



The poetics of XXI century contemporary science fiction novels

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the stylistic evolution of science fiction from its pulp origins to contemporary manifestations such as cyberpunk and postmodern science fiction. It argues that despite the emergence of literary sophistication, experimental narration, and thematic complexity in modern SF, the structural and narratological foundations of pulpstyle remain widely influential. The genre's traditional features – such as linear narrative progression, speculative extrapolation, and dialogic exposition – are frequently retained, even in texts that appear to subvert genre norms. Through a comparative analysis of cyberpunk, the article demonstrates how the subgenre transforms but does not abandon the aesthetic logic of pulp, fusing New Wave literary reflexivity with Golden Age scientific rigor. It critiques the frequent conflation of science fiction with postmodernism, suggesting instead that science fiction is distinguished by its commitment to epistemological inquiry, ethical individualism, and narrative resolution, often contrasting sharply with postmodern fiction's ontological ambiguity and open-endedness. The article further challenges the assumption that science fiction's "juvenile" label undermines its seriousness, arguing that its didactic function, especially in adult readership, enhances its cognitive and ethical dimensions. It critiques the literary canon's exclusion of SF and calls for a genre-specific poetics grounded in science fiction's unique formal mechanisms – including cognitive estrangement, world-building, and kinetic storytelling. Finally, the article invites rethinking critical terminology by developing a historical poetics rooted within the science fiction tradition itself rather than relying on imported frameworks from mainstream literary theory. This study contributes to ongoing debates about literary value, canon formation, and narrative function, proposing a reevaluation of science fiction not as marginal literature but as a dynamic, self-reflexive genre that uniquely bridges ontology, epistemology, and narrative drive.

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XXI asr zamonaviy ilmiy-fantastik romanlari poetikasi

ANNOTATSIYA

Калит сўзлар:

ilmiy fantastika poetikasi,
pulp uslubi,
kiberpank,
postmodernizm,
narrativ nazariya,
ontologiya va
epistemologiya,
adabiy uslub,
kanon shakllanishi,
kognitiv begonalashtirish,
o'quvchining javob
nazariyasi,
ilmiy fantastika estetikasi,
janr nazariyasi,
muqobil adabiy tarixlar,
dunyo qurish,
narrativ kinezis,
postgumanizm,
ekstrapolyativ fantastika,
ilmiy fantastikadagi axloqiy
individuallik,
spekulyativ hikoya,
adabiy qadriyat.

Ushbu maqolada ilmiy-fantastika adabiyotining uslubiy taraqqiyoti, uning dastlabki “pulp” (ommabop jurnallar) ildizlaridan boshlab, zamonaviy kiberpank va postmodern ilmiy fantastikaga qadar bo'lgan shakllanishi tahlil qilinadi. Maqolada, zamonaviy ilmiy fantastikadagi badiiy yetuklik, eksperimental hikoyalash va tematik murakkabliklarning yuzaga chiqishiga qaramay, “pulpstyle” – ya'ni ommabop uslubdagi struktura va narrativ asoslar hanuzgacha keng ta'sirga ega ekani ilgari suriladi. Janrning an'anaviy xususiyatlari – masalan, chiziqli hikoya rivoji, spekulyativ (faraziy) ekstrapolyatsiya va dialogik bayon – hatto janr me'yorlariga qarshi chiqishga urinadigan asarlarda ham ko'p hollarda saqlanib qoladi. Kiberpankning taqqosloviiy tahlili orqali maqola ushbu subjanr pulp estetik logikasini tark etmasdan, uni yangi to'lqin adabiy reflektivligi va Oltin Davr ilmiy qat'iyati bilan birlashtirib, qanday o'zgartirganini ko'rsatadi. Maqola ilmiy fantastika bilan postmodernizmni tez-tez adashtirish holatini tanqid qilib, ilmiy fantastikani epistemologik izlanish, axloqiy individuallik, va narrativ yechimga sodiqlik bilan ajralib turishini ta'kidlaydi. Bu jihatlar ko'pincha postmodern adabiyotdagi ontologik noaniqlik va ochiq tugallanmaganlikka qarama-qarshi turadi. Shuningdek, maqola ilmiy fantastikaga “o'smirlar uchun” deb qarash bu janrning jiddiyligini kamaytiradi degan fikrni rad etadi. Aksincha, ayniqsa kattalar o'quvchilarida, uning ta'limiy vazifasi kognitiv va axloqiy jihatlarni kuchaytiradi. Maqola SF (science fiction) janrining adabiy kanondan chiqarib tashlanishini tanqid qiladi va ilmiy fantastikaga xos poetikani – masalan, kognitiv begonalashtirish, dunyo qurish, va kinezisga asoslangan hikoyalash – asos qilib olishni taklif qiladi. Nihoyat, maqola adabiy tanqid terminologiyasini qayta ko'rib chiqib, uni ilmiy fantastikaning o'z tarixiy asoslariga tayangan holda rivojlantirishni taklif etadi. Bu tadqiqot adabiy qadriyat, kanon shakllanishi, va hikoya strukturasiga oid muhokamalarga hissa qo'shib, ilmiy fantastikani chetga surilgan adabiyot emas, balki ontologiya, epistemologiya va hikoya dinamikasini birlashtiruvchi jonli, o'zini aks ettiruvchi janr sifatida qayta baholashga undaydi.

