, creating what can be called a “perpetual present.” In choosing to base a novel in the present time for the first time in his career, William Gibson responds to this change. When he wrote his Sprawl trilogy (*Neuromancer* (1984); *Count Zero* (1986), *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988)), Gibson used futuristic themes to tell stories that take place in distant temporalities. His attention then turned to the present world as the main locale of his most recent novels *Pattern Recognition* (2003), *Spook Country* (2007) and *Zero History* (2010). The most obvious explanation for this shift is that the futuristic themes Gibson imagined when he
wrote his earlier science fiction novels have now become part of our daily life. For instance, although the Internet had already existed before the publication of *Neuromancer*, its idea was much simpler than what it has become in the late-1990s and into the twenty-first century. The idea of a global, powerful network of billions of computers (that is the Internet now) was first imagined, and explained in detail in *Neuromancer*. The present of *Pattern Recognition* is characterized by popular sci-fi-like themes: the power of the technology, the rise of the machine, second life, and cyberspace. Gerald Alva Miller sums up the image of the techno-mediated world that *Pattern Recognition* portrays, “Since we live under a constant barrage of information that bombards us from all sides through computers, cell phones, televisions, GPS systems, etc., we never have the capacity to look beyond the present moment. We already live in the future, so the need to create fictional futures becomes pointless” (102). This idea of existing in a perpetual futuristic present also echoes what one entrepreneur in Gibson's novel, Hubertus Bigend, claims,

We have no idea, now, of who or what the inhabitants of our future might be. In that sense, we have no future. Not in the sense that our grandparents had a future, or thought they did. Fully imagined cultural futures were the luxury of another day, one in which 'now' was of some greater duration. For us, of course, things can change so abruptly, so violently, so profoundly, that futures like our grandparents' have insufficient 'now' to stand on. We have no future because our present is too volatile. [...] We have only risk
management. The spinning of the given moment's scenarios.

Pattern recognition. (PR 57)

Looking at how the world functions in the posthuman age, one can argue that Hubertus is right; we certainly live in a present where every pulse of life has been reduced to data and codes which, although they only exist on flickering screens, determine every aspect of human life. Technology is developing great velocity, and yet we want more and more speed.

The realization of this perpetual present by the teaming up of the market and technology has resulted in the creation of mass culture, which works in close liaison with the neo-liberal globalizing market. For the market to have better control over the consumers, culture has to become unanimous. According to Adorno and Horkheimer this unanimity then allows the monopoly of the market, and “under monopoly all mass culture is identical” (94). Furthermore, aspects of culture that the market aims to control and monopolize are not limited to the real but also include the virtual. For example, *Pattern Recognition* introduces an enormous online social interest in viral video footage on a global online forum called F:F:F (Fetish:Footage:Forum). On this website, a sequence of anonymous film clips becomes an online sensation with millions of users around the world theorizing about the origins, meanings and artistic value of the clips. The footage and the search for the maker of the videos connect all the actions of the novel together. This mysterious Internet video footage, the social interest in it and the search for its origins also serve as a turning point in the novel where the commodification of the market and the desire for meaning and depth by the users
clash. What is especially interesting about Gibson's novel is that as it addresses the humanizing potential of the Internet, his writing also shows how the market threatens to coopt this potential. Indeed, as the phenomenon of the clips begins to have the potential of bringing people together in a quest for meaning, the market aims to spread its tentacles around it in order to turn it from a humanizing social experience into a business opportunity. After Cayce flies to London to sign a contract with a marketing company to evaluate a proposed logo for them, she is offered a completely different contract by Hubertus Bigend, the CEO of the company known as Blue Ant. Cayce eventually finds out that Blue Ant is not really what she was told it was, which is interesting since the name “blue ant” originally refers to an Australian wasp that looks like and is called an ant but really is not. The 135 video segments that go viral and draw a lot of attention on the Internet present a marketing opportunity to a business-oriented person like Hubertus Bigend who now wants Cayce to find the maker of the footage. People on the Internet become obsessed with this footage and try to find patterns and meanings in it, but for Bigend the goal is not to find patterns that might lead to meaning in the footage, but, according to him, to find a way to exploit and market the footage. Bigend makes a bold statement about today's market which has become, according to him, very much a simulacrum more than a real thing, “Far more creativity, today, goes into the marketing of products than into the products themselves” (*PR* 67). Earlier in the novel as Cayce walks into a Harvey Nichols and her allergy to brand names hits, she makes a similar statement about the reality of marketing:
This stuff is simulacra of simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who had himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row, flavouring their ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo kit and regimental stripes. But Tommy surely is the null point, the black hole. There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul. (PR 17-18)

Hubertus Bigend is a living embodiment of late capitalism that prioritizes material gain over anything else. For him, life can be seen through the lens of production and marketing. Although Bigend is the one who pushes Cayce to start the search for the origins of the footage, which ironically leads to Cayce’s effort to break from the trap of techno-capital and seek a re-appropriation of selfhood, his intentions are merely materialistic. As a representation of the market, Bigend seems to be the only one who has an interest in the clips yet does not care if the clips are parts of a whole or not, or if they have any symbolic or aesthetic meaning. When Cayce raises the question and asserts that she “knows in her heart” that the clips are parts of a whole and thus contain a meaningful message, Bigend rejects the possibility and, instead, emphasizes the importance of turning the footage into a marketable product, going so far as to describe the way in which people are wired to purchase products in a capitalist culture:
"The heart is a muscle," Bigend corrects. "You 'know' in your limbic brain. The seat of instinct. The mammalian brain. Deeper, wider, beyond logic. That is where advertising works, not in the upstart cortex. What we think of as 'mind' is only a sort of jumped-up gland, piggybacking on the reptilian brainstem and the older, mammalian mind, but our culture tricks us into recognizing it as all of consciousness. The mammalian spreads continent-wide beneath it, mute and muscular, attending its ancient agenda. And makes us buy things. (PR 69)

This obsession with the footage represents people’s desperate search for meaning in a world saturated with signs, a search for origins in a world of simulacra, a search for linearity in a world that celebrates fragmentation, and a search for depth in a world that reflects and reproduces itself in images and surfaces. It is an obsession that Bigend hopes to market and that Cayce hopes will lead to something meaningful.

Preserving a human identity in the world of commodity

Cayce Pollard works as a “cool hunter,” a job that has resulted in (or from) her unusual ability to recognize patterns in humans’ social behavior and predict with very high accuracy what the next market trends are going to be. Although this ability is developed within an overpowering technological market, Cayce succeeds in preserving her human identity from dissolution. Through years of experience in the marketplace, she has internalized huge datasets of logos,
trademarks, and marketing tricks and becomes exceptionally able to recognize the next “hot” trend before others do, hence her designation as a "cool hunter."

She observes and recognizes patterns in even mere randomness. According to Miller, Cayce’s incredible ability to recognize patterns in the market comes as a result of internalizing “not just the commodity marketplace, but also the hegemony of computers” (110). Cayce, however, has a so-called “trademark allergy”, one that develops into a phobia or a nausea of certain trademarks like Tommy Hilfiger and Bibendum, the Michelin Man; it is a “side effect of too much exposure to the reactor-cores of fashion” (PR 8). To solve this problem she removes the trademark logos from the clothes she wears and avoids contact with any fashion brand names. It is interesting that a person who lives in a “logo-maze” and whose psyche is populated with trademarks and brands cannot bear to have those trademarks come into contact with her body. In the way that Gibson describes it, this rejection is Cayce’s conscious attempt to keep herself from being consumed by the hegemonic power of the techno-cultural system and from becoming a mere commodified being. She, more than others, understands the influence of commodities and brands on humans and thereafter starts a journey where she searches for depth in a superficial empire of signs.

The marketing system that Cayce works within necessitates that she become, in effect, a conscious machine programmed to do one thing and to do it well. As we meet Cayce at the beginning of the novel, she works in recognizing patterns out of randomness for the market by deciding what will or will not work. To do so, she compares what she sees with the massive amount of information
about the market that she has acquired over the years. This gives one the impression that she has developed a computer-like binary system. For example, when she is flown over from New York to London at the beginning of the novel, the sole purpose is for her to only say “yes” or “no” to a company’s new sneaker’s logo. Despite all the money that has been invested in the logo, if she says “no” (without offering any reasons) the logo is not going to be used. Cayce was compared, both literally and metaphorically, to an artificial intelligence system on several occasions at the beginning of the novel, but one of the most intriguing of all is when her friend Damien refers to her clothes as CPUs: Cayce Pollard Units. CPU is a popular computer acronym that stands for “central processing unit” and functions as the brain in a computer. The CPU basically processes or executes a computer program which is made of sets of stored instructions and data. Cayce’s CPU is her brain, which has stored a vast amount of information about thousands of trademarks and logos and makes her responses to trends, fashion and marketing very much like a computer’s. After returning home from a meeting with Hubertus Bigend, “Cayce pauses to do a recompute” (PR 74) on that meeting. That is how Cayce is introduced to the reader, as a person whose deep immersion in the market and techno-cultural life has turned her into a soulful machine.

