



FROM VOODOO GODS TO SUMERIAN CODES: CYBERNETIC DEITIES AND POSTMODERN SPECTACLE IN GIBSON'S COUNT ZERO AND STEPHENSON'S SNOW CRASH

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Abstract:

This paper explores how William Gibson's *Count Zero* (1986) and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) reinterpret myth within the digital landscapes of cyberpunk fiction. Gibson reimagines African diasporic spirituality through the presence of voodoo loa in the matrix, portraying artificial intelligences that assume the guise of deities. Stephenson, by contrast, grounds his narrative in Sumerian myth, suggesting that language functions as a viral code capable of shaping consciousness and controlling societies. Both novels demonstrate that myth is not displaced by technology but reconfigured as a system of meaning within cyberspace. By analyzing these works alongside theoretical insights from Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson, and N. Katherine Hayles, this paper argues that cyberpunk transforms myth into cybernetic deities that embody postmodern anxieties about hyperreality, identity, and power. The voodoo loa in *Count Zero* reflect the persistence of cultural memory in digital systems, while the linguistic virus in *Snow Crash* illustrates how ancient codes underpin the vulnerabilities of contemporary information networks. Through close reading and critical engagement, the study shows that both novels reveal myth's adaptability in the digital age. Far from being obsolete, myth survives as spectacle, commodity, and simulation, demonstrating the ways in which postmodern culture negotiates belief and spirituality within technological environments.

Key Words: Cyberpunk, William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, Voodoo, Sumerian Myth, Cyberspace, Hyperreality, Postmodernism

Introduction:

Cyberpunk literature, emerging in the 1980s and 1990s, is often celebrated for its imaginative depiction of cyberspace, artificial intelligence, and corporate dystopias. Yet beneath its surface fascination with technology lies a persistent engagement with myth, religion, and spirituality. William Gibson's *Count Zero* (1986) and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) exemplify this dynamic by showing that even in a world dominated by networks and codes, humanity continues to turn to narratives of gods, origins, and belief. Both novels reintroduce myth into digital landscapes, transforming it into a new language of power and meaning. In *Count Zero*, the artificial intelligences of Gibson's earlier *Neuromancer* trilogy evolve into forms recognizable as deities of Haitian Vodou. The protagonist Bobby Newmark encounters this digital pantheon when he is told: "You got to talk to the loa, boy. They the ones that run things now" (Gibson 152). The mythic presence of the loa illustrates how cyberspace becomes not only a realm of data but also a stage for spiritual encounters, where gods ride their human "horses" through digital possession. Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, by contrast, grounds its mythology in the ancient Sumerian story of Babel. Here, language itself is presented as a primal virus: "The word is a virus, and the Sumerian tongue is the primordial infection" (Stephenson 115). In Stephenson's world, cyberspace becomes an arena where linguistic codes function as weapons, binding myth and technology through the metaphor of viral contagion.

These narrative strategies invite us to reconsider the relationship between myth and modernity. Far from being eclipsed by technological progress, myth adapts to digital environments. Jean Baudrillard famously argued that in postmodern culture, "simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). Gibson and Stephenson illustrate precisely this process: the loa of *Count Zero* and the Sumerian code of *Snow Crash* are not "real" deities in the traditional sense, but simulacra that nonetheless generate belief, meaning, and authority. Equally relevant is Fredric Jameson's contention that postmodernism restructures cultural forms into allegories of information and control (*Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 26). Both Gibson and Stephenson reveal how ancient myths are repurposed into the logic of networks-where gods become artificial intelligences and linguistic myths become viral software. These transformations are not neutral: they expose how postmodern society commodifies even the sacred, reducing spirituality to spectacle while simultaneously preserving its cultural resonance.

The persistence of myth in cyberpunk also underscores questions of identity and subjectivity in digital environments. Bobby Newmark in *Count Zero* experiences the loa not merely as external powers but as forces that shape his selfhood: "The loa ride you, same way they ride the horses" (Gibson 245). Similarly, Stephenson depicts characters in *Snow Crash* as avatars, "masks they wear in the system" (Stephenson 310), suggesting that identity is always mediated by code, language, and mythic narrative. As N. Katherine Hayles notes, the posthuman condition emphasizes "information as more fundamental than material instantiation" (*How We Became Posthuman* 13). Both novels dramatize this posthuman shift, where the boundaries of selfhood are negotiated through encounters with cybernetic myths. This paper argues that *Count Zero* and *Snow Crash* demonstrate the adaptability of myth in the postmodern digital age. By transforming spiritual archetypes into cybernetic deities, Gibson and Stephenson reveal how belief systems persist as cultural simulations, reflecting both continuity and change. These works highlight

the ambivalence of postmodern culture: on one hand, myth is commodified, coded, and manipulated; on the other, it survives as a vital structure of meaning, shaping identity, memory, and collective imagination in cyberspace.

