Central Services

"Hi there. I want to talk to you about ducts. Do your ducts seem old fashioned? Out-of-date? Central Services' new duct designs are now available in hundreds of different colours to suit your individual taste. Hurry now while stocks last to your nearest Central Services' showroom. Designer colours to suit your demanding taste."

TV Commercial Presenter, *Brazil* (1985)[1]

In 1985 Terry Gilliam released the film *Brazil*, his prescient satire of a decelerating retro-future slowed under the weight of a lumbering, bureaucratic workforce. The film's release was remarkably well timed as it coincided with an audible sigh of relief as the total social subjugation which seemed immanent in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948) had somehow yet to arrive. Missed in the celebration of this dystopian avoidance was that also unrealised were the utopian futures predicted in his contemporaries' works of science fiction. Still in 1985 we could not teleport; we did not live on Mars; there was no robot workforce; we were no closer to an egalitarian society.

This is in contrast to the first half of the 20th century in which innovation was materializing the formerly fantastic, systematically attending to a checklist of poetic technologies handed down directly from Jules Verne. Submarines: check; Flying machines: check; Rockets to the Moon; check. Had our technological ambitions out-paced our abilities? Were we just better guessers at the turn of the century? Or instead, had the inventive energies of the second half of the 20th century been directed elsewhere?

Seemingly in response to the utopian energy of the late 1960's, the following decade saw a deviation from the pursuit of alternative futures, instead directing focus and funding towards information and military technologies which carried predictable outcomes. Further detouring any burgeoning quixotic impulse, this decade also saw 'peer-review' established as the gatekeeper to professional and academic funding; placing those researchers most likely to propose alternative futures in competition with one another, vying to convince their rivals that they already know what their investigations will discover. This resulting oversight ensured the abandoning of large-scale investment in poetic technological research for the remainder of the century.[2]

In *Patterned Recognition*, Jennifer Rose Sciarrino purposively foregrounds these competing strains of technological development, exhibiting the anachronistic tension between these two drives. Citing those last gasps of the utopian dream of a robot work force, Sciarrino deploys an attended CNC router to shape plaster into sculptural models that lay veiled upon a modular arrangement of sterile work desks. Work on Computer Numerical Control (CNC) technologies began in the early 1950's, during a late burst of emancipatory patronage. This particular avenue of research contained enough imaginative potential that it incited rampant speculation by groups like the Situationists, Yippies, and *Potere Operaio* about a dawning labour-less future. However, the move to

replace human workers with robots never wholly materialized. Still today, the employing of automated workers has only occurred in the narrow guise of the technician's aid; shifting human labour from the processes of construction and assembly to those of management and administration.

Two decades later the pursuit of bureaucratic technologies had become the primary target of government financing. Newly founded agencies such as ARPA (later DARPA) were created to ensure that U.S. military technology remained ahead of the Soviet Union, and their well-funded laboratories were thrown open to welcome the brightest, young researchers working in fields including missile defense, nuclear test detection, counter-insurgency, behavioural sciences and computer processing. While a student-researcher for ARPA, Edwin Catmull, who now serves as the president of Walt Disney Animation and Pixar Studios, developed the technology of texture-mapping as a means of applying colour, detail, and surface texture to a 3D model. Its contemporary application allows for life like, real-time simulations, producing manageable temporal and spatial distances between the user and their virtual objective.

Using this technology Sciarrino prints a series of computer-generated textures onto synthetic fabrics, stretching them across the curves and corners of her CNC'ed models. Taken together, an array of material applications is proposed as digital updates for out-of-date dreamers; soliciting with a pseudo-sales pitch of, 'sure, we'll get to the future, but wouldn't it look better in stone? Stainless steel?' Each finish proposes an alternative virtual event with a distinct set of social values, yet despite the myriad outcomes available within a digitally modelled world each one falls back within the constraints of our current condition.

Referencing both sides of this vital rift within 20th century research, Sciarrino produces a subtle science fiction. Gilliam's *Brazil* ends with the protagonist Sam Lowry convicted as a terrorist for failing to adhere to the strict controls of the Ministry. As he awaits execution his mind drifts to a dream world in which he himself can fly, soaring toward an unencumbered future. With a gaze turned both forward and back, *Patterned Recognition* too exhibits a desire to escape bureaucratic rule, proposing instead a return to those energies through which alternative futures might again be imaginable.

– Aryen Hoekstra

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[1] *Brazil*. Dir. Terry Gilliam. Universal, 1985.

[2] Graeber, David. *On Bureaucratic Technologies and the Future as Dream-Time*. SVA Lecture Series.
 Art Criticism and Writing MFA Program. SVA School of Visual Arts, New York. 19 January, 2012.