However, Cayce Pollard, in Donna Haraway’s terms, is a cyborg. Her subjectivity and identity have undergone a mutation as she exists in a technomediated space. The cyborg’s immersion in techno-culture constantly redefines the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. The cyborg embraces
newness and possibilities. This new position of the human does not, however, necessarily mean that humans have lost their value or exceptionalism. It is basically a new world that requires a new and different way of connecting with the other elements of culture. According to L. R. Rutsky, “The position of human beings in relation to this techno-cultural unconscious cannot, therefore, be that of the analyst (or theorist) who, standing outside this space, presumes to know or control it. It must instead be a relation of connection to, of interaction with, that which has been seen as ‘other,’” (21). Rutsky does not see this change as an abandonment of our humanity or as a beginning of a transhumanist age. Rather, this position of the human in relation to techo-culture can be understood, he argues, as an acknowledgement of “the otherness that is part of us. It would involve opening the boundaries of individual and collective identity, changing the relations that have distinguished between subject and object, self and other, us and them” (21-22).

Similarly, Rob Latham even argues that adapting to this new system of being is crucial for our survival. He builds on the argument of Douglas Rushkoff who praises the young generation that adapts to cultural mutation with enthusiasm and calls them “screenagers.” Latham then adds that these “cyborgs serve as models of how we must all learn to “youthen” ourselves—for either we incorporate the appropriate psychic prostheses [...] that permit us to interface with new technologies, or we consign ourselves to stagnation” (141). This stagnation can be either in the form of resisting technology or of becoming passive to its power. Thus, the key for human progress is incorporating and
appropriating the power of technology in ways that can advance our humanity.

Despite the overpowering impact of the market that *Pattern Recognition* portrays, hope for the human to preserve an identity can still be salvaged through the possibility of interaction between humans and technology outside of the manipulations of the marketplace. Alex Wetmore argues that Gibson wrote *Pattern Recognition* as a more optimistic version of the technological world of his 1984 cyberpunk masterpiece *Neuromancer* by presenting a posthuman culture in which “forms of autonomy and agency survive even after the boundaries have broken down between oppositions such as organic and artificial, humans and machines, reality and simulation, and labor and the self” (73). This human-technology interaction, Wetmore maintains, can allow for new modes of representation and new narratives of identity without threatening human survival or human subjectivity. As we see in *Pattern Recognition*, the most influential media technology, the Internet, which has been highly manipulated by marketing and advertising, can still present a realm of hope for individuals to counter the threat of the market through regaining and expanding a sense of self and identity, through searching for meaning and new interpretations, and through building bridges of communication and compassion. In “The Brand as a Cognitive Map in William Gibson’s *Pattern Recogniton*,” Lee Konstantinou argues that the Internet has so far played a significant part in transforming consumer culture by creating “hyperinformed consumers,” who have the means necessary to “survive the strains of our evolving consumer culture” (68). Konstantinou stresses that the right way for humans to survive is not by trying to
stop the rate of commodification or by adopting anti-consumption or anti-technology lifestyles, but by taking advantage of what high technology has made available to us and that is “historically unparalleled knowledge-gathering abilities, tied into the ‘central nervous system’ of the Internet” (68-69).

Therefore, instead of becoming just another tool for the market to fasten its grip over the masses, the Internet can turn into a democratizing and humanizing force.

The Internet can also turn pattern recognition from a marketing tool into a human desire for meanings and interpretations. The novel offers an interesting perspective on the phenomenon of pattern recognition, that is, the human capacity, stemming from our evolutionary past, to discern meaningful shapes among otherwise random patterns. What the novel suggests is that this age-old human capacity has been eroded by techno-culture. Indeed, after the videos become an Internet sensation, “footageheads” around the world have formed what Fredric Jameson calls “a worldwide confraternity,” (126) which starts following these clips and offering their interpretations of the content and wondering whether the clips are “a work in progress” or “something completed years ago, and meted out now, for some reason in these snippets” (PR 22). Cayce waits impatiently for every new segment; she plays and replays them again and again. As she watches the clips, Cayce becomes more and more desperate for meaning, for wholeness and depth, and she “wants nothing more than to see the film of which this must be a part. Must be” (PR 24). On the other hand, her “online” friend, Parkaboy, whom she knows through the website F:F:F, celebrates
the randomness of the clips. He tells her to “go to new footage as though you’ve seen no previous footage at all, thereby momentarily escaping the film or films that you’ve been assembling, consciously or unconsciously, since first exposure. [...] Homo sapiens are about pattern recognition” (PR 22). Parkaboy’s theory, that pattern is a thing of the past, reflects life in a techno-cultural society where everything is about data and profit. For Parkaboy, pattern recognition is “both a gift and a trap” (PR 22), so since there is a 50/50 chance of erring when it comes to human pattern recognition, being both a “gift” and a “trap,” Parkaboy thinks that it has to be abandoned. He refers to pattern recognition as something that “homo sapiens” needed, but at this age and time it no longer makes sense. What he believes in instead is technology because it eliminates doubt.

Cayce, on the other hand, thinks that taking risks with pattern recognition should be cherished as part of our humanness. Interestingly enough, her search for patterns and meaning as she accepts the job by an untrustworthy employer like Hubertus Bigend to track down the origin of the clips and find the maker can be seen as an emotional response to a more mind-numbing question of meaning: the mysterious disappearance of her father an ex-CIA agent who disappeared on the morning of 9/11. The loss and the trauma in the videos, which are reminiscent of the tragedy of 9/11 and the loss of her father, make Cayce eager to search for meaning. Cayce joins a large subculture that spends days on end studying the fragments, and despite her previous knowledge that “the one hundred and thirty-four previously discovered fragments, having been endlessly collated, broken down, reassembled, by armies of the most fanatical investigators, have yielded no
period and no particular narrative direction” (PR 24), she insists on trying to find meaning beyond the glowing surface of the videos.

Within the intersection of technology and the posthuman, Cayce’s search for the maker yields an important discovery regarding the use of the Internet in expanding the potential of the human, one that brings disability studies into conversation with posthumanist discourse. The maker of the film clips turns out to be a young Russian woman named Nora. In an assassination attempt that resulted in the death of her parents, Nora suffered neurological damage that rendered her mentally and physically disabled. She has one way to communicate with the world which is by producing video fragments. Disability studies are currently connecting with posthumanism. In The Posthuman (2013), Rosi Braidotti criticizes the narrow humanist ideas of “normality, normalcy, and normativity” (26) that have for centuries pushed people with disabilities to the edge of the human. As the disabled have suffered marginalization, and a subhuman status, it is sobering to see a mentally and physically disabled woman given voice and an opportunity for self-expressions through technology. The disabled also symbolizes the other that has been excluded by certain obsolete criteria of humanism. The constructive power of technology has allowed the “subaltern” to speak.

Cayce’s search for the maker of the video clips is in itself of great significance as well. Ever since the video clips started surfacing online, Cayce has become obsessed with them, she studied them carefully, looking for meaning and clues, but one thing that she wanted to know the most was the identity of the
author or “the maker.” Referring to the person who created the clips as “the maker” gives the author a god-like significance. This god-like significance of the maker gives Cayce a much needed assurance that what she is pursuing is not mirrors and smoke or mere apophenia, which is, as the novel defines, “the spontaneous perception of connections and meaningfulness in unrelated things, [or] an illusion of meaningfulness, faulty pattern recognition” (115). Cayce’s search for the maker and the origins of the clips is also symbolic of meaning and depth in a world saturated with machines and consumer products.

Cayce’s constant refusal to be consumed by the culture of brands and simulacrum and her desperate attempts to reconnect with reality and search for deeper meanings in life is a clear indication that while she, an avid Internet user and fashion cool hunter, explores “the new vistas that cyberspace has made available for colonization,” she also remembers “the fragility of a material world that cannot be replaced” (Hayles, How We Became 49). Her understanding of how important it is to connect with the “fragile” material world is reflected clearly in her trip to Tokyo. As she arrives in Tokyo, “the manically animated forest of signs,” (PR 125) she starts looking for any vestiges of nature and reality. She believes reality has been banished in this city to the extent that paved streets do not seem to hide any soil underneath, and everything looks artificial; “she’s never actually seen soil emerge from any incision they might make in the street, here; it’s as though there is nothing beneath the pavement but a clean, uniformly dense substrate of pipes and wiring” (PR 125). Tokyo is the techno-cultural space that epitomizes the posthuman city. Its densely complex structure and perfectly
designed scape resembles high-tech networks. It gives city dwellers the illusion that no world exists outside of this network. Cities like Tokyo are “founded on the premise that, at least in highly technologized societies, technology [...] has become such an inseparable part of our everyday cultural life that we now feel ourselves surrounded by, immersed in, a new, techno-cultural environment” (Rutsky 121). In Tokyo, Cayce’s subjectivity goes through a new phase, one in which nostalgia for the real and a desire for meaning create a sense of alienation in a simulated city that does not need a past, because it has already reached and perpetuated the future, and a city that thrives on signs and simulacrum. However, through individual re-appropriation, which is a resistance of overwhelming dominant cultural discourses that threaten her identity, Cayce is able to refuse to be consumed by the simulacrum.