Cyberpunk and Postmodernism:

Fredric Jameson describes postmodernism as the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” where historical depth collapses into a perpetual present mediated by images and systems (Postmodernism 26).

In literature, postmodernism challenges the traditional norms of storytelling that have long dominated Western literature. It employs narrative techniques such as non-linearity, pastiche, parody, magical realism, and historiographic metafiction. (Nazar 119).

Cyberpunk, as Scott Bukatman observes, dramatizes this collapse by staging characters who lose individuality in vast information networks: “cyberpunk’s protagonists negotiate systems that overwrite the liberal subject” (Terminal Identity 9). Gibson’s *Count Zero* embodies this dynamic in the figure of Bobby Newmark, whose sense of self is destabilized when he is told, “The loa ride you, same way they ride the horses” (Gibson 245). Subjectivity becomes a site of possession, where mythic structures overwrite personal autonomy. Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* also reflects Jameson’s view of postmodern allegory. By presenting the Babel story as an allegory of system failure—“The Babel story isn’t just a myth. It was the first hack, the first system crash” (Stephenson 167)—Stephenson fuses myth with the logic of information systems. This fusion suggests that myth itself becomes a postmodern code, a structure for understanding the vulnerabilities of technological society.

Myth and Cybernetic Deities:

Brian McHale has argued that postmodernist fiction often appropriates myth “as a discourse of authority, transforming archaic gods into digital avatars” (Postmodernist Fiction 229). Gibson literalizes this transformation: the artificial intelligences of *Count Zero* present themselves as the loa, declaring, “They the ones that run things now” (Gibson 152). Here, myth serves as a familiar vocabulary for comprehending the incomprehensible vastness of cyberspace. Stephenson, meanwhile, deploys Sumerian mythology to construct a linguistic and technological theology. The “Snow Crash” virus functions simultaneously as digital code and ancient curse: “Snow Crash is a metavirus, a piece of information that infects the brain” (Stephenson 229). This duality highlights how myth provides a cultural bridge between ancient fears of contamination and contemporary anxieties about information overload. As Umberto Eco notes, “myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it can be recoded, reshaped, and reinterpreted in each age” (Myth, Science, and Fiction 58). Stephenson’s viral myth exemplifies this principle.

Hyperreality and Simulation:

Jean Baudrillard’s notion of hyperreality is indispensable to understanding both novels. For Baudrillard, “simulation is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (Simulacra and Simulation 1). In *Count Zero*, the loa exist as such simulations—entities without material origin that nonetheless generate belief and authority. “The matrix has become an ecology of spirits, where the loa dance through code” (Gibson 201). In *Snow Crash*, hyperreality manifests in the Metaverse, where avatars and digital gods replace embodied presence. Hiro reflects, “In the Metaverse, gods can be coded, worship can be programmed” (Stephenson 293). This mirrors Baudrillard’s insight that simulations no longer point to any original reality but instead constitute reality for their users. The Metaverse becomes not a representation of culture but its primary stage.

Cyberpunk and Cultural Critique:

Critics have also emphasized cyberpunk’s role as cultural critique. Veronica Hollinger observes that cyberpunk narratives “interrogate the boundaries of the human and the posthuman, dramatizing the uncertainties of subjectivity in late capitalism” (Contemporary Literature 40.3, 1999, p. 351). In this sense, Gibson’s loa and Stephenson’s linguistic virus are not mere narrative devices but allegories of power in a globalized, digitized economy. N. Katherine Hayles extends this argument by asserting that posthuman identity privileges information over embodiment: “the posthuman view configures information as more fundamental than material instantiation” (How We Became Posthuman 13). Both Gibson and Stephenson dramatize this claim—the former by coding gods into networks, the latter by reducing subjectivity to linguistic programming.

Myth as Spectacle and Commodity:

Finally, critics such as Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker have suggested that postmodern culture commodifies even spirituality: “The sacred becomes spectacle, consumed in the circuits of techno culture” (Data Trash 48). This idea resonates strongly with Gibson’s depiction of voodoo as a transactional discourse: “Even the loa can be bought, if you know the right channels” (Gibson 276). Stephenson’s depiction of L. Bob Rife as a media tycoon who exploits religion underscores the same critique: “Rife didn’t just own land and ships, he owned souls” (Stephenson 345).