Поэтика современных научно-фантастических романов XXI века

АННОТАЦИЯ

Ключевые слова:

поэтика научной фантастики, палп-стиль, киберпанк, постмодернизм, теория нарратива, онтология и эпистемология, литературный стиль, формирование канона, когнитивное отчуждение, теория отклика читателя, эстетика научной фантастики, теория жанра, альтернативные литературные истории, построение миров, нарративный кинезис, постгуманизм, экстраполятивная фантастика, этический индивидуализм в НФ, спекулятивное повествование, литературная ценность.

В данной статье рассматривается стилистическая эволюция научной фантастики – от её истоков в массовых журналах (pulp fiction) до современных проявлений, таких как киберпанк и постмодернистская фантастика. Автор утверждает, что несмотря на рост литературной изощрённости, экспериментального повествования и тематической сложности в современной НФ, структурные и нарративные основы «палп-стиля» сохраняют широкое влияние. Традиционные черты жанра – линейное развитие сюжета, спекулятивная экстраполяция и диалогическое изложение – часто сохраняются даже в произведениях, которые намеренно отклоняются от жанровых норм. На примере сравнительного анализа киберпанка статья показывает, как поджанр трансформирует, но не отказывается от эстетики pulp, объединяя литературную рефлексивность «Новой волны» с научной строгостью «Золотого века». Автор критикует частое отождествление научной фантастики с постмодернизмом и настаивает, что научная фантастика отличается эпистемологической направленностью, этическим индивидуализмом и склонностью к сюжетной завершённости, в отличие от онтологической неопределённости и открытых финалов постмодернистской прозы. Статья также ставит под сомнение восприятие научной фантастики как «детской литературы», утверждая, что её дидактическая функция, особенно в произведениях для взрослых, усиливает её когнитивные и этические качества. Критикуется исключение НФ из литературного канона и предлагается создание поэтики, специфичной для жанра, основанной на таких элементах, как когнитивное отчуждение, мировостроение и кинетическое повествование. В завершение, автор призывает переосмыслить критический аппарат и развивать историческую поэтику, коренящуюся в самой традиции научной фантастики, а не опираться на внешние теоретические рамки. Работа вносит вклад в дискуссии о литературной ценности, формировании канона и функции повествования, призывая переоценить НФ не как маргинальный жанр, а как динамическую, саморефлективную форму, объединяющую онтологию, эпистемологию и сюжетное движение.

In the evolving poetics of contemporary XXI century science fiction, reading is less a linear sequence than a complex, reader-driven process. These novels often resist conventional narrative order, instead inviting non-sequential engagement. Readers may begin at the introduction, consult the index, revisit the contents, or skip forward and

backward at will. The text becomes a navigable space, not unlike a temporal map, where the reader dictates the trajectory. This flexible interaction mirrors the speculative and often non-chronological worlds constructed by science fiction authors, reflecting the genre's central themes of multiplicity, agency, and temporal disruption.