In the “The Poetics of Pattern Recognition: William Gibson’s Shifting Technological Subject,” Alex Wetmore draws on the work of Michel de Certeau, especially his book *The Practices of Everyday Life* (1984) to show how Cayce’s mundane practices like walking in the city are of great importance in maintaining a sense of selfhood in the face of a dominant late capitalist discourse that threatens to absorb her subjectivity. In one section of the book entitled “Walking in the City,” Certeau contrasts two practices, the first is reminiscent of the Foucauldian panoptic view of the city as one looks down on New York from the top floor of the World Trade Center, and the other is what he refers to as “spatial practices” that escape the dominant discourse and mark “a contradiction between the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation”
One of these “spatial practices” is walking in the city. In London and Moscow, as well as in Tokyo, Cayce finds herself tempted to walk the city streets and evading the dominant cultural discourses, exemplified in the novel by spying, marketing, and automation of everyday life, that have begun to threaten her individual selfhood. It is through these mundane everyday life practices, that Cayce feels that she can connect with reality and its contingencies and gaps in meaning and interpretation.

Both Cayce and Nora share a significant human marker that triggers an urgency for meaning which seems to be the only possible way to break from the “dominant-based paradigms of interpretation.” Loss and its subsequent trauma become that shared human quality. Cayce’s goal of searching for the origins of the clips results from her deep feeling of the loss of her father, Win Pollard, on the morning of 9/11. Cayce describes the events of 9/11 as “an experience outside of culture” (PR 137) that has left her with many unanswered questions. For her, the terrorist attacks intercepted a culture that has terminated any sense of time and shielded itself against the harshness of reality.

However, even this trauma, and the idea of death and destruction, has been absorbed by the dominant cultural narrative of the media. Film and television’s constant depictions of catastrophes have turned it into a spectacle. The infinite entertainment and pleasure that the market promises gives the illusion that pain has no place in culture. When Cayce sees a low and loud plane flying over West Broadway on the morning of 9/11, the only thing she could think of was “They must be making a film” (PR 137), and after she watched the event...
live, it all felt like “watching one of her own dreams on television” (PR 137).

Thinking of movies and dreams at that moment echoes how we’ve begun to view
catastrophes even when they happen in real life. We have reached a point where
destruction and violence are only associated with movies and television, so when
a destructive event of this magnitude makes an unexpected appearance in our
reality, comprehending it becomes a challenge.

It is interesting that Cayce’s first reaction to the events combines both
movies and dreams. Movies and dreams are similar in their effect to the way we
perceive what we see. In his review of “Inception,” a 2010 blockbuster that deals
with dreaming and reality, Jonah Lehrer ties the idea of movie-watching to the
idea of dreaming in convincing fashion by using the theories of neuroscience. He
writes, “From the perspective of your brain, dreaming and movie-watching are
strangely parallel experiences. In fact, one could argue that sitting in a darkened
theater and staring at a thriller is the closest one can get to REM sleep with open
eyes.” Cayce’s inability to comprehend the harshness of reality after the attacks is
a result of the “Hollywood-ization” of everyday life. From a neuroscientific point
of view, Lehrer adds, there is a connection between watching a movie and seeing
a dream because when people watch movies or see dreams the prefrontal cortex
of the brain, “an area associated with logic, deliberative analysis, and self-
awareness,” becomes inactive. When the prefrontal cortex is inhibited, we lose
ourselves in the movie or the dream no matter how unbearable, absurd or
nonsensical the events are; “it’s as if our cortex is entertaining us with surreal
cinema, filling our strange nighttime narratives with whatever spare details
happen to be lying around.” A possible explanation of how Cayce felt as she witnessed the events is that the shock of the spectacle was probably too much for her to handle so she felt like dreaming or watching a thriller which quieted her prefrontal cortex while her visual cortex becomes more active than usual. “It’s a process in which [her] senses are hyperactive and yet [her] self-awareness is strangely diminished.” When we become desensitized to catastrophes through movies and simulations, this might be the only “mode” we can “switch to” in order to absorb such scenes. We can possibly connect this analogy between movies and dreams to consumption and marketing as well. This differentiation between parts of the human brain and their unparalleled reactions to different simulants resonates with Hubertus Bigend’s marketing philosophy: “You ‘know’ in your limbic brain. The seat of instinct. The mammalian brain. Deeper, wider, beyond logic. That is where advertising works, not in the upstart cortex” (PR, 69).

Bigend differentiates between the “upstart cortex” of the brain, which does the pattern recognition and works to build meaningful associations and the “limbic brain,” which, he believes, a cool hunter like Cayce needs to appeal to when it comes to buying and selling. This is why Bigend wants to find the maker of the videos and end the speculations about patterns, meanings and origins, which makes people use their “upstart cortexes.” He wants to end the pattern recognition quest, put that active “upstart context” of consumers to sleep, commodify the videos and awaken the consumers’ “limbic brain.”

This quieting of our prefrontal cortex does not only affect our ability to absorb the shock but also our ability to remember it. Although Cayce has seen
people jumping and falling from the towers, she realized “there will be no memory of it” (*PR* 137) because tragedy, destruction and loss are too real to be comprehended or even imagined by a culture saturated with hyperreality. In an essay written a few months after the attacks, Don DeLillo describes the events’ influence on our culture in similar terms; “The dramatic climb of the Dow and the speed of the Internet summoned us all to live permanently in the future, in the utopian glow of cyber-capital, because there’s *no memory* there, and this is where markets are uncontrolled and investment potential has no limits. All this changed on September 11” [emphasis added] (33). As Cayce becomes more and more frustrated with the fact that her father has disappeared without a trace and that no one seems to know where he was, she lamented, “the city seemed to have acquired a very specific amnesia” (*PR* 187). After this realization, Cayce’s interest in meaning, depth and wholeness becomes a defining aspect of her work. Her insistence that there is pattern and meaning in the clips reflects her feeling of loss and her desperate need for closure after the disappearance of her father. But her obsessive interest in the clips could also be part of a cultural counter-narrative used against the unimaginable disaster that was “too real” to handle. This counter-narrative seems to be exemplified by a fascination with objects. Right before the attacks, as Cayce was waiting for a meeting at the SoHo Grand Hotel, she witnessed what Gibson calls a “micro-event” that has announced the destruction that was about to come. “She had watched a single petal fall, from a dead rose” (*PR* 135) in a display window in an antique store. This image of the falling petal seemed to have stuck in her memory for a while after the events.
This micro-event becomes part of an obsession with objects, or as Georgiana Banita calls it a “panoptic obsession” (251) that followed the terrorist attacks. This obsession was triggered by an attempt to deal with a shocking unimaginable event. DeLillo lists more of these objects:

- The cellphones, the lost shoes, the handkerchiefs mashed in the faces of running men and women.
- The box cutters and credit cards.
- The paper that came streaming out of the towers and drifted across the river to Brooklyn backyards, status reports, résumés, insurance forms.
- Sheets of paper driven into concrete, according to witnesses.
- Paper slicing into truck tyres, fixed there.

These are among the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day. We need them, even the common tools of the terrorists, to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response. (35)

It may seem that objects, machines, and data that were once blamed for dehumanizing us are now the very thing we look for in order to take control of our humanness, but if we look closer at these objects listed by DeLillo and compare them to the clips Cayce has become fascinated with, we find they share a significant similarity. Those 9/11 objects are fragmentary, a pile of disconnected items that survived a holocaust of objects. What they lack now in their current state is pattern, but they are not necessarily random, and that gap between
pattern and randomness is what initiates the search for meaning and depth. The loneliness and silence of these objects is similar to the loneliness and silence of the scrap video footage that Nora compiles together in the viral clips. Fredric Jameson wrote that the clips’ lack of pattern and style provides “an ontological relief” to Cayce because they can give her “an epoch of rest, an escape from the noisy commodities themselves, which turn out [...] to be living entities preying on the humans who have to coexist with them” (114). Therefore, as Cayce sets out to search for her humanness and a redefinition of her subjectivity after realizing the overwhelming power of media technology and the commercialization of everyday life, she never rejects the system or tries to seek herself outside of it. On the contrary, as she resists the dominant discourse of late capitalism, Cayce seeks to re-understand her position in the system through negotiation and re-appropriation. She rejects trademarks and the simulacra of commercialism but at the same time chooses to immerse herself in the infinite possibilities of the World Wide Web through the online fascination of video footage that does not abide by the laws of linearity and sequential narrative. Her strategy echoes Katherine Hayles’, which entails that technology and information are not dangerous in themselves, but “the computational universe becomes dangerous when it goes from being a useful heuristic to an ideology that privileges information over everything else” (How We Became 244). What Cayce looks for in the online world of F:F:F and the video footage is what Hayles refers to as “fracture lines” in the system that allow people to envision other possibilities and other “futures in
which human beings feel at home in the universe because they are embodied creatures living in an embodied world.” (How We Became 244)

