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Poetics of fantastic characters in the novels of William Gibson and Neal Stephenson

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Annotation *This article explores the poetics of fantastic characters in the works of William Gibson and Neal Stephenson—two key figures in the development of cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk science fiction. Through a comparative literary analysis, the study identifies the structural, semantic, and symbolic features of their character construction, with emphasis on the cultural, philosophical, and technological contexts that inform the fictional worlds of their novels. Special attention is given to Gibson's Neuromancer and Stephenson's Snow Crash, where, fantastic characters act as mediators between human and post-human realities. The article argues that both authors use fantastical elements not only to construct speculative futures, but also to challenge existing narratives of identity, agency, and embodiment in the digital age.*

Keywords *Cyberpunk, speculative fiction, fantastic characters, poetics, posthumanism, simulation, artificial intelligence, identity, ontology, epistemology, digital culture, narrative theory, cybernetic subjectivity, literary analysis, cultural critique, postmodernism*

Поэтика фантастических персонажей в романах Уильяма Гибсона и Нила Стивенсона

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Аннотация *В статье рассматривается поэтика фантастических персонажей в произведениях Уильяма Гибсона и Нила Стивенсона — двух ключевых фигур в развитии киберпанка и посткиберпанка в научной фантастике. Посредством сравнительного литературного анализа выявляются структурные, семантические и символические особенности построения персонажей, с акцентом на культурный, философский и технологический контекст, определяющий художественные миры их романов. Особое внимание уделяется романам «Нейромант» Гибсона и «Лавина» Стивенсона, где фантастические персонажи выступают посредниками между человеческой и постчеловеческой реальностью. В статье утверждается, что оба автора используют элементы фантастики не только для конструирования спекулятивного будущего, но и для критического переосмысления нарративов идентичности, агентности и воплощённости в цифровую эпоху.*

Ключевые слова *Киберпанк, спекулятивная фантастика, фантастические персонажи, поэтика, постгуманизм, симуляция, искусственный интеллект, идентичность, онтология, эпистемология, цифровая культура, теория*

нарратива, кибернетическая субъектность, литературный анализ, культурная критика, постмодернизм

Uilyam Gibson va Neyl Stivenson romanlarida fantastik qahramonlar poetikasi

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Annotatsiya *Ushbu maqolada kiberpank va postkiberpank ilmiy fantastikasining rivojida muhim rol o'ynagan Uilyam Gibson va Neyl Stivenson asarlaridagi fantastik qahramonlar poetikasi o'rganiladi. Taqqosloviy adabiy tahlil orqali mualliflar yaratgan obrazlarning struktura, semantika va ramziy xususiyatlari aniqlanadi. Tahlilda romanlarning badiiy olamlarini shakllantiruvchi madaniy, falsafiy va texnologik omillarga alohida e'tibor qaratiladi. Ayniqsa, Gibsonning Neuromancer (Neyromant) va Stivensonning Snow Crash (Qor bo'roni) asarlaridagi fantastik qahramonlarning insoniy va postinsoniy realliklar o'rtasida vositachi sifatida namoyon bo'lishi tahlil qilinadi. Maqolada mualliflar fantastik elementlardan nafaqat taxminiy kelajakni yaratish, balki raqamli asrda shaxsiyat, subyektivlik va jismoniylik haqidagi mavjud narrativlarni qayta ko'rib chiqish vositasi sifatida foydalanishlari ta'kidlanadi.*

Kalit so'zlar *Kiberpank, spekulativ fantastika, fantastik qahramonlar, poetika, postgumanizm, simulyatsiya, sun'iy intellekt, shaxsiyat, ontologiya, epistemologiya, raqamli madaniyat, narrativ nazariyasi, kibernetik subyektivlik, adabiy tahlil, madaniy tanqid, postmodernizm*

The latter decades of the 20th century witnessed a striking transformation in speculative (science) fiction—a shift from utopian visions and pulp futurism toward deeply theorized, culturally embedded narratives. As Patrick Parrinder notes, this period saw the emergence of a "mytho-metaphorical" science fiction, in which new technologies become metaphors and frameworks for human experience, not merely narrative devices. Scholars such as Veronica Hollinger and Kathryn Hume have emphasized how speculative characters—and the societies they inhabit—serve to critique hegemonic structures, particularly capitalist and patriarchal systems, by articulating the tension between the individual and increasingly technologized structures of power.