Such texts challenge the assumption of narrative origin and authority. The idea that the "first paragraph was written first" is openly questioned, destabilizing traditional authorial structures. In this sense, the science fiction novel becomes less an object of consumption and more a platform for intellectual and imaginative collaboration. The reader is not a passive observer but the "engine" of the article – it's essential activating force. The text only "functions" through active interpretation. This conceptualization aligns with I.A. Richards' foundational assertion that "an article is a machine to think with" (Richards, 1924, p. 1), highlighting literature as a cognitive tool rather than a closed artifact. In 21st-century science fiction, this framework is particularly apt, as the genre frequently foregrounds epistemological uncertainty, narrative multiverses, and interactive structures that demand critical participation.

While the structure of a reader's engagement may seem chaotic, coherence emerges through thematic and conceptual patterning. The reader's motivation and cognitive investment become the central axis of meaning-making. Thus, the poetics of the contemporary science fiction novel are as much about how we read as what we read. The genre invites us to explore not only alternate futures and realities but also alternate modes of textual experience.

Science fiction stands as the most distinctively popular literary genre within contemporary Western culture. Statistical indicators affirm its dominance: as of the late 20th century, it accounted for approximately 10% of all fiction sold in the United Kingdom (Davies, 1990, p. 2) and 25% of all novels published in the United States (Pohl, 1989, p. 53). Crucially, science fiction has thrived predominantly as a paperback medium, democratizing access and embedding itself within the reading habits of the broader literate public. Its cultural reach, however, extends far beyond the printed page. At the level of mass entertainment, science fiction films consistently top box-office charts, attesting to their visual and thematic appeal. Moreover, the aesthetic and conceptual frameworks of science fiction shape the design principles behind modern architecture and industrial design, particularly in imagining the future.

The genre's imprint is also evident across diverse domains of everyday culture: from children's media and playground games to corporate branding, advertising, and consumer products. Brands from the automotive industry to snack food manufacturers utilize science fiction imagery to evoke innovation, excitement, and futurity. Furthermore, the genre has exerted a unique linguistic influence. Since surpassing poetry in the 1930s, science fiction has become the most prolific contributor of neologisms to the Oxford English Dictionary, thereby shaping the evolution of modern English (Delany, 1977, p. 142). This linguistic innovation parallels its speculative ethos, pushing the boundaries of not only narrative and imagination but of language itself.

The significance of science fiction lies not only in its widespread popularity but in its profound cultural and intellectual influence. This article contends that to fully grasp the meaning and function of science fiction, one must focus on its language, not merely as vocabulary or style, but as the entire communicative system that shapes how science fiction is written, read, and interpreted.

Understanding this linguistic system is essential across disciplines: whether studying science fiction from the perspectives of literary criticism, cultural studies, psychology, or futurism, it is the organization and processing of language that lies at the center. Literature cannot be critically approached in isolation from the science of language. While writing may be an artistic act, its study is grounded in modern science, specifically, in linguistics, which provides the most robust tools for rigorous textual analysis.

Though some may instinctively resist this scientific framing of literary study, the aim here is not to silence skepticism, but to encourage critical engagement. Science, as understood here, is not about uncovering absolute truths, but about constructing provisional, yet explanatory frameworks. Traditional literary criticism often lacks the methodological clarity of linguistics, treating criticism more as a creative practice than an analytical one. In contrast, modern linguistics, with its subfields in pragmatics, cognitive poetics, discourse analysis, and stylistics, provides a powerful framework for analyzing how meaning is constructed and interpreted.

A scientific poetics, informed by linguistics, can achieve all the interpretive depth of traditional literary analysis while also offering clarity, differentiation between interpretation and reflection, and a capacity for methodological debate. While some literary criticism achieves this level of rigor, much of it does not. Though this volume cannot fully defend the fields of literary linguistics or cognitive poetics, it builds upon foundational works by scholars such as Leech and Short (1981), McCarthy and Carter (1994), Carter and Simpson (1989), Short (1989, 1996), Weber (1996), and Simpson (1997). Each paragraph of the research of this article explores a particular theme within the broader poetics of science fiction, employing distinct methodologies to reveal how different approaches produce varied yet meaningful interpretations of the same text.

Ultimately, a comprehensive poetics does not seek to reduce a science fiction text to a static description. Rather, it promotes an open, adaptive inquiry into the experience of reading. Literary linguistics is not the mechanical dissection of a text; it is a dynamic practice – a form of intellectual discipline and interpretive flexibility akin to yoga (Jeffries, 1993, p. 2).