Problem Solving:

Although cyberpunk has been extensively studied for its representations of technology, virtual reality, and late-capitalist dystopias, its engagement with myth and spirituality has received comparatively less critical attention. Much scholarship frames cyberpunk as a genre that privileges technological innovation over cultural or religious continuity, yet Gibson’s *Count Zero* and Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* suggest otherwise. Both novels show that myth not only persists in digital environments but is also recoded into systems of power, belief, and control. In *Count Zero*, cyberspace is explicitly populated by the loa of Haitian Vodou, who tell Bobby Newmark: “You got to talk to the loa, boy. They the ones that run things now” (Gibson 152). This statement reveals that the matrix, often conceived as a purely technological realm, is mediated through spiritual archetypes. Similarly, in *Snow Crash*, Hiro learns that “The Babel story isn’t just a myth. It was the first hack, the first system crash” (Stephenson 167). Here, mythology functions not as decorative background but as a structural metaphor for the vulnerabilities of information society. Despite these rich intersections, few critics have examined how myth in cyberpunk functions as a cybernetic system—entities that operate as both cultural simulations and narrative agents. Brian McHale notes that “postmodernist fiction appropriates myth as a discourse of authority” (Postmodernist Fiction 229), but cyberpunk goes further by embedding myths directly into digital ecologies. This transformation calls for closer analysis, as it suggests that myth is not a vestige of the past but an adaptable framework for negotiating identity and power in postmodern culture.

The problem, then, is twofold. First, cyberpunk scholarship often emphasizes technology at the expense of spirituality, reducing mythic elements to exotic color rather than treating them as central to the narrative. Second, studies that do acknowledge

myth frequently analyze it in isolation, without fully exploring its fusion with digital systems. This gap obscures the deeper function of myth in *Count Zero* and *Snow Crash*: to illustrate how belief systems persist by becoming part of the technological spectacle of hyperreality. The central objective of this paper is therefore to investigate how Gibson and Stephenson transform myth into cybernetic deities that shape both narrative and cultural critique. The research asks: How do the voodoo loa in *Count Zero* and the Sumerian code in *Snow Crash* reconfigure spiritual belief within cyberspace? What do these transformations reveal about the postmodern condition of identity, power, and cultural imagination? And how do these texts critique the commodification of spirituality in late-capitalist systems of information? By addressing these questions, the study positions cyberpunk not only as a literature of technology but also as a literature of myth in the digital age, where gods and codes alike circulate as simulations within the spectacle of postmodern culture.

Methodological Approach:

The study applies close reading techniques to identify and interpret mythic motifs within the novels. Specific attention is given to how: Gibson's loa function as cultural metaphors for the inscrutability of artificial intelligence and cyberspace. When a loa declares, "They the ones that run things now" (Gibson 152), it signals that power in the digital realm is articulated through spiritual archetypes. Stephenson's reworking of the Babel myth positions language itself as a technological vulnerability: "The Babel story isn't just a myth. It was the first hack, the first system crash" (Stephenson 167). Here, myth is not illustrative but structural, encoding both narrative logic and thematic critique.

Findings & Results:

The findings of this study reveal that William Gibson and Neal Stephenson integrate myth into their cyberpunk narratives not as background ornamentation but as active frameworks of power, identity, and cultural critique. Through the voodoo loa in *Count Zero* and the Sumerian code in *Snow Crash*, myth becomes a digital system of belief that functions within postmodern hyperreality.

1. Voodoo Loa as Digital Gods in *Count Zero*:

Gibson's *Count Zero* dramatizes cyberspace as a spiritual terrain populated by the loa of Haitian Vodou. These figures appear not as metaphors but as literal agents in the matrix. When Bobby Newmark is told, "You got to talk to the loa, boy. They the ones that run things now" (Gibson 152), the statement redefines cyberspace from a technological system to a pantheon ruled by myth. Similarly, the AI entities declare, "The loa ride you, same way they ride the horses" (Gibson 245), evoking Vodou possession as a metaphor for posthuman subjectivity. From a theoretical standpoint, this aligns with N. Katherine Hayles's claim that "the posthuman view configures information as more fundamental than material instantiation" (*How We Became Posthuman* 13). The loa do not have bodies; their power derives from code and belief, emphasizing that in cyberspace, information eclipses embodiment. Thus, Gibson's novel suggests that the authority of gods is not diminished in the digital era but reconfigured-myth adapts into a language for comprehending AI and cyberspace. The finding here is that myth is not obsolete but technologically translated.