Into this evolving paradigm entered William Gibson and Neal Stephenson, whose works did not merely contribute to the genre; they redefined it. With Neuromancer (1984) and Snow Crash (1992), these authors introduced characters who embody the cybernetic intersection of human subjectivity and technological materiality. Bryce Nolan argues that these novels elevated cyberpunk from subgenre to literary canon—indeed, Neuromancer and Snow Crash were among the first works of science fiction to achieve sustained critical and cultural attention precisely because of their poetic ambition.

Gibson's poetics are anchored in what The New Yorker describes as an intense engagement with the present: he observed emergent technologies like Sony Walkman's and arcade games, mapping their social resonances to projected futures in cyber-space. This creative method disrupts traditional chronology—futurity is never fully "arrived," but perpetually unfolding. In Neuromancer, cybernetic experience and embodied lived realities blend through what M. Keith Booker, drawing on Bakhtin's notion of the chronotype, calls a shift from temporal to spatial narrative modes—a hallmark of the postmodern imagination.

Stephenson, by contrast, embraces a maximalist, intertextual poetics. Snow Crash weaves together Sumerian myth, linguistic theory, hacker culture, and corporate dystopia. His protagonists—Hiro Protagonist and Y.T.—are embodied metaphors for techno-linguistic hybridity, negotiating both physical and virtual geographies. Walter Benn Michaels has noted that the novel's view of language-as-code centralizes the hybridity of hacker and machine consciousness.

In their respective contexts, both authors explore the posthuman condition. Gibson's cyborg characters—Molly Millions, Case, AI entities—function as liminal agents who destabilize Cartesian binaries and reveal the permeability of organic/inorganic, human/machine boundaries. Stephenson's avatars and viruses dramatize the mutability of identity and language, rendering characters as software-ridden, data-encoded beings navigating hyperreal environments.

Critics like Alexandra Wetmore have observed ideological shifts across Gibson's work—from Neuromancer's Foucauldian sense of panoptic control to later texts like Pattern Recognition, where hope and agency are relocated in material, embodied experience and everyday practices. This evolution underscores the dynamic relationship between character poetics and theoretical frameworks—from disciplinary power toward embodied performativity along lines described by Hayles and de Certeza.

This article investigates how fantastic characters function rhetorically and poetics-wise within these works, framed across three interlinked dimensions:

1	**Ideological and thematic reflection**	How characters critique techno capitalistic structures, negotiate autonomy and embodiment, and enact resistance through their cybernetic hybridity.
2	**Stylistic and structural techniques**	Gibson's spatial-first narrative and sensory-hallucinatory texture; Stephenson's historical intertextuality and code-saturated exposition.
3	**Cultural-philosophical positioning**	Cultural-philosophical positioning: The interplay of postmodernity, posthumanism, myth, and simulation, grounded in theories by Jameson, Baudrillard, Haraway, and Hayles.

By comparing these poetic strategies, we show how fantastic character poetics not only illustrate but enact a reimagining of identity, temporality, and reality in the networked, digital age. In doing so, Gibson and Stephenson's characters emerge as symbolic mediators, navigating and exposing the evolving boundaries of human being—technological, cultural, and ideological.

This study draws on an interdisciplinary framework grounded in three interrelated theoretical currents: literary theories of the fantastic, the aesthetics of cyberpunk, and post humanist philosophy. Each framework provides unique but overlapping tools for analyzing how

characters in the novels of William Gibson and Neal Stephenson are constructed, narrated, and interpreted as fantastic figures within speculative narrative systems.

First, the theory of the fantastic, most notably defined by Tzvetan Todorov in his seminal work "The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre" (1973), establishes a critical apparatus for interpreting ambiguity in narrative. Todorov defines the fantastic as the moment of hesitation between a natural and supernatural explanation of events, emphasizing how the reader's uncertainty is an essential aspect of the genre. Rosemary Jackson further develops this framework in "Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion" (1981), arguing that the fantastic does not merely escape reality but actively undermines and interrogates it. This notion aligns with Gibson's and Stephenson's characters, who often exist in liminal states—half-human, half-digital, half-mythical—challenging the epistemological assumptions of rational modernity.