This study positions itself not as a mere linguistic analysis of science fiction, but as a poetics – a comprehensive exploration of the genre that integrates both textual structure and reader response. The term *poetics* is used here to capture the interwoven linguistic and cognitive dimensions that define the genre's form and function. While these layers are conceptually distinct, they are treated as analytically separable only for clarity of discussion. Some paragraph of the research focuses closely on stylistic aspects of specific texts, while others shift toward interpretative and cognitive processes associated with reading science fiction.

Crucially, a robust poetics must account not just for how texts are written, but for how they are experienced by readers. This demands engagement with cognition, inference, and the variability of interpretation. Although the interpretations offered in this volume are necessarily individual, the objective of a systematic poetics is to identify and articulate the underlying linguistic and cognitive mechanisms that give rise to multiple readings. In other words, even diverging interpretations can be explained through shared structural and cognitive processes. The emphasis, therefore, is not anecdotal. Rather than presenting a disconnected series of interpretive case studies, the

work aims to demonstrate how individual textual effects relate to the generic capacities of science fiction as a whole. By tracing the recurring strategies that shape the reader's interaction with the text – whether through syntax, semantics, or cognitive schemas – it builds a framework for understanding how meaning is made in the genre.

Moreover, the use of the term *poetics* is intentional in another sense: to evoke its broader connotation of *poetic* expression. Although science fiction is seldom described in these terms, this study emphasizes that aesthetic stylization and poetic language are indeed present – and often underappreciated – features of science fiction prose. Part of the article's mission is to reveal and exemplify this poetic potential, repositioning the genre not merely as speculative or technological, but as stylistically rich and expressively nuanced.

Much of the contemporary discourse surrounding postmodernism is shaped by the foundational analyses of Fredric Jameson, particularly in his works *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) and earlier essays such as “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” (1984). Jameson conceptualizes postmodernism not simply as a stylistic movement in the arts but as the cultural manifestation of late capitalist society, closely intertwined with the structures of post-industrial economic systems. In summarizing his argument, postmodernism is seen to have emerged in the late 1950s, characterized by a conscious departure from the perceived elitism of modernist aesthetics. While its claim to populism remains contested, the movement is broadly understood to dissolve the traditional hierarchies between high and low culture, as well as between art and non-art (Jameson, 1991, p. 2). This collapse of cultural boundaries is not only structural but ideological, manifesting in a rejection of authoritative meaning and a celebration of open-ended, reader-oriented interpretations.

Postmodern art often exhibits a playful, ironic, and self-reflexive orientation, employing devices such as pastiche, intertextual reference, and layered citation. Jameson critiques this tendency for its “deathlessness” and commodified aesthetic, where historical reference becomes a stylized surface, often stripped of genuine political or critical agency (Jameson, 1991, pp. 17–25). Despite his skepticism, Jameson's framework has become essential for understanding how science fiction interacts with postmodern culture, particularly in its blending of narrative genres, collapse of ontological boundaries, and recursive engagement with its own literary and cultural history.

The convergence of postmodernism and science fiction, particularly from the 1980s onward, is a widely acknowledged critical development. While some critics trace this alignment to earlier works such as Brian Aldiss's *Barefoot in the Head* (1990), the most explicit association comes through the emergence of cyberpunk, which many scholars recognize as the genre's postmodern crystallization. Notably, Samuel R. Delany (1990) cites science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson's argument that a significant portion of post-1960s science fiction aligns ideologically and aesthetically with postmodernism. However, broader critical consensus tends to narrow this relationship, viewing cyberpunk of the 1980s as the most definitive postmodern expression within the genre. Earlier figures – Philip K. Dick, William Burroughs, J.G. Ballard, and Brian Aldiss – are often considered precursors to this aesthetic shift (see Butler, 1996; James, 1994, p. 100).

One of the most emphatic claims is made by Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., who declares that “as a label, *cyberpunk* is perfection. It suggests the apotheosis of postmodernism” (Csicsery-Ronay, 1991, p. 182). This notion is further expanded in the

same edited volume by Brian McHale (1991), who charts the historical development of science fiction: from its early “ghettoization” in the 1920s–1940s, through the mid-century mainstreaming via stylists like Heinlein, Clarke, and Asimov, to a later stage of cross-pollination with literary modernism in the 1960s and 70s. This mutual exchange, he argues, led to a feedback loop by the 1980s, culminating in cyberpunk as a hybrid form where literary and genre boundaries collapsed.