Cayce vs. Case

One way to see the difference between the current human position in a techno-mediated existence and the one characterized by a theorized radical transformation of humanness proposed by the transhumanists is to consider the difference between the protagonists of Gibson’s Neuromancer and Pattern Recognition. Cayce Pollard in Pattern Recognition represents the version of the posthuman this study advocates while Henry Dorsett Case in Neuromancer represents the more extreme transhumanist version that this study discredits. Gibson’s first novel Neuromancer (1984) announced the birth of Cyberpunk and Cyberspace which started a new trend of science fiction that focused mainly on the relationship of subjectivity and machine and tackled issues related to embodiment, immortality, and cyborgism. Neuromancer gives us a world that could only have been dreamt by transhumanists. In Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson (2000), Dani Cavallaro sums up the transhuman world of Neuromancer:

The human body immersed in a virtual environment is made harder and shinier by its fusion with technology. Yet it also crosses over into the domain of the hybrid, for its humanity is indissolubly linked to nonhuman apparatuses. The responses elicited by such an interpenetration of the organic and the inorganic are ambivalent; on the one hand,
technology is viewed as a kind of magical mirror capable of multiplying human powers ad infinitum and of reflecting humanity in an idealized form; on the other, technology is associated with the engulfment of the human by the nonhuman. Either way, the ‘hyper-texted’ body constructed via technology, ‘with its micro-flesh, multimedia channelled ports, cybernetic fingers, and bubbling neuro-brain,’ displaces the binary opposition between wired corporeality and organic corporeality. (28-29)

These properties of a transhuman subject are exemplified in *Neuromancer’s* main character, a “cyberspace cowboy” and a hacker who through several complex neurosurgeries is able to exist hybridly, between physical reality and virtual reality. This ability allows him to enter cyberspace and hack into corporate accounts and steal information. Case’s world is characterized by the great hegemony of information technology and the astounding advances of biotechnology that makes it possible to replace body parts and engineer them to give the body more powerful capabilities. In fact, in the world of *Neuromancer*, there is a black market that trades body parts and other genetic materials. Like *Pattern Recognition’s* Cayce Pollard, Case is hired by mysterious employers to find or steal information. Interestingly enough, the most important employer of Case is an artificial intelligence known as Wintermute who seeks Case’s help in order to unite with another artificial intelligence known as “Neuromancer.” Their unity in the end creates “the sum total of the work, the whole show” (259).
the beginning, Case was bedazzled by the infinite possibilities of the Matrix of
cyberspace and considered his body as “meat” and that he was in “the prison of
his own flesh” (6). At the end he meets his disembodied clone in the Matrix.

By comparing the main characters in Gibson’s two seminal works, the
reader can see that their names (Case and Cayce) are pronounced the same. Of
course, one would assume that Cayce should be pronounced like “Casey” or
“Cassie,” but she explains that she prefers to be called “Case.” (In fact, Cayce
mentions that her mother named her after Edgar Cayce—pronounced Casey—a
man who was known as the Sleeping Prophet because he claimed to have psychic
abilities and could tell the future, which is also another reference to Cayce’s cool-
hunting and pattern recognition skills). Another similarity between the
protagonists, Cayce and Case, is that they both travel between a virtual and a
physical world in search of information and access. Despite these similarities, a
closer examination of the two novels reveals an important change of tone in the
whole debate of posthumanism in Gibson’s fiction. *Neuromancer*’s Case reflects
the exaggerated view of transhumanism about the future of humanity. The
cyberspace that *Neuromancer* describes is built on the idea of disembodied
existence which is shown as a world of infinite possibilities and freedoms, a world
in which the body is nothing but a shell that can be enhanced and replaced or
simply cast away when one feels burdened with it. The Matrix, as Gibson refers to
it, is the next step in human’s search for immortality and an ultimate refuge from
the incarceration of the body. While *Neuromancer* embraces a panopticon
culture in which humans are technologically controlled, *Pattern Recognition*, on
the other hand, “moves away from totalizing depictions of technologically
determined subjects and toward a more hopeful vision in which the self is
occasionally able to elude the grasp of totalizing forces through everyday
practices of re-appropriation” (Wetmore 71-72). The Neuromancer’s Matrix, a
totally simulated realm of existence, is what makes its premise of a posthumanist
future flawed. The idea that one can cross over from a physical world into a
virtual, simulated existence originates from the notion that humanity can survive
without embodiment. Pattern Recognition comes as realization that just as
human body and consciousness can never exist separately, so do the physical and
the virtual spheres.

Of course, the market will continue to manipulate technology and form an
overwhelming and totalizing force that looks to commodify every last aspect of
culture, so there arises an urgency for humanity to avoid falling under the spell of
that force. Neuromancer serves as a cautionary tale that what Case does is a mere
escape from one radical view of humanness to another; both are based on the
same theoretical premise, an obsolete version of humanism in which the human
must always find a way to dominate the world. What Case has done is “replaced
an identity once dominated by notions of ‘biology as destiny’ with one dominated
by ‘technology as destiny.’” (Wetmore 73). Pattern Recognition therefore
presents the more compelling version of human life in a techno-cultural world
where humanness can still be preserved without necessarily rejecting technology
or escaping life in a simulated dimension. Countering the commodification of
culture and humanness must arise from within techno-culture and not by
escaping it.

The ending of *Pattern Recognition* carries profound meanings in terms of the quest for humanness and the preservation of a human identity in the face of the commodifying machine. The novel ends with Cayce falling asleep peacefully after accomplishing what she sets out to accomplish from the start: finding the maker and solving the mystery of the footage. But before Cayce falls asleep, her brand allergy, a side effect of excessive exposure to the market, is suddenly cured. Cayce is no longer afraid of the Michelin Man or of Tommy Hilfiger products. This cure symbolizes her ability to preserve her identity from the “logo-maze” (*PR* 18) that threatened to dissolve it because she now has gained a much better understanding of the system. Also of similar significance in the last scene of the novel is Cayce’s weeping “for her century, though whether the one past or the one present she doesn’t know” (356). This display of human empathy by Cayce is significant especially when contrasted with Molly’s, Case’s partner in *Neuromancer*, who, after multiple prosthetics were implanted in her eye sockets to add superhuman optical enhancements, loses the ability to cry, so when she feels sad her tears are transferred to her mouth, and she spits them.
CHAPTER 4

Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis: The Illusion of Transhuman Immortality and the Importance of the Self

“You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature [...] It’s what we invented to conceal the terrible secret of our decaying bodies. But it’s also life, isn’t it? It prolongs life, it provides new organs for those that wear out. New devices, new techniques every day. Lasers, masers, ultrasound. Give yourself up to it, Jack. Believe in it.” (DeLillo, White Noise)

Cosmopolis is a story about the failure of the transhumanist project, a cautionary tale that portrays the dire consequences of being tempted and ultimately consumed by the misleading promises of the cyber-capital world. Another side of the novel, however, draws on the journey of regaining control of subjectivity and seeking meaning and agency in a chaotic world. The novel’s odyssey-like ride across town that 28 year-old billionaire Eric Packer takes to get a hair-cut, a two mile ride that takes all day, serves to bring together two disparate spheres, the virtual sphere of cyber-capitalism and the sphere of reality
with its doubt, complexity and embodied, historical experience. As the story progresses, we begin to see the protagonist’s gradual acceptance of embodied existence, the connection between body and history and the damaging impact of cyber-capitalism (the teaming up of advanced technology and the market) on human agency and human identity.

The following chapter discusses two important points. First, it begins with a look at the impact of transhumanism and cyber-capitalism with their promises of immortality, unlimited power and the elimination of doubt on human subjects and their view of the world. The second point of focus is the sense of urgency the novel expounds to understand one’s position in a techno-saturated posthuman world and the need to re-appropriate a liberal humanist subjectivity not only through reorganizing the relations between embodiment and information but also by disrupting the commodification and dehumanization of the subject through acts of protest, violence, and even self-destruction.

Questions of death and immortality have permeated DeLillo’s oeuvre. In *Cosmopolis*, Eric who represents the hubris of cyber-capitalism speaks of a near future in which cybernetic immortality will be realized. Such a bold declaration echoes theories popularized by transhumanism. Transhumanists no longer view death as an inevitable fate that is part of human nature but as a shortcoming of our biological or evolutionary nature. They believe death is just another problem that technology needs to step in and fix. David Gelles, a *New York Times* reporter
who writes on the transhumanist issues, concludes that current transhumanists believe “sickness, aging, and death [are] unnecessary hindrances that we have the right and the responsibility to overcome. Our bodies, frail and unpredictable, are just another problem for these engineers to solve. The brain, our body’s computer, is due for an upgrade” [emphasis added] (35).

These and other similar transhumanist ideas are discussed in Cosmopolis in the back of the white stretch limousine by Eric Packer, who firmly believes that humanity might not be too far away from building a technology powerful enough to help us avoid this fearful fate called death. Armed with the dazzling technological advances of the twenty-first century and the power of nanotechnology, the transhumanist project aims to progress from human perfectibility on to human life-span expansion and, finally, to the ultimate elimination of death itself. Transhumanists list three levels of immortality that are being pursued simultaneously: biological immortality, bionic immortality and cybernetic immortality. Biological immortality is sought through genetic modifications and enhancements that halt aging and prevent diseases. Bionic immortality entails enhancing the body and adding or replacing parts that are stronger and immune to aging or sickness. When human-enhancing technologies reach the level where every body part can be replaced, immortality will be a
matter of maintaining those parts. The third type is cybernetic immortality in which consciousness is separated from the body and uploaded to a machine.