Second, the aesthetics of cyberpunk, as articulated by critics like Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. and Brian McHale, provide a crucial lens through which to read the stylistic and narrative techniques that shape these texts. Csicsery-Ronay's "The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction" (2008) identifies key elements of cyberpunk poetics, including the merging of human and machine, the collapse of temporal and spatial boundaries, and the prominence of artificial intelligence and virtuality. McHale, in "Postmodernist Fiction" (1987), locates cyberpunk within the broader context of postmodern aesthetics, where ontological uncertainty becomes the dominant mode. These aesthetics inform the characterization strategies of authors like Gibson, whose prose style is deliberately fragmented and elliptical, reflecting the disorientation of characters embedded in complex, layered realities.

Third, the study incorporates posthumanist theory, particularly the works of N. Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti, to understand how identity, embodiment, and agency are reconfigured in technologically saturated environments. Hayles's "How We Became Posthuman" (1999) offers a crucial insight: that subjectivity in the information age is increasingly disembodied, distributed, and networked. Braidotti's "The Posthuman" (2013) extends this analysis by positing the posthuman as a new ontological subjectivity, decentered and relational. In the novels of Gibson and Stephenson, fantastic characters often reflect these posthuman conditions: they are coded entities, avatars, and hybrid beings that question the stability of the human subject.

In this context, the term 'poetics' is invoked in its classical Aristotelian sense—the study of the structures and principles that govern narrative and character construction. However, this study also adapts the term to include its modern critical evolution, encompassing the performative, symbolic, and ideological dimensions of character. Thus, the poetics of fantastic characters involves not only how such figures are written but how they function within broader cultural discourses about technology, identity, and power.

Gibson and Stephenson, while distinct in their narrative styles and philosophical emphases, both deploy poetics that challenge ontological boundaries. Their characters are not merely products of futuristic imagination but serve as critical instruments for exploring the crises of humanism in the digital age. These figures resist categorization; they are at once mythical and material, human and non-human, protagonists and algorithms. In examining these literary constructs through the intersecting lenses of the fantastic, cyberpunk, and posthumanism, this study seeks to uncover how speculative fiction narratively theorizes the transformation of the human condition in the 21st century.

William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984) is widely credited as a foundational text in the cyberpunk genre, and its fantastic characters represent a radical reimagining of human

identity in the digital age. The novel introduces Case, a former hacker who has been biologically punished for double-crossing his employers, and Molly Millions, a cyborg mercenary with mirror-shaded eyes and retractable razors beneath her fingernails. These characters occupy a fragmented, hyper-capitalist world where multinational corporations wield more power than governments, and where artificial intelligences (AIs) like Wintermute and Neuromancer operate behind the scenes, manipulating human actors as part of a broader transhumanist narrative.

The fantastic elements in *Neuromancer* are subtle and often philosophical in nature. Rather than presenting supernatural forces or magical beings, Gibson constructs a world in which the boundary between human and machine is constantly blurred. As critic Scott Bukatman observes, "cyberpunk's liminal characters dwell at the threshold of organic and synthetic being, enacting a fundamental crisis of identity in the postindustrial era" (*Terminal Identity*, 1993). Case's ability to "jack into" cyberspace—a virtual matrix of data—extends his consciousness beyond his physical body, making him a prototype for the disembodied posthuman subject. This immersion in digital environments effectively transforms him into a fantastic figure, as he transcends the biological limits that traditionally define human identity.

Similarly, Molly represents a synthesis of flesh and technology. Her enhanced reflexes, augmented vision, and weaponized body subvert conventional gender roles while also complicating the notion of bodily autonomy. Molly is not a fantasy in the traditional sense, but a product of biomedical engineering and techno-capitalist intervention. As Donna Haraway might argue in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, Molly embodies the cyborg mythos—a figure of resistance who exists outside the binaries of man/woman, human/machine, nature/culture. Her presence in the novel destabilizes normative assumptions about agency and subjectivity.

Gibson's approach to character construction aligns with the aesthetics of minimalism and cinematic detachment. His prose is spare, relying heavily on implication rather than exposition. As noted by Bruce Sterling, Gibson's writing is "dense with implication and light on explicit motivation," requiring readers to interpret meaning from setting, dialogue, and technological immersion rather than traditional psychological development. This technique results in characters who feel both archetypal and elusive—figures who suggest more than they declare.