Fredric Jameson (1991) takes this claim further by identifying cyberpunk as the “supreme expression of late capitalism” (p. 419), representing both the cultural logic and aesthetic symptom of a fully commodified, technocentric postmodern condition. In a related but nuanced interpretation, Joseph Tabbi (1995) describes cyberpunk as a form of “applied postmodernism” – a genre that doesn’t just theorize the postmodern condition but enacts it through its embeddedness in technological infrastructure. He contrasts cyberpunk’s material engagement with digital culture to the more abstract theorizing of earlier postmodern literary experiments, likening the shift to that from “paper science” to “lab science” (Tabbi, 1995, p. 219). This genre, he argues, collapses conventional binaries: fiction and history, high and popular culture, technological and literary domains. Ultimately, cyberpunk’s generic plasticity, its interdisciplinary fluency, and its narrative integration of the technological sublime position it at a unique crossroads of postmodern aesthetics and speculative literature, both reflecting and shaping the cultural moment it emerges from.

A significant portion of cyberpunk scholarship centers on William Gibson, whose seminal novel *Neuromancer* (1984) is frequently hailed as the genre’s archetype. Darko Suvin (1991) provocatively claims that Gibson stands as the only true cyberpunk author, while others are dismissed as “expert publicity men” who replicate the surface features of the genre without its literary substance.

In a detailed analysis, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. (1992) positions *Neuromancer* as the quintessential cyberpunk text, describing it as a “masterpiece” that captures the “poetry of the retrofuture.” This concept refers to the novel’s linguistic texture, which constructs a dazzling illusion that the reader is already fluent in the emergent dialects of a near-future technoculture (p. 388). For Csicsery-Ronay, Gibson’s prose achieves a stylistic balance – extrapolated from 1980s drug culture and computer slang – that is sparse yet evocative, gesturing toward a shared cultural lexicon that feels plausible without overloading the narrative with excessive neologism or symbolic density.

In contrast, Csicsery-Ronay identifies a more “symbolist” mode of speculative fiction, wherein futuristic language becomes overly dense and reconstructs its context in opposition to critical realism. Here, authors such as Walker are cited as producing prose that resists readability through linguistic saturation, whereas Gibson’s writing is “just sufficient” to be immersive and believable without collapsing under its stylization.

Veronica Hollinger (1991) offers a complementary but revisionist reading of Gibson’s style and thematic scope. She coins the term “rhetoric of technology” to describe how Gibson focuses technological imagery with narrative form (p. 205). However, Hollinger challenges the frequent assumption that cyberpunk is synonymous with postmodernism. Instead, she frames it as “posthumanist”, focusing not on fragmentation or nihilism, but on the reinsertion of the human into the evolving technological realities of late capitalism. As she writes, cyberpunk represents “the reinsertion of the human into the new reality which its technology is in the process of shaping” (p. 218). This perspective shifts emphasis from cultural deconstruction to ethical and ontological engagement with human identity in technologized environments.

These interpretations reflect an intersection between science fiction and mainstream literary theory, applying frameworks such as posthumanism, stylistics, and semiotics to the analysis of genre literature. In contrast, Larry McCaffery (1991) offers a genre-internal account of science fiction's development, distinguishing between two broad phases: an early "expansionist" period and a subsequent "implosive" turn. The expansionist mode, prominent in mid-century authors like Heinlein, Clarke, and Asimov, emphasized heroic exploration, rationalism, and "lucid, utilitarian prose" that mirrored the command-and-control ethos of scientific modernity (p. 189). By the 1960s, this mode was increasingly displaced by a focus on "inner space", privileging introspection, altered consciousness, and psychotechnological transformation. McCaffery observes that "more and more science fiction treat hallucination as an object in the world" (p. 190), signaling a move toward the dramatization of perception itself. This transition marks a fundamental shift in the poetics of science fiction, wherein subjective experience and cognitive instability become legitimate objects of narrative exploration.