Using modern technology to avoid mortality is an enterprise that has roots in the mid-twentieth century. A project known as “Cryonics” developed by Robert Ettinger began gaining popularity in the 1960s. Cryonics means freezing the cadaver as soon as the person dies, and keeping the frozen body until future technology figures out a way to bring the dead back to life. Today Alcor Life Extension Foundation’s Cryonics facility in Scottsdale, Arizona has 144 bodies stored in liquid nitrogen. The idea behind the freezing, of course, is to keep the body cells from dying so that the reanimation and revival would be possible. The point of Cryonics is that those who die would not miss the opportunity of becoming immortal once biotechnology succeeds in solving the mortality riddle.

Interestingly, DeLillo’s most recent novel Zero K (2016) is also about Cryonics. The novel presents a fictionalized version of the Alcor freezing facility, which DeLillo calls the “Convergence.” This facility is much more advanced than its real-life counterpart in that it has a special unit called “Zero K” for those who choose to check out early. In this special unit, since the residents are still in good health, their bodies are not frozen; they live a life on a different level. It is a life that separates them from the world in an attempt to shelter them from its
suffering and pain. The narrator is a visitor to the facility in which his stepmother is dying of multiple sclerosis and is about to be frozen, and his father who is in good health chooses to stay in the “Zero K” unit. When confronted by his son about the illogicality of what he is about to do, the father says “I’m ending one version of my life to enter another and far more permanent version” (111). The narrator is skeptical of the whole enterprise of Cryonics and continues to question ideas like the influence of the technological resurrection on consciousness and identity. For example, will a person who was frozen and brought back to life by technology have the same consciousness?

What will it be like to come back? The same body, yes, or an enhanced body, but what about the mind? Is consciousness unaltered? Are you the same person? You die as someone with a certain name and with all the history and memory and mystery gathered in that person and that name. But do you wake up with all of that intact? Is it simply a long night’s sleep? (48)

The narrator also linked the transhumanist project of Cryonics to the market, “Give the futurists their blood money and they will make it possible for you to live forever” (117). This connection between cyber-capitalism and transhumanism
casts another shadow over the whole enterprise of life extension and cyber-
mortality.

Another technological ambition for achieving immortality that is also
gaining ground among many transhumanists is the practice of uploading, which
DeLillo also delves into in *Cosmopolis*. This idea of uploading originates from the
belief that the body is a machine and the brain is a computer. In this line of
thinking, the brain is a computer and human consciousness, memory and feelings
are understood as information encoded in our brains. This information can
therefore be uploaded, that is, copied and transferred onto a computer. One of
the first transhumanists to popularize the idea of uploading is Hans Moravec. In
*Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988), Moravec
provided multiple scenarios in which the uploading can take place. Another
major proponent of uploading is Ralph Merkle who believes that humanity, with
the help of nanotechnology and biotechnology, is on the right path to achieving
the cybernetic immortality of uploading. He lays out his theory as follows:

Your brain is a material object. The behavior of material
objects is described by the laws of physics. The laws of
physics can be modeled on a computer. Therefore, the
behavior of your brain can be modeled on a computer. (157)
Merkle explains that in a few decades we will have enough computer power to make the transfer successful.

But why this great fascination with immortality? People in general desire to live long lives by maintaining good health. Most of the choices we make are in some way related to health and the pursuit of comfort and happiness which have an underlying goal of living longer. Mortality, however, has been accepted as an inevitability throughout the ages in most cultures as a part of life. Acceptance of death as an inevitability has helped people deal with the anxiety of mortality.

However, the quest for immortality also has a long history. According to the popular myth, over 3700 years ago, a king in Mesopotamia named Gilgamesh went on a journey to look for an herb that grows at the bottom of the sea and was believed to grant whoever eats it everlasting life. After finding the plant, however, he falls asleep and a snake steals it before he can eat it. People in later cultures, whether by magic or alchemy or by searching for the “Fountain of Youth,” also sought ways of defeating mortality. The quest for eternal life, nonetheless, has also been viewed as unnatural and an endeavor that threatens to bring dire consequences or misery on the seeker. The story of Tithonus, a mortal who married Eon, the goddess of the dawn, and was granted immortality by Zeus, is told as a lesson that mortality may be a blessing when compared to an infinity of
pain and suffering. From the punishment of Prometheus to the fall of Icarus, attempts to exceed the boundaries of human mortality have been considered by many cultures throughout history as an aim that could backfire and bring more harm than good.

For the transhumanists, however, those past attempts have failed because human life was not advanced enough, and humans in the past did not have the technological means to pursue immortality. It is worth mentioning that the transhumanists’ dreams of immortality and their inability to accept death as an inevitability started to emerge due to two major cultural developments. First is the power and potential of virtuality, which has become an important benchmark in the cyber-capital world. The virtual world when seen as a disembodied existence paints a picture of infinite possibilities for human life. As transhumanists already celebrate the body/mind Cartesian dualism, it becomes easy for them to dream an existence that transcends the mortality of the body. Another factor that has contributed to the dream of immortality among transhumanists is the suppression of the fear and anxiety of death in late-capitalist cultures. DeLillo has raised the issue of mortality and the suppression of the fear of death in late capitalist America in most of his novels, especially in White Noise (1985) in which this idea is explicitly articulated and stands as a
major theme. The main characters in the novel, Jack Galdney, a college professor at a small midwestern college and his wife, Babette, both share an anxiety and fear of dying and always wonder who of them will die first. To counter this fear, the couple along with the rest of the society immerse themselves in shopping, consumption and watching television hoping to escape their anxiety. This fear of dying runs as the underlying theme of the novel and ties all its actions. In *White Noise*, people appear to have become obsessed with the anxiety and fear of dying and desperately seek a way to eliminate that fear. Symbolic immortality is sought through consumption and the hyperreality of the mass media and especially television. When these distractions are not enough, others seek more drastic measures. Dylar, a black-market experimental drug designed to make people forget the fear of death, is advertised as a remedy that can be taken by those who have an uncontrollable anxiety and fear of dying. A side effect of this substance, however, is a condition that results in the user’s inability to differentiate between reality and hyperreality, that is, simulations of reality like those found on television. Dylar is, of course, symbolic of a consumer and media culture that aims to help people forget about death but in the process blurs the lines that separate the real from the virtual such that people become “overwhelmed by the sheer number of material things, brand names, information and codes in an
entropic simulacra world whose main function is to cover up death” (Heller 37). The barrages of images and mass-produced products overwhelm the senses where it becomes hard to see the origin or the real, an idea that is beautifully articulated in a famous White Noise quote concerning an advertisement for an historic barn frequently visited by tourists: “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12). But, as White Noise concludes, Dylar, television, and consumption all fail to make people forget the fear of dying, and death remains an event that stands outside of culture; it is the “white noise” that people can sense all round them but cannot see and do not wish to talk about. What the novel also hints at in terms of technology is that an acceptance of the idea of mortality, in the words of the novel’s neurochemist, Winnie Richards, is “the boundary we need,” which can give a “precious texture to life [and] a sense of definition” (228). What DeLillo clearly establishes here is a conception of mortality as an essential component of humanness.

Cosmopolis also seeks to put forward this lesson of what makes us human by challenging a different version of the resistance to the idea of death. People like Eric Packer, the young venture capitalist billionaire, do not see death as a fearful inevitability to be suppressed or accepted, as the characters in White Noise did. Appearing as a mouthpiece for transhumanism and cyber-capitalism,
Eric believes that death can be defeated by technology. The cyber-capital sanctuary he lives in has given him a sense of faith that death is nothing but an anomaly that needs to be remedied. Eric lives his life according to screens, numbers, and the rise and fall of Nasdaq and Dow Jones; he appears to have become a part of the system that functions only in the “zero-oneness of the world” (CP 24), a system that has transformed him into a sum of information or a mere simulacrum. According to Jerry Varsava, the power of late capitalism, technology and wealth make Eric abandon both the public, corporeal sphere and function in what Varsava calls the “self sphere, a place defined by solipsism and ego where the libertarian credo of self-interest is taken to its logical conclusion” (84). By surrounding himself with screens and cameras that control everything outside, he removes any sense of insecurity. Furthermore, by turning his psyche into a digital realm where he believes he exerts more power, control and profit, Eric has reached a level where his subjectivity becomes “absorbed by a primordial megalomania” (Varsava 102). Benno Levin, Eric’s former employee who now is determined to kill him after claiming that Eric’s cyber-capital empire has degraded and dehumanized him, describes his former boss as a man who “wants to be one civilization ahead of this one” (152). Eric indeed appears always impatient “with the age-old limitations of physical reality, as if he were an
absolute outsider to the corporeal world” (Chandler 243). That may explain Eric’s
dream of the “singularity,” the transhumanist idea of uniting human and
machine and thus enabling people to become immortal. Eric has a strong faith
that technological mediations in human life are strong and influential enough to
eternalize humans cybernetically. He confidently predicts that “people will not
die. [...] People will be absorbed in streams of information” (CP 104). He is
convinced that he could transcend his biological body and “live outside the given
limits, in a chip, on a disk, as data, in whirl, in radiant spin, a consciousness
saved from void” (CP 206). Eric is also a proponent of the transhumanist idea of
uploading and wishes that he could upload his brain on a disk to immortalize it,
freeing in the process his consciousness from the limitations of the biological,
mortal body. According to Moravec, what people like Eric ultimately want is to
“evolve independently of human biology and its limitations, passing instead
directly from generation to generation of ever more capable intelligent
machinery” (4). Eric expects this post-biological “near” future to be realized as
machines become more intelligent than humans and are able to do unimaginable
things.