Furthermore, the artificial intelligences Wintermute and Neuromancer operate as non-human intelligences that challenge traditional notions of character altogether. They do not simply serve as plot devices; they possess goals, agency, and self-awareness, albeit constructed through programming. Their eventual merger into a higher form of intelligence transcends the limits of human understanding and pushes the narrative into the domain of the metaphysical. Critics like N. Katherine Hayles interpret this shift as emblematic of the transition from humanist to posthumanism epistemologies, where consciousness is decentered and distributed across multiple systems and platforms (*How We Became Posthuman*, 1999).

The world of *Neuromancer* is, in many ways, more magical than the supernatural realms of traditional fantasy. Gibson's cyberspace—described as a "consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions"—functions as a new kind of reality, where virtual constructs hold as much narrative and ontological weight as physical objects. This space is populated by avatars, AI, and data ghosts, creating a fantastic dimension that is entirely infrastructural. Characters like Case and Molly, by navigating this hybrid reality, become mythic agents within a digital mythology that speaks to contemporary anxieties about surveillance, autonomy, and the erosion of the self in techno-modernity.

Gibson's poetics in *Neuromancer* create fantastic characters through an economy of style, layered metaphor, and ontological dislocation. By refusing to clearly delineate the real from the virtual, the human from the artificial, Gibson invites readers into a world where fantasy is born from the collision of code, consciousness, and control. His characters are not simply participants in speculative fiction—they are embodiments of a new mythos for the information age.

Neal Stephenson's "Snow Crash" (1992) represents a landmark moment in the development of cyberpunk and speculative fiction. Blending linguistic theory, historical myth, and digital culture, Stephenson constructs a world where fantastic characters emerge not from magic, but from semiotic networks, virtual economies, and bio-hacker logics. Central to the novel are Hiro Protagonist, a samurai-sword-wielding hacker and pizza delivery man for the Mafia, and Y.T., a rebellious teenage skateboard courier. Both characters operate in a fragmented America—privatized, franchised, and governed by corporate and religious enclaves—where identity is increasingly mediated by digital technologies and coded systems.

"Snow Crash" redefines the fantastic by embedding it in plausible techno-linguistic constructs. Hiro navigates both the physical world and the Metaverse, a virtual reality space populated by avatars and governed by its own aesthetic and logic. The Metaverse is not merely a virtual game world but a parallel social and economic sphere, complete with its own architecture, currency, and geopolitical structures. Hiro's dual existence mirrors the posthuman condition: he is a self-aware subject who operates simultaneously as a body and a code. As critic Fredric Jameson might argue, Hiro exemplifies the postmodern figure who traverses 'hyperspace'—an abstraction of space where traditional epistemological anchors are dismantled ("Postmodernism", 1991).

Y. T., by contrast, embodies a new generation of techno-liberated youth. Agile, fearless, and equipped with cybernetic enhancements, she functions not only as a courier but as a cultural insurgent. Her skateboard is a technological marvel, complete with magnetic grapples and speed-boosting devices. While she lacks formal power, she subverts authority through mobility and adaptability. As with Molly in "Neuromancer", Y.T. complicates conventional gender roles, asserting agency in spaces typically dominated by male figures.

The most overtly fantastic aspect of "Snow Crash" lies in its central conceit: the virus Snow Crash itself. It is both a computer virus and a neurological agent, capable of infecting hackers and ordinary users alike through visual symbols and spoken language. Drawing on the theories of Sumerian mythology and neurolinguistics, Stephenson proposes that the earliest human languages functioned as operating systems for the brain—a bold, speculative idea rooted in both science and myth. The Snow Crash virus thus becomes a metaphor for ideological control and mental colonization. As scholar Hayles suggests, Stephenson presents language not as a tool of communication but as a form of control deeply embedded in biological hardware ("How We Became Posthuman", 1999).

Artificial intelligences and avatars in the Metaverse further blur the line between fantastic and mundane. Characters like the Librarian—a virtual assistant programmed with vast stores of knowledge—operate as digital oracles, invoking the role of the sage or guide in classical epic. Yet these figures are fully artificial, born not from myth but from code. They function as fantastic characters by embodying ancient narrative roles in radically new, technologized contexts. This synthesis of old and new is at the heart of Stephenson's poetics.