Such dynamics are central to understanding how cyberpunk emerged as both an aesthetic form and cultural commentary – an expression of fiction's evolving ability to simulate not just speculative futures, but the very conditions of consciousness required to inhabit them. To critically engage with the arguments surrounding cyberpunk and postmodernist science fiction, it is essential to conclude this discussion with the work of Samuel R. Delany – a writer whose contributions bridge speculative fiction and linguistic theory. As both an acclaimed science fiction author and an academic theorist, Delany is uniquely positioned within the discourse. Notably, he is described as a postmodern science fiction writer in the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (Clute & Nicholls, 1993, p. 950).

Delany's novels – particularly *Babel-17* (1966), *Nova* (1968), *Dhalgren* (1974), and *Triton* (1976) – demonstrate a sustained engagement with language, semiotics, and cognition. *Babel-17*, for instance, constructs an entirely new language, embodying the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits that language shapes thought and perception. *Nova*, while less overt in its linguistic architecture, explores dialectal variation and syntactic innovation, particularly in how characters' identities are refracted through speech patterns. However, as Meyers (1980, pp. 178–184) argues, Delany's later works – *Dhalgren* and *Triton* – move beyond the deterministic implications of the Sapir-Whorf framework. These texts no longer suggest that language singularly determines thought; instead, they portray language as a dynamic field of interaction, ambiguity, and resistance. The linguistic environments in these novels are multivalent, saturated with competing codes, and reflective of postmodern concerns about subjectivity, instability, and semiotic excess. In this way, Delany's oeuvre challenges simplistic correlations between language and cognition. His writing offers an expansive model for understanding science fiction as a linguistically self-aware genre, capable of interrogating its medium of representation. His dual role as a novelist and theorist positions him as a vital figure in rethinking the poetics of science fiction from both literary and linguistic perspectives.

As the science fiction genre expanded through intertextual proliferation, one narrative voice emerged with particular dominance: the military-scientific register. Repeatedly employed across decades of short stories and novels, this register became not only familiar but normative, serving as the default stylistic convention of science fiction against which later innovations were implicitly or explicitly judged. Even authors who sought to subvert or critique this tradition – figures such as Kurt Vonnegut, Philip K. Dick,

Harlan Ellison, Brian Aldiss, and J.G. Ballard – typically did so within the pulp-style matrix. Their contributions, while thematically and cognitively innovative, often remained structurally indebted to pulp conventions. Notably, they shifted attention to the mental processes of narrative focalization, disrupting but not entirely discarding the dominant stylistic model. (For further elaboration on this counter-tradition, see Paragraph of the research 3.) Despite these departures, the traditional *pulpstyle* remains the dominant form in science fiction from the mid-20th century through the late 1980s. Writers such as Isaac Asimov, who published extensively until his death, retained a pulp aesthetic throughout. His 1990 collection *Azazel*, for example, is stylistically indistinguishable from the short stories of the 1940s, adhering to familiar tropes in tone, plot construction, and dialogue.

This stylistic conservatism extends to novels as well. Larry Niven's *Ringworld* (1973) reads less like an expansive novel and more like an elongated short story. The narrative centers on a singular speculative premise – a vast ring-shaped megastructure encircling a star (the novum) – and features a third-person narration focalized through protagonist Louis Wu. The text integrates exotic aliens, pseudo-scientific exposition, and heavy use of direct speech. However, it also perpetuates gender stereotypes, rendering female characters as passive archetypes – either sexualized or symbolic. While the novel introduces sexual content absent from earlier pulp fiction, it remains couched in euphemistic techniques, such as paragraphs of research fade-outs during intimate scenes, preserving a stylized modesty reminiscent of earlier decades.

The “modern traditional” style of science fiction writing, which continues this aesthetic lineage, can be observed in the works of Poul Anderson, Greg Bear, Jerome Bixby, Arthur C. Clarke, Harry Harrison, Robert Heinlein, Ursula K. Le Guin, Walter M. Miller, Robert Sheckley, L. Sprague de Camp, Theodore Sturgeon, and others. This is not to diminish their literary value; indeed, many of these writers have produced some of the genre's most formally accomplished and conceptually rich texts. Even works that conform closely to the pulp template frequently surpass the average literary standard in contemporary fiction.