Eric’s internalization of transhumanist philosophy has influenced his
ability to connect with the physical world and with the past as well. In the first
half of the book, Eric constantly complains about the obsoleteness of objects around him. For him, offices are outdated concepts, airports don’t belong in the future, stethoscopes are “lost tools of antiquity” (CP 43), the ATM as a term is “aged and burdened by its own historical memory, [...] so cumbrous and mechanical that even the acronym seemed dated” (CP 54). The street, moreover, is “an offense to the truth of the future” (CP 65), and he believes that “it was time to retire the word phone” (CP 88). For Eric, the physical world is an obstacle to the free movement of data and information and these tools and objects should all be abandoned and left behind as humanity crosses into “smart spaces built on beams of light” (CP 102). The alternative to these objects, however, are screens and smart gadgets that bring the world to him while sitting in his cork-lined stretch limousine:

He understood how much it meant to him, the roll and flip of data on a screen. He studied the figural diagrams that brought organic patterns into play, birdwing and chambered shell. It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was
the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. (CP 24)

This description of Eric’s work as a cyber-capitalist shows how closely it is related and influenced by transhumanism. The above description clearly indicates the disembodiment and free movement of data. All human labor and effort can be reduced to data which frees it from physical realities’ limitations and boundaries. It is “soulful and glowing” and can be realized in digital form. This view of the market is what ultimately convinces Eric that even his consciousness can be "fully realized in electronic form." He desires to transcend biology and defy death, wanting to be able to seamlessly control the world from his gadgets and to become, in effect, fully virtual and transcend biology and defy death. What Eric yearns for and expresses here is what Joseph Conte has called the "technological sublime," “the conviction that science and technology can emancipate and uplift humanity with their promise of a brightly burnished future that eradicates the past” (187). The transhumanists’ faith in the technological sublime is so strong that it holds a spiritual value for many of them. Key to the above quoted definition of the technological sublime is the eradication of the past and the doubt that comes with it, as well as a sense of embodied lived experience. Eric asserts that one of the major achievements of technology is the elimination of doubt; “all doubt rises from past experience” (CP 86). In order to move beyond doubt, humans have to live in a perpetual future-present. Cyber-capitalism is the
ability to build, run and control businesses and investments electronically without necessarily having any physical presence. Physical presence is tied to time while virtual space is not. Due to the virtuality of this type of capitalism, which depends heavily on high technology, with all the business deals and all the gains and losses throughout the novel, we never see Eric enter an office or go to a place of business because “everything is fully realized in electronic form.” Both Cyber-capitalism and transhumanism view the past as an enemy because of its association with history, embodiment and corporeality. Embodiment and corporeality, which Eric named “meat space” as opposed to cyberspace, entail depth while cyber-capital celebrates surfaces. They entail pain and suffering, and cyber-capital preaches pain-free, virtual immortality.

Living on the network and the hastening of transhumanism

_Cosmopolis_ is set in April 2000, but Eric Packer is already “one civilization ahead of this one” (_CP_ 152). He does not believe in progress that is built on a time continuum involving past and present and leading to the future. Instead, he carries the slogan of cyber-capitalism “Destroy the past, make the future” (_CP_ 93). The future is all that matters to him because “the future is always a wholeness, a sameness. We're all tall and happy there” (_CP_ 91). Eric Packer’s dream future is a transhuman world in which his life is more virtual than physical, and his movement and interaction with the other elements of the cyber-capital world are abstract, resembling that of disembodied data and information.

According to Katherine Hayles, the transhumanist dualistic idea that sees information as disembodied deeply influences its view of the future of humanity.
Hayles explains that the argument of the information as disembodied was expressed along three fronts:

The first was concerned with the construction of information as a theoretical entity; the second with the construction of human neural structures so that they were seen as flows of information; the third, with the construction of artifacts that translated information flows into observable operations, thereby, making the flows ‘real’ (*How We Became 50*).

By internalizing these beliefs, Eric Packer, therefore, thinks of himself as a machine carrying a coded consciousness that can transcend any physical limitations and move freely within the network of the cyber-capital universe.

One can read the novel’s formal properties, as an allegory of a network on which Eric functions as a sign that only has meaning through connecting with other signs on the grid. In fact, the narrative of Eric’s journey across Manhattan which comprises the novel’s plot resembles surfing the World Wide Web where the organizing principles of time and space no longer apply. Eric goes from the multicultural area around the United Nations to the Diamond district, then stops at a presidential motorcade followed by the funeral procession of his favorite Sufi rap star; he then finds himself in the middle of an anti-capitalism riot, then a techno rave and later a filming of a movie that he himself becomes an extra in. The massiveness and unrealness of these compressed experiences are topped off by him having sex four times with four different partners, witnessing assassinations of two important figures, and making a large fortune and then
losing it all. These events are also punctuated with philosophical conversations with his analysts about history, politics, technology, transhumanism and death. This matrix of signs and data happens in a place that can be considered the mecca of cyber-capitalism, New York City. Eric celebrates this transformation and views it as the liberation of humans and capital from the boundaries of the physical world.

Eric’s trip takes place inside a white stretch limousine, “a platonic replica” that is identical to a dozen other cars in the city carrying prominent figures of the cyber-capital world. The replication and anonymity of the car is symbolic of the abstractness and data-like nature of the journey. The journey encounters several gridlocks on the actual streets of New York and the limo is reduced to stagnation at several times, making what should have been a relatively short drive across town to get a haircut last all day; however, behind the shortcomings of the physical world, life on Eric’s network is busy as usual. He holds meetings with his staff team in his limo, he bets millions of dollars on the yen, he runs his conglomerate businesses of Packer Capital with mere touches and swipes of his gadgets, he runs into his new wife whom he hardly knows, he transfers her entire wealth to his account and loses it in the stock market. His free-floating movement, his deals and cause-and-effect actions take place outside of the physical realm where real life with its complexities and uncertainties happens.

Living on the grid and moving like data on a computer program has a dehumanizing effect on Eric. It is important to note here that it is not technology that dehumanizes him. What dehumanizes him is his insistence that “the only
thing in the world worth pursuing professionally and intellectually [is] the interaction between technology and capital. The inseparability” (CP 23). Eric has been absorbed by the system which only believes in digital form. Anything that is not data has no value, because for Eric it has no market value. Everything has to be measured in numbers. Eric looks at the people on the street and describes them as “the others of the street, endless anonymous, twenty-one lives per second” (CP 20), viewing even human life as an otherness.

The heart of cyber-capital is abstractness and manipulation. It turns even those who protest against it into “a market fantasy” (CP 99). The technology that Eric lives his life in is a technology that separates and distances him from the world, making him incapable of human emotions or empathy. He does not want to blur the boundaries between the virtual and the corporeal; instead, he yearns for the triumph of the virtual over the corporeal so his movement would be boundless. This does not only alienate Eric from the outside physical world; it also alienates him from his own body because cyber-capitalism does “frighten and alienate us from our own (frail) bodies” (Helyer 134). When his white stretch limousine was being made, he demanded, in a reference to Marcel Proust, that “they had to proust⁴ it, cork-line it against street noise” (CP 70). Eric says that the point was to block out the noise of the city, but the real reason is in fact to shelter

⁴ DeLillo’s witty use of the word “proust” to refer to the cork-lining of the car is a reference to Marcel Proust’s famous cork-lined bedroom in Paris. Proust’s illness forced him to seek a sheltered lifestyle in the form of a cork-lined, noise-free room where he spent the last years of his life.
and completely separate him from the outside world. When the car gets stuck in an anti-capitalism protest, the protesters vandalize the outside of the car, while inside, Eric and Vija Kinski, his chief of theory, are drinking and discussing business. She also convinces him that the protest is a mere fantasy. Joel Schlosser argues that although Eric looks like a well-networked and connected businessman, he “seems to lack any kind of substantial connection with others. [...] The networked great man may have all kinds of access but the access itself does not amount to much” (3). He explains that Eric’s loss of self and human depth results from “pursuing the intersection of technology and capital [which] assaults the borders of perception. [...] These projects pull Eric into a virtual world where the very desires that impel him become unreal” (3). If we trace Eric’s movements throughout the novel, we realize that everything he does is abstract and bears no depth. His marriage to Elise Shifrin is an example. Eric suggests that he married Elise, a poet and an heiress of “the fabulous Shifrin banking fortune of Europe and the World” (CP 15), for her market value. Indeed, He married her for the value of her fortune, “the history of it, piling up over generations through world wars” (CP 120). When it comes to the woman herself, he does not know her and she does not know him. After being married for twenty-two days, they run into each other in Manhattan, and she exclaimed that he did not tell her that his eyes were blue, and he asked what she exactly does for a living. When he thinks of her he does so by her full name, which, as the narrator explains, is “due to her relative celebrity in the social columns and the fashion books” (116). Eric’s relationship with everybody else is also abstract and devoid of
any empathy or meaning. He felt inexplicably rejoiced and happy, when, for example, he learns of the death of his friend and business rival Nikolai Kaganovich with whom he hunted wild boars in Siberia. He also says that the killing of Arthur Rapp, the IMF managing director, on live television was so refreshing to him that he had to replay the video many times.