Stylistically, Stephenson's prose contrasts sharply with Gibson's minimalist aesthetic. He embraces an encyclopedic style, packing pages with technical detail, historical references, and satirical asides. This narrative density

contributes to the fantastic feel of the novel: the world is not only strange but hyperreal, saturated with meaning. Brian McHale's theory of 'ontological dominant' is useful here: in postmodern fiction, reality itself becomes uncertain, and characters are often unsure whether they are experiencing simulations, delusions, or altered states ("Postmodernist Fiction", 1987).

Moreover, Stephenson's world resists easy allegory. The fantastic is not a realm apart but a dimension of everyday life. Avatars, hacking, brain viruses, and virtual samurais are treated as routine elements of existence. This normalization of the fantastic aligns with Rosemary Jackson's idea that fantasy often critiques, rather than escapes, the real ("Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion", 1981). Stephenson's characters reflect the tensions of living in a post-truth, post-human, and post-national landscape.

Ultimately, "Snow Crash" portrays a world where identity is modular, language is weaponized, and reality is fragmented across platforms. In such a world, the fantastic character becomes a site of convergence: between past and future, body and code, myth and software. Stephenson's protagonists, avatars, and AI entities are not traditional heroes but semiotic agents—participants in a dense narrative matrix that mirrors the complexities of contemporary digital life.

While both William Gibson and Neal Stephenson operate within the broad tradition of speculative fiction—particularly within the cyberpunk and post-cyberpunk subgenres—their approaches to character poetics reveal notable divergences in aesthetic, thematic focus, and philosophical orientation. A comparative analysis of their works, especially *Neuromancer* (1984) and *Snow Crash* (1992), allows for a deeper understanding of how fantastic characters function not only as narrative agents but as embodiments of competing visions of identity, agency, and human-machine symbiosis in late capitalist and digitally mediated societies.

Gibson's characters are often marked by opacity, ambiguity, and emotional detachment. His poetics favor minimal exposition, indirect characterization, and what Fredric Jameson might describe as "the waning of affect" in postmodern fiction (*Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991). Figures like Case and Molly Millions are defined as much by their environments as by internal drives or desires. The narrative rarely penetrates their psychology in depth; instead, it positions them within fragmented, hypercommodified settings in which they are partially alienated from their own bodies and actions. This stylistic choice reflects the broader themes of dislocation and ontological uncertainty that permeate Gibson's vision of cyberspace.

By contrast, Stephenson's characters—while also navigating digitally layered realities—are rendered in more exuberant, often satirical terms. His narrative voice permits broader exposition, humor, and linguistic playfulness. Hiro Protagonist and Y.T. are more openly reflective, their internal monologues infused with cultural commentary, historical analogy, and a heightened awareness of the absurdities of the worlds they inhabit. While Hiro is also a hacker immersed in virtual realities, his narrative arc includes mythological allusions, linguistic theory, and political critique, granting him a discursive depth that contrasts with Case's numbed stoicism.

Moreover, Gibson's characters often embody what Brian McHale calls an "ontological dominant"—concerned primarily with the nature of being and the instability of reality (*Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987). In *Neuromancer*, the line between organic consciousness and artificial intelligence dissolves, particularly in the figures of Wintermute and Neuromancer, who defy traditional character models. These AIs are as complex, manipulative, and purposive as any human figure, thereby expanding the bounds of what counts as "character" in narrative terms. Human characters like Case are often reactive

rather than active, caught in flows of information and control systems that exceed their comprehension.

Stephenson, on the other hand, often operates under what McHale describes as an "epistemological dominant"—where questions of knowledge, interpretation, and meaning take precedence. The central conceit of *Snow Crash*—that language functions as both code and virus—positions characters as interpreters of a semiotic landscape. Hiro's journey is epistemological: to uncover the origins of the Snow Crash virus, he must decode myths, analyze ancient texts, and navigate the interplay of linguistic structures and neurological mechanisms. In this sense, his character is both a symbolic hero and an academic sleuth.

Despite these differences, both authors converge in their treatment of posthumanism. Identity in both *Neuromancer* and *Snow Crash* is fluid, deterritorialized, and distributed across networks, bodies, and virtual interfaces. Haraway's cyborg theory is applicable to both Case and Hiro, as each character embodies a hybrid ontology—part biological, part technological, part informational. The fantastic in their characterization does not arise from the supernatural, but from the technological sublime: the moment when human subjectivity merges with code, data, and systemic architectures.