What distinguishes these authors is their capacity to leverage the limitations of the pulpstyle in service of narrative innovation. For instance, Heinlein's “By His Bootstraps” uses the trope of time travel to create a narrative of reflexive identity, where a single protagonist confronts his temporal selves through a unified focal lens – a feat nearly impossible outside of speculative genres, with the possible exception of literary surrealism (see Paragraph of the research 7). Similarly, Jerome Bixby's “It's a Good Life” (1974), though composed within traditional stylistic boundaries, manipulates focalization to represent a psychological terror so profound it resists articulation, let alone resolution (see Section 7.4).

In sum, while thematic content in science fiction has evolved considerably, stylistic innovation has largely occurred within the framework of narrative point of view, rather than through the transformation of genre language or register. The pulpstyle, therefore, remains a deep-rooted and flexible literary scaffold, enabling both conformity and critique.

Characteristics of pulpstyle vs. counter-style science fiction

PULPSTYLE	COUNTER-STYLE
Military-scientific register	Subverts pulp conventions
Conventional narrative focalization	The themes of mental processes
Exotic aliens and pseudo-science	Narrative focalization innovation
Sexism and euphemism	Counter-culture critique

In his influential preface to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, Bruce Sterling (1988) characterizes cyberpunk as both a definitive cultural product of the 1980s and a genre deeply indebted to the broader sixty-year tradition of popular science fiction. Although each author in the movement acknowledges distinct literary influences, Sterling identifies a shared ancestral lineage, suggesting that cyberpunk emerges from within science fiction's internal evolution rather than as a break from it. This sense of continuity is especially evident in cyberpunk's hybridization of the New Wave's literary self-consciousness of the 1960s with a renewed focus on the technical rigor and scientific extrapolation characteristic of the Golden Age. On a stylistic and conceptual level, cyberpunk appears to depart from traditional pulpstyle. Yet, upon closer examination – particularly in the stories within *Mirrorshades* – many features of the pulp tradition remain embedded within the new form.

Key pulp-derived elements persist: the reliance on dialogue-driven drama, now delivered in a vernacular, naturalistic register; the inclusion of expository technical passages, although more smoothly integrated into the narrative; and a continued fascination with neologisms, albeit drawn from the lexicon of computer science rather than astrophysics. Thus, while cyberpunk refines and recontextualizes these elements, it does not wholly discard them. Notably, the genre exhibits a growing stylistic self-awareness, characterized by experimental techniques such as stream-of-consciousness focalization, colloquial syntax, and poetic metaphor. These features mark a gradual shift away from the utilitarian tone of earlier science fiction and towards a more layered, reflexive mode of narration. Scholars such as Patricia Warrick (1980) and the contributors to Slusser and Shippey's (1992) critical anthology have explored these stylistic developments in depth. This literary evolution supports the broader argument that cyberpunk is aligned with postmodernist fiction; an issue discussed further in section 3.5.1. Central to this identification is the genre's ontological orientation. In contrast to mainstream fiction – which assumes a shared experiential world and thereby can reference contemporary realities without extensive exposition – science fiction must actively construct the world it depicts, requiring explicit narration of both environment and event.

This distinction forms the basis of Brian McHale's (1987) theorization of science fiction and postmodernism as ontological fiction, which he contrasts with the epistemological orientation of realist narratives. In ontological fiction, the central question is not "What can we know?" but "What exists?" This framework allows McHale to classify authors such as Philip K. Dick as exemplary ontological writers, whose works explore the instability of reality, identity, and existence – concerns that lie at the heart of both postmodernist and science fictional discourse.

While science fiction is frequently aligned with postmodernism – both in terms of its narrative experimentation and its intersection with post-structuralist literary theory – this conflation oversimplifies the genre's critical function. In fact, science fiction often

serves as a structural and ideological critique of postmodernism itself. Unlike postmodern texts, which commonly embrace ontological ambiguity and often conclude with narrative indeterminacy or aesthetic ambivalence, science fiction typically insists on resolution. These resolutions may be spectacular, apocalyptic, or transcendent, but they reflect a core impulse within the genre to seek coherence, closure, and understanding.

Even in science fiction narratives that remain ostensibly unresolved, the text generally signals the potential for explanation. Where postmodern fiction favors the dissolution of categorical and rational boundaries, science fiction reappropriates the fantastic and the unreal within the rationalist framework of scientific extrapolation. Science becomes a tool not only for technological speculation but for ontological organization, extending its domain into the very structure of alternate realities. Furthermore, science fiction diverges from postmodern fiction in its treatment of ethical subjectivity. While postmodernist narratives often focus on groups or archetypes, presenting characters as representatives of social constructs, science fiction tends to center individual moral agency. As Andrew Butler (1996) observes, the genre frequently couples speculative scenarios with an exploration of the ethical consequences of individual action, emphasizing a fusion of practical responsibility and speculative inquiry. Even the ethically complex or "amoral" environments of cyberpunk narratives foreground ethical questions as thematic concerns, making the moral dimension of futurity visible and urgent.

Brian McHale's (1987) seminal claim that postmodern fiction is primarily ontological is persuasive in its insight but limited in its reach. Science fiction does not merely replicate postmodernism's ontological focus – it also engages deeply with epistemological questions. The genre constructs alternate realities not just to display them, but to actively investigate their knowability, structure, and logic. Science fiction narratives are often driven by a dynamic imperative to explore and comprehend these constructed worlds – an energy that is inherited from the genre's pulp origins, which emphasized action-oriented storytelling and speculative momentum. This dynamism introduces a third axis of literary engagement, beyond ontology and epistemology, which might be termed *kinesis* – the narrative emphasis on movement, transformation, and material progression. Science fiction, particularly in its cyberpunk manifestations, is therefore best understood as a holistic genre – one that is simultaneously epistemological, ontological, and kinetic. It resists the static relativism of postmodernism, instead favoring exploration, confrontation, and change within speculative frameworks.

The stylistic paradigm known as *pulpstyle* continues to shape the formal architecture of the majority of science fiction. Even those texts that appear to diverge radically from this tradition – such as those examined in the Paragraph of the research – do so in reaction to its conventions. These narratives retain the generic logic of narrative progression, which infuses what might otherwise be static or abstract explorations with momentum, tension, and thematic clarity.

This paragraph of the research has examined the primary stylistic features of *pulpstyle* and their relationship to canonical valuation. This is not to argue that *pulpstyle* has been unfairly marginalized in literary history; rather, it had a specific historical role, and while it has not always aged gracefully, its influence remains pervasive. What this analysis reveals are that literary value is often a product of cultural fashion and institutional legitimation, which retrospectively attaches or withdraws value from texts. Importantly, the value of a text is not inherently tied to its style; stylistic traits are reflections of historically shifting taste rather than determinants of intrinsic merit.

A comparative reading of a classic pulp story (e.g., from Asimov's *The Early Asimov* (1975)) and a cyberpunk story (from *Mirrorshades*, ed. Sterling, 1988) can reveal important questions about shared lineage versus formal constraints. Are their similarities due to a common heritage in the science fiction tradition, or are they simply products of the short story form? Exploring a non-science fiction story may help disentangle these questions. If parallels persist, how does cyberpunk recontextualize pulp elements – such as exposition, dialogue, or technological language – and to what effect?

Consider how science fiction represents childhood and education, particularly in television and film. The genre has often been branded as “juvenile literature”, both descriptively and dismissively. Early editors like John W. Campbell emphasized science fiction's didactic function, supporting authors who straddled popular storytelling and popular science communication. The tension between education and escapism continues to affect how the genre is received. If adult readers are drawn to science fiction for its cognitive stimulation, is this evidence of a genre with a distinct readerly function, as opposed to conventional literary fiction?

While parametric approaches to genre (judging works within their own category-specific expectations) offer an inclusive critical lens, they risk flattening distinctions between texts of varying literary significance. If all works are judged equally within their genre, how do we evaluate texts that disrupt generic norms? Is literary value purely sociocultural, or can stylistic precision and innovation contribute to aesthetic legitimacy? Science fiction still struggles to be recognized as “serious literature” unless its authors – such as Orwell, Huxley, Vonnegut, or Lessing – are effectively removed from the genre's label. Should science fiction seek canonical recognition, or does its cultural marginality offer critical freedom?

Much of the critical terminology applied to science fiction originates in the mainstream literary canon, shaped by a linear, authorized version of literary history. If we adopt an alternative history focused on “alternativity”, as discussed in Paragraph of the research 3, perhaps it is time to develop a new critical vocabulary and historical poetics rooted within the science fiction tradition itself. Such a framework might define itself through the genre's unique formal strategies: extrapolation, novum, world-building, cognitive estrangement, and narrative kinesism.

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