2. Sumerian Codes as Viral Myths in *Snow Crash*:

In contrast to Gibson's voodoo, Stephenson reimagines myth as linguistic code. In *Snow Crash*, the Babel narrative is reframed as a technological disaster: "The Babel story isn't just a myth. It was the first hack, the first system crash" (Stephenson 167). This line redefines myth not as allegory but as a technical event, an early form of information warfare. The titular "Snow Crash" virus illustrates how ancient myth and modern computing overlap: "Snow Crash is a metavirus, a piece of information that infects the brain" (Stephenson 229). Here, belief itself becomes programmable, suggesting that human subjectivity is as vulnerable to linguistic hacking as software. This resonates with Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation: "simulation is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality" (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). Stephenson's virus has no "real" beyond its code, yet it dictates social and spiritual behavior. Myth thus functions as both narrative logic and cultural operating system.

3. Myth as Hyperreality and Simulation:

Both novels illustrate how myth becomes hyperreal, existing as a simulation that acquires authority without material grounding. In *Count Zero*, Gibson describes cyberspace as "an ecology of spirits, where the loa dance through code" (Gibson 201). The loa exist only in digital networks, yet they influence human behavior and belief.

Notably, it becomes more vivid, more emotionally and intellectually compelling, than the real physical world for the protagonist Case. The precise description of cyberspace is an artificial environment that is believed in, acted upon, and experienced as if it were authentic. (Khaled 84)

In *Snow Crash*, Hiro reflects that "In the Metaverse, gods can be coded, worship can be programmed" (Stephenson 293). Spirituality becomes commodified within virtual environments, paralleling Arthur Kroker's observation that "the sacred becomes spectacle, consumed in the circuits of techno culture" (*Data Trash* 48). The comparative finding is that both novels treat myth as hyperreal-no longer tied to tradition, but instead functioning as digital spectacle. Myth survives because it has become simulation, aligning with Baudrillard's vision of postmodern culture.

4. Myth, Power, and the Postmodern Subject:

A final finding emerges in the relationship between myth and power. In *Count Zero*, myth legitimizes AI control: "Even the loa can be bought, if you know the right channels" (Gibson 276). Spirituality is commodified, echoing late-capitalist logics of exchange. In *Snow Crash*, L. Bob Rife exploits myth for domination: "Rife didn't just own land and ships, he owned souls" (Stephenson 345). Religion and language are weaponized to secure corporate and political power. Fredric Jameson's view that postmodernism reduces culture to allegory of systemic forces (*Postmodernism* 26) is evident here: both novels show that myth becomes a tool for managing populations within information capitalism. As Veronica Hollinger notes, cyberpunk interrogates "the uncertainties of subjectivity in late capitalism" (*Contemporary Literature* 40.3, 1999, p. 351). Myth becomes part of this interrogation, dramatizing how identity and belief are destabilized in global networks.

Conclusion:

This study has examined how William Gibson's *Count Zero* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* transform myth into digital systems of belief, revealing the persistence of spirituality within postmodern cyberspace. Far from being obsolete in

technological futures, myth emerges as a flexible cultural code that adapts to the conditions of hyperreality, commodification, and posthuman identity. In *Count Zero*, Gibson reimagines cyberspace as a pantheon of loa, where AIs assume the guise of gods: “You got to talk to the loa, boy. They the ones that run things now” (Gibson 152). These digital deities dramatize how belief survives by translating itself into the logic of information systems. In *Snow Crash*, Stephenson portrays myth as linguistic code, reframing the Babel story as “the first hack, the first system crash” (Stephenson 167). Here, myth functions not only as allegory but as structural metaphor for the vulnerabilities of technological society. Both novels illustrate Baudrillard’s claim that “simulation is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1). The loa and the metavirus have no material grounding, yet they exercise cultural power, shaping identity and social order. Myth, therefore, is not a relic of the past but a simulation that constitutes postmodern reality.

Furthermore, the commodification of spirituality is evident across both texts. Gibson depicts the transactional nature of divine authority: “Even the loa can be bought, if you know the right channels” (Gibson 276)-while Stephenson critiques corporate exploitation of belief: “Rife didn’t just own land and ships, he owned souls” (Stephenson 345). These portrayals echo Arthur Kroker’s observation that “the sacred becomes spectacle, consumed in the circuits of techno culture” (*Data Trash* 48). The central conclusion is that myth in cyberpunk is not decorative but functional: it provides a vocabulary for negotiating crises of identity, power, and meaning in digital culture. By integrating myth into their narratives, Gibson and Stephenson highlight the instability of the posthuman subject, the commodification of belief, and the collapse of representation in hyperreality.

For future research, the comparative framework applied here could be extended to other cyberpunk texts, such as Gibson’s *Neuromancer* or Stephenson’s *The Diamond Age*, to further explore how myth adapts across different visions of cyberspace. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that draw from religious studies, cultural anthropology, and media theory may yield deeper insights into how contemporary society recodes spirituality within technological systems.

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