Furthermore, both authors deconstruct traditional notions of agency. In Gibson, agency is fractured, often overridden by systemic forces like AI or corporate machinations. Case's actions are preconditioned by manipulations from higher intelligences, suggesting a deterministic or fatalistic poetics. In Stephenson, agency is reasserted, but in a fragmented, postmodern form. Characters like Y.T. operate with subversive autonomy, often resisting the dominant orders through movement, improvisation, and technological savvy.

In terms of gender representation, both authors present empowered female figures—Molly and Y. T.—but in divergent registers. Molly is rendered with noir stylings and a certain narrative mystique, reflective of cyberpunk's indebtedness to hardboiled traditions. Y. T., conversely, is irreverent, humorous, and richly layered, embodying not just resistance but adaptability. Scholars like Sherryl Vint have noted how cyberpunk often struggles with the representation of female subjectivity, yet in Stephenson's work, we observe a shift toward more nuanced portrayals.

Finally, the narrative structures themselves reinforce the character poetics. Gibson's fragmented, minimalist prose mirrors the psychological fragmentation of his characters. Stephenson's maximalist, encyclopedic style reflects the multiplicity and interconnectivity of his characters' worlds. Both approaches serve the larger thematic goals of their texts: to explore what it means to be human—or posthuman—in a world of machines, myths, and metastable realities.

While Gibson and Stephenson differ in style, tone, and character construction, they are united in their exploration of the fantastic as it intersects with cybernetic existence. Their characters are poetic in the Aristotelian sense—not merely representations of human action, but manifestations of philosophical inquiry. They traverse virtual worlds, rewrite mythologies, and embody the uncertainties of an age where the boundaries between self and system, flesh and code, are increasingly blurred. Through comparative analysis, we see how two distinct voices within speculative fiction converge on a shared poetic project: to reimagine identity, narrative, and subjectivity in the digital age.

The fantastic characters crafted by William Gibson and Neal Stephenson function not merely as imaginative constructs but as profound philosophical agents, dramatizing the ontological, epistemological, and ethical dilemmas of contemporary technoculture. Both authors use their characters to probe fundamental questions of what it means to be

human in an age where the boundaries between the organic and the artificial, the real and the simulated, are increasingly unstable. As such, these characters are not only products of narrative invention but also vectors of cultural critique and theoretical exploration.

In Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the philosophical register is primarily ontological. Characters such as Case, Molly, and the AI entities Wintermute and Neuromancer operate in a world where the authenticity of experience is constantly undermined by simulation, data, and virtuality. Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation is particularly resonant here; as Baudrillard notes, the postmodern subject lives in a reality saturated with signs that refer to nothing but other signs (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 1981). In *Neuromancer*, cyberspace is the ultimate simulacrum—a realm of pure information in which identity, memory, and agency can be uploaded, deleted, or reprogrammed. Case's detachment from his body and his immersion into the matrix metaphorically and literally illustrate the disintegration of embodied subjectivity and the ascendance of informational being.

This disembodiment also reflects a deeper philosophical tension: the erosion of Cartesian dualism. Gibson's characters challenge the idea that mind and body are distinct and hierarchically ordered. The fusion of human consciousness with cyberspace, and the emergence of sentient AIs, upends any clear separation between human and machine, self and other. N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), argues that posthumanism does not reject embodiment but reconfigures it as material-information entanglement. In Gibson's world, fantastic characters dramatize this entanglement—they are hybrid agents who both exceed and undermine traditional humanist assumptions.

Stephenson, while equally invested in posthuman themes, places greater emphasis on epistemology—the nature and limits of knowledge. In *Snow Crash*, the protagonist Hiro Protagonist navigates a narrative landscape structured by linguistic, historical, and computational systems. The central conceit—that language operates like a computer virus—links ancient Sumerian mythology with modern computational theory. As Hayles notes, this convergence of myth and code suggests that human consciousness has always been programmable to some extent, whether by divine logos, genetic structure, or digital interface.

Stephenson's characters, therefore, are not merely agents within a fictional world but semiotic explorers. They uncover hidden codes, decipher symbolic systems, and enact a form of intellectual heroism that resonates with postmodern epistemological skepticism. As Lyotard observed in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), the grand narratives of Enlightenment rationality and scientific objectivity are increasingly fractured; Stephenson's characters operate within this fractured terrain, piecing together meaning from hybrid discourses—myth, science, cybernetics, and religion.

