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«Il Fantastico, il Perturbante e il Meraviglioso nelle letterature americane»

A più di quarantacinque anni dalla pubblicazione del celebrato studio di Todorov su *La letteratura fantastica*, il genere *fantasy*, in tutte le sue possibili declinazioni e in tutta l'ampia gamma delle sue manifestazioni mediatiche, continua ad occupare larga parte del nostro presente di lettori/fruitori. Indagare sulla persistenza del "fantastico" anche nell'ambito delle letterature americane – analizzando sia la produzione di genere che quella di autori che, all'apparenza, rifuggono, nelle loro opere, dall'Insolito e dallo Strano – può costituire un utile esercizio per misurare la pervasività e il ruolo storico dell'*Unheimlich* (per utilizzare la terminologia freudiana) nelle profondità dell'immaginario artistico delle Americhe.

Francisco Collado-Rodríguez

THE IMPERFECTIONS OF A FUTURE PAST: TRAUMA, POSTHUMANITY, AND SCI-FI IN WILLIAM GIBSON'S "THE GERNSBACK CONTINUUM"[1]

Introduction: A matter of time

In recent years, technologically overdeveloped societies have suffered from what seems to be the ideological and cultural effects of a new paradigm that combines the master narratives of trauma and posthumanity. Perhaps as result of their continuous exposure to the mass media,[2] contemporary manifestations of popular culture are leading us into an understanding of humanity as being quintessentially exposed to multiple traumas and continuous dangers while paradoxically living in a hypertechnological renovation of being in which our bodies become gradually improved when not forgotten or even physically dissolved for the benefit of a new articulation of the late human being as a new posthuman creature, an ideological and scientific entity essentially constructed of and by information and its processing. The main aim of this paper is to retrieve and analyze some literary "memories as projections of the future" belonging to the core ideological point, a few decades

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[2] Holt N. Parker, "Toward a Definition of Popular Culture," *History and Theory*, vol. 50 (May 2011): 156.

ago, in which Sci-Fi started to offer, thanks to the development of cyberpunk, glimpses of this new and problematic articulation of being as a conflicting processor of painful information and forerunner of a languishing traumatized humanity. More specifically, this paper centers its analysis on the first story ever published by William Gibson, the well-known guru of cyberpunk, and on his presentation there of the first posthuman character in his fiction. This early cyberpunk story, called "The Gernsback Continuum,"[3] unfolds as a temporal recollection of an imperfect future past, an issue that offers the author the opportunity to play with our so far fruitless attempts to ever understand the category of time and thus our own place in the universe. In addition, by looking back and commenting on modernist notions referred to time and memory, "The Gernsback Continuum" takes readers into