A Journey of re-humanization

Philip Nel writes that although DeLillo is widely regarded as a postmodern author, his fiction actually “complicates traditional distinctions between modern and postmodern” traditions (17). Nel argues that modernism, as much as postmodernism, is important to understanding the fiction of DeLillo because he “seeks the epic in the mundane, embraces a modernist avant-garde, writes a tightly controlled prose, and densely layers his allusive novels” (17). Just as DeLillo brings the modern and the postmodern in his fiction and complicates the distinction between the two, his work, I argue, also presents a complex mixture of humanist and posthumanist techniques that complicates the boundaries between humanism and posthumanism. Although Eric Packer is a firm believer in the power of techno-capitalism and transhumanism, in the broader scheme of the novel there is a deep desire—one that is reflected more in his actions than in his words—to locate his lost human identity. From the beginning of the story, one can sense that Eric’s cyber-capital world is falling apart and symbolized, for instance, in Eric’s sudden desire to go back to the old, poor neighborhood where his father used to take him to get a haircut. With his wealth and power, he could hire barbers to come to his office, house or even his limousine, as his chief of
technology advised, but he insists on going across town to the old neighborhood even when credible threats to his life have been reported. Along the way, Eric’s life begins to change; he starts as a man who lives for the power of technology and money, but he gradually, intentionally gives up both. The novel traces the way he begins to understand the dehumanizing effect that the cyber-capital has had on his selfhood and identity. As he starts freeing himself from the shackles of cyber-capitalism, he becomes more and more eager to confront his mortality, the very aspect of reality he previously wanted to banish.

There is a recurrent theme in DeLillo’s fiction where one of the ways to counter the commodification of everyday life is through acts of violence. Through acts of violence, DeLillo's characters, those who feel that their subjectivities have been dissolved by the market, try to recover a sense of human agency. These violent reactions are depicted in his work as embedded in a confrontation with the body and mortality. For example, there is a scene in White Noise where Jack Gladney finds out that his wife Babette is having an affair with a man in exchange for Dylar, the black-market drug believed to erase the fear of dying. Jack decides that he wants to kill this man. He first hesitates but then sees the opportunity to face his fear of dying by engaging in this act of violence. He uses the violence as a means to recuperate his body to its mortality, which gives him a sense of assurance and agency. Violence brings characters back into their bodies and compels them to face, accept, and affirm mortality as part of what it means to be human.

Both Eric and Benno also look eager to face mortality. Benno Levin, Eric’s
nemesis, sets out to do exactly what Jack Gladney does. Benno attempts to recuperate embodiment and counter the commodification of his subjectivity by resorting to violence. He is convinced that by confronting mortality he is able to regain control over his embodiment and counter the dehumanizing power of cyber-capitalism. According to Conte, “Although Levin is not to be regarded as a martyr in the cause of a global theocratic state, his murderous design puts him in loose alliance with those who refuse to be absorbed in the dominion of an information economy and a virtual future” (187). Eric also strives for the same purpose by seeking the man he initially victimized and destroyed but now poses the greatest threat to his life. Eric’s understanding of his mortality through the confrontation with his killer helps him understand his human weakness. By confronting Eric, Benno aims to re-establish his subjectivity by differentiating himself from those who are dead, and by shooting himself in the hand, Eric aims to do the same but by establishing a connection to mortality. Regardless of the different sides of life and death on which they stand, the influence of the experience on both of them is the same: It made them feel fully human. As this tension and interaction between mortality and immortality, embodiment and information continue into the posthuman age, there will continue to be more re-appropriation and reinscription through which subjectivity re-establishes itself and individual agency finds a way to emerge.

Eric’s desire to re-establish his subjectivity also appears in his heightened interest in the body after previously disregarding its value in favor of the mind. Although most of his philosophical discussions with his staff and analysts show
that he dreams of disembodied existence, his actions from the outset suggest otherwise. Eric’s obsession with his body can be seen in his uncontrolled sex drive and his obsessive daily medical check-ups. He becomes extremely worried that his “prostate is asymmetrical,” a condition his doctor tells him is benign and no reason for concern. But Eric is concerned about it, not because the condition is life threatening, but because he, a man who immersed himself in the realm of techno-capitalism with its promise of perfection and balance, realizes the failure of that promise in the imperfection of his own body, an imperfection that cannot be fixed. He might have ignored his asymmetrical prostate gland, since he dreams of a cyber, disembodied immortality that would allow him to leave the imperfect body behind, but in DeLillo’s rendering he cannot ignore the truth of his body. As his assassin, Benno Levin confronts him towards the novel’s end, he tells him that the answer to the meaning of his life is in “the lopsided, the thing that’s skewed a little. You were looking for balance, beautiful balance, equal parts, equal sides, [...] the answer was in your body, in your prostate” (200). Levin is not an enemy of technology; he is an enemy of techno-capital. For him technology is part of life, not a separate life in itself. Technology, for him, is not supposed to make human life perfect and completely balanced; instead, it is supposed to empower humans as they face the imperfections and imbalances of life.

As he comes face to face with his death, Eric laments his failure to seek a unified self. He knows that he has been absorbed by the techno-capital market and that his identity and subjectivity have become saturated. Not only did Eric
think there is no such thing as a unified self, he also believed that pursuing one was a contradiction. As Eric’s death looms in the horizon, he starts to understand the importance of the physical in the establishment of subjectivity. Embracing mortality allows Eric to experience first-person consciousness and a sense of subjectivity or, as one of the characters in DeLillo’s play Valparaiso (1999) calls it, “the naked shitmost self” (91). He tries to experience that through self-inflicted pain. In the scene where Eric seeks and voluntarily surrenders to his nemesis, Benno, Eric shoots himself in the hand in an attempt to bring his consciousness and body together “as a gesture of concentration, his direct involvement in the action of pain reducing hormones” (CP 197). It is this moment that Eric feels human again, body and soul united under excruciating pain. Eric finally succumbs to his mortality and declares the impossibility of the technological sublime in a passage so crucial I quote it in its entirety:

But his pain interfered with his immortality. It was crucial to his distinctiveness, too vital to be bypassed and not susceptible, he didn’t think, to computer emulation. The things that made him who he was could hardly be identified much less converted to data, the things that lived and milled in his body, everywhere, random, riotous, billions of trillions, in the neurons and peptides, the throbbing temple vein, in the veer of his libidinous intellect. So much come and gone, this is who he was, the lost taste of milk licked from his mother’s breast, the stuff he sneezes when he sneezes, this is him, and how a person becomes the reflection he
sees in a dusty window when he walks by. He’d come to know himself, untranslatably, through his pain. He felt so tired now his hard-gotten grip on the world, material things, great things, his memories true and false, the vague malaise of winter twilights, untransferable, the pale nights when his identity flattens for lack of sleep, the small wart he feels on his thigh every time he showers, all him, and how the soap he uses, the smell and feel of the concave bar make him who he is because he names the fragrance, amandine, and the hang of his cock, untransferable, and his strangely achy knee, the click in his knee when he bends it, all him, and so much else that's not convertible to some high sublime, the technology of mind-without-end. (CP 207-8)

Eric’s late desire is now to return to the past and to retrieve a historical depth through the organic and the physical. The only way people like Eric understand the past is when it is reduced into codes and commodities. Thus, even when Eric wants culture to get rid of the past, he could only see it through commodities and gadgets “ATM,” (54), “cash register” (71), “phone” (88), and “Walkie-talkie,” (102). It seems only fitting that when Eric realizes the importance of historicizing, he seeks that through his interest in the body as a reflection of history. Eric starts seeing people differently, looking for signs of history in their physical appearance. For example, his limousine driver, an Indian Sikh, who for Eric has never been much more than “the Sikh at the wheel,” is missing a finger. Upon noticing that physical impairment, Eric takes it seriously and reads in it “a body ruin that
carried history and pain” (CP 17). Also, his other Middle Eastern driver, Ibrahim, has a “ravaged eye,” which Eric becomes obsessed with. The scar makes him think of “brooding folklore of time and fate” (CP 170). The fact that these drivers come from poor nations that lack technology and endure a lot of physical suffering and pain that is reflected on their bodies has made it even more meaningful to him.

Does maintaining a subjectivity require a rejection of technology? The answer lies in humans’ understanding and use of technology. A comparison between Benno Levin and Eric Packer’s views of technology reveals that technology meant different things to them. Benno embraces technology but, unlike Eric, he succeeds in realizing its potential without being sucked into the cyber-capital trap that dissolves one’s identity and subjectivity and turns a subject into “a helpless robot soldier” (CP 195). The difference between Benno and Eric is that when Benno feels that his job requires that the cyber market dehumanize him and turn him into “a minor technical element” (CP 60), all he has to do is to leave his job and re-establish himself, but for Eric cyber-capital is not his job, it is his life, and that explains why Eric’s emancipation from the entrapment of cyber-capital ends with his destruction. According to Joseph Conte, Benno and Eric belonged to two different alliances; Benno belonged to the “alliance with those who refuse to be absorbed in the dominion of an information technology and a virtual future” (187).

The final scene of Cosmopolis definitely brings about that complication and overlapping of the two world views: the posthumanist and the humanist. It
may appear on the surface that Eric “the posthumanist” and Benno “the humanist” are enemies, and that Benno hates Eric more than anything, but that is simply not the case. Without the illusions and the hubris of cyber-capital that dominated Eric’s life, he and Benno are not that different; they even share the same rare condition, the asymmetrical prostate.

When comparing Eric’s discussions with his staff earlier in the novel to his discussions with Benno in the final scene, we find that these last discussions between them are the most humanizing and the most compassionate. Eric’s discussions with his staff about technology, economics, philosophy and history are mainly abstract, contrived and depthless; even the staff themselves are devoid of any sense of history or any connection to reality. Eric, for example, says of Vija Kinski, his chief of theory, “She was a voice with a body as an afterthought, a wry smile that sailed through heavy traffic. Give her a history and she’d disappear” (105). As he talks with Benno, Eric feels a deep connection with him due to the history that is embedded in his experience. After Eric loses all his fortune and realizes that the dream of cybernetic immortality is nothing but an illusion, Benno feels that all of a sudden “he has lost interest in the man” (209). He has to “remember why” (61) he wanted to kill him now because what he sets out to do initially, which is to end Eric’s fantasy-like life claiming that it is the only way to “put my life in order” (151), has happened without the need to end Eric’s life.

For Eric, Benno also serves as the other that he repressed. As they come face to face, their realization of their mortality becomes a humanizing force that blurs the gap between the self and the other for both of them. When Eric shoots
himself in the hand, Benno “caringly” uses handkerchiefs to stop the bleeding. In that moment of unshielded pain, an unlikely bonding between the killer and the victim takes place. DeLillo leaves the meaning of this bonding intentionally vague. One interpretation of this bonding could be that Benno is Eric’s alter ego, but it could also be the case that he is Eric’s past, which comes back to humanize him explaining what Benno means when he says, “I know you better than anyone knows you” (CP 198).

DeLillo’s witty ending of the novel leaves open the question of the source of human bonding, that is, the compassionate connection that forms between Eric and Benno, target and would-be killer. Eric has an unusual wristwatch that displays images through a camera that was “so microscopically refined it was almost pure information. It was almost pure metaphysics. It operated inside the watch body, collecting images in the immediate vicinity and displaying them on the crystal” (CP 204-5). Eric looks at the watch and sees his body in a morgue, suggesting that his crystal hi-tech watch has foreseen his death. The crystal watch is the last residue of Eric’s cyber-capital empire, and his death depicted by it may be interpreted symbolically as the death of his transhuman, cyber-capital world. This is not the first time that this watch predicts the future and shows something before it happens to Eric in real life. The reason this watch declares his death is because the pain he feels after he shoots himself summons him back from the virtual into the real world. He is alive in original space, consciousness and embodiment, but this also has interrupted the uploading of his consciousness
into the matrix of the virtual world. That process has to be aborted because Eric has become fully human.
CONCLUSION
Towards a New Understanding of Posthumanism

This study argues that posthumanism is not an abandonment of humanism but is in fact a re-appropriation of certain humanist principles to fit an age in which humanity has embraced technology and the nonhuman. Humanity’s relationship to the nonhuman, which has shifted from that of control and manipulation to acceptance and interaction, necessitates that the role and position of the human in the posthuman age be reimagined. One of the most important humanist principles that is being redefined is human exceptionalism. According to traditional humanist philosophy, the human is superior to the nonhuman because only the human is believed to be capable of self-consciousness, rational reasoning and the acquisition and use of knowledge. But the recent growth and proliferation of technology and artificial intelligence show that machines are now able to perform tasks that in the past only humans were believed to be capable of and that the power of these machines is incessantly and exponentially evolving. These developments have started to raise questions about human exceptionalism and superiority. Some critical posthumanists, like N. Katherine Hayles, argue that humanist values like exceptionalism, autonomy and agency no longer belong in the posthuman age while transhumanists, like Nick Bostrom and Ray Kurzweil, believe that the technological revolution is going to allow humanity to transcend its current limited state into some post-biological existence where dreams like cybernetic immortality and the singularity (merger
of human intelligence and machine intelligence) will become a reality. Through an analysis of a sample of novels written by contemporary authors known for their portrayal of the human condition in the age of technology, this study shows that values like human exceptionalism, autonomy and agency can survive in the posthuman age through acts of re-appropriation and reinscription. In fact, the novels emphasize that these values are essential to the survival and preservation of humanness especially when technology is used by the late capitalist market as a hegemonic force to subdue humans and dissolve their identities in order to turn them into passive consumers or mere market values.

The relationship between the human and the machine is discussed in the first chapter, which focuses on *Galatea 2.2* by Richard Powers. As this study aims primarily to shed light on the position and role of humanity in the posthuman age, it is very important to examine the current status of the relationship between human intelligence and machine intelligence, and *Galatea 2.2* presents a quintessential case. Powers succeeds in portraying a relationship of co-existence and interaction between the human and the machine without having to sacrifice one side for the survival of the other. In fact *Galatea 2.2* not only shows that the relationship between humans and intelligent machines can evolve into love, care and companionship, but it also allows a better understanding of the human self. This understanding can be seen more clearly when applying the concept of “dépaysement,” which entails that by immersing oneself in the world of the other or the unfamiliar, a person can see the self or the familiar in a new, more constructive manner. While the analysis of *Galatea 2.2* shows that the
boundaries between the human and the nonhuman have not collapsed but are being reconceptualized, it also debunks the transhumanist theory that relationships with machines can replace relationships with humans. The inability of the intelligent machine, Helen, in *Galatea 2.2* to handle the full human experience and the machine’s decision to shut itself down proves that machines are not capable of having human emotions.

As humans become more and more attached to and enamored by technology, they may become victims of the late capitalist market that uses the dazzling lure of technology to entrap consumers in a frenzy of overconsumption, which can result in an uncontrolled addiction to entertainment and pleasure. While *Galatea 2.2* emphasizes the importance of technology in understanding the self through interaction and mutual understanding, David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* shows the destructive results of becoming passive to the power of a technology controlled by the market. Chapter two discusses Wallace’s magnum opus as a cautionary tale of how humanity can fall prey to that lethal power of the entertainment market, which uses the latest advances in technology to bait consumers. The novel presents a gloomy posthuman future in which humanity has sold its soul in exchange for the illusion of infinite pleasure through technology. The unbridled desire for unlimited choices pushes the society into recursive loops where the main principle they sacrifice is choice itself. Although the world of *Infinite Jest* is extremely dystopic and grim, Wallace implies that humanity in the posthuman future can still be saved by becoming more aware of the danger of seeking infinite pleasure through an overpowering market and by
returning to human values like empathy and unmediated communication. A less gloomy portrayal of technology can be found in *Pattern Recognition* by William Gibson, who decides for the first time in his career to write a realist novel in order to capture the current status of technology in human life. In chapter 3, we see how *Pattern Recognition* shows a shift in Gibson’s view of the posthuman age from the transhumanist future he predicted in *Neuromancer* in which humans are able to exist in virtual matrices and where human bodies can be enhanced or replaced. In *Pattern Recognition*, Gibson shows that while the market continues to have a powerful impact on humanity, technology can still function as an empowering force for humanity and has not fallen under the complete control of the market. It is as if the characters in Gibson’s novel have heeded the warning by Wallace and, therefore, feel the responsibility to preserve their human identities in the face of the market that threatens to dissolve them. The Internet, for example, becomes a humanizing realm that expands the potential of the self and allows the characters to search for deeper meanings and build bridges of communication and empathy.

The last issue that this study delves into is the idea of cybernetic immortality and its connection to cyber-capitalism through a discussion of Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*. The idea of cybernetic immortality has been popularized by transhumanists, who claim that high technology will make it possible for humans to live forever once a method to upload human consciousness on a computer is developed. The chapter discusses the origins of the idea of cybernetic immortality and how this desire for post-biological existence can have a destructive impact on
those who pursue it. As the idea of technological immortality is discredited, the importance of embodied human experience is highlighted. The last chapter also shows how after the dream of achieving immortality proves to be an illusion, the protagonist starts to realize the importance of embodied existence and its deep connection to history and humanness.

Finally, each one of these novels emphasizes one or more humanist values that need to be preserved in the posthuman age in order for humanity to survive and develop through meaningful interaction with the nonhuman other. However, these novels belong to what is commonly known as high art or high literature, which is largely known for its focus on serious human values and a better human future. Therefore, by only focusing on novels form high literature, the fairly limited scope of this study leaves out the perspectives of other works of art, especially those referred to as popular fiction, in terms of their representation of the ideas of posthumanism and transhumanism. Future studies can look into these representations and possibly draw comparisons between high literature and popular literature.
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