The philosophical implications of Stephenson's characters extend to questions of control and agency. The Snow Crash virus, which targets the neuro-linguistic centers of the brain, becomes a metaphor for ideological manipulation and cultural programming. Drawing on Foucauldian notions of discourse and biopower, the virus represents a mechanism by which the state or corporations may control populations at the deepest cognitive levels. The resistance enacted by characters like Hiro and Y.T., then, is not merely physical or tactical, but also epistemological—they seek to reclaim interpretive sovereignty over language and meaning.

In both authors, the fantastic character serves as a nexus point for multiple cultural anxieties: the threat of artificial intelligence, the pervasiveness of surveillance, the commodification of identity, and the destabilization of reality itself. Gibson's use of AI entities as fully realized characters, complete with motives, agency, and evolution,

foregrounds the ethical and ontological dilemmas of machine consciousness. Are these entities "alive"? Do they possess rights, intentions, or interiority? The answers remain ambiguous, reflecting broader societal ambivalence about the rise of autonomous technologies.

Stephenson's work, meanwhile, interrogates the spiritual and mythological dimensions of digital life. By linking virtual viruses to ancient language cults and religious esoterica, he suggests that our technological future may not supersede the past but rather repackage it in new forms. The fantastic character in *Snow Crash* thus becomes a philosophical archaeologist, unearthing forgotten truths beneath layers of code and simulation.

The cultural and philosophical dimensions of fantastic characters in Gibson and Stephenson's fiction extend well beyond the boundaries of genre. These characters embody the convergence of myth, machine, and meaning. They are vehicles for critical inquiry, dramatizing the collapse of old certainties and the emergence of new, unstable paradigms of selfhood, agency, and reality. Through their fantastic figures, both authors offer not escapist fantasy but a deeply engaged, poetic response to the complexities of digital modernity.

To sum up, the exploration of fantastic characters in the works of William Gibson and Neal Stephenson reveals a profound transformation in the construction and function of literary subjectivity in the context of speculative fiction. These characters—cyber-enhanced mercenaries, disembodied hackers, digital avatars, and artificial intelligences—do not merely inhabit futuristic worlds; they constitute new paradigms for understanding identity, agency, and narrative form in the posthuman era.

In "Neuromancer", Gibson crafts a poetics rooted in minimalism, ambiguity, and ontological rupture. His characters, particularly Case and Molly, are defined by their liminality—their partial presence within both the physical and digital realms. Through these figures, Gibson critiques the commodification of human experience and explores the collapse of Enlightenment distinctions between mind and body, human and machine. His fantastic characters do not conform to heroic archetypes but instead illustrate a networked, post-Cartesian reality in which subjectivity is fluid, deterritorialized, and deeply embedded in systems of control and surveillance.

Stephenson's "Snow Crash" offers a complementary yet distinct vision. His approach is encyclopedic and satirical, drawing on myth, linguistics, and cultural theory to construct a densely layered world in which language, code, and biology intersect. Hiro and Y.T. serve as avatars of a new techno-cultural condition, navigating a landscape where history is encoded in software, and reality is mediated by semiotic systems. Stephenson's fantastic characters expose the ideological underpinnings of techno-capitalism while also enacting forms of resistance grounded in knowledge, mobility, and hybridity.

Together, these authors demonstrate how speculative fiction can serve as a laboratory for philosophical and poetic inquiry. Their characters are not simply narrative devices; they are speculative hypotheses—embodiments of theoretical tensions and cultural anxieties. Drawing on literary theory, cyberpunk aesthetics, and posthumanist philosophy, this study has shown that the fantastic in Gibson and Stephenson is a function of dislocation: a way of destabilizing familiar ontologies and foregrounding the instability of the self in a technologized world.

In a time increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, digital identity, and the virtualization of everyday life, the poetics of fantastic characters remains not only relevant but urgent. As literary constructs, these characters illuminate our deepest questions about the nature of consciousness, the limits of embodiment, and the future of humanity itself.

Through their narratives, Gibson and Stephenson invite readers to confront the strange new realities of the 21st century—not by escaping them, but by engaging their complexity with imagination, critical inquiry, and poetic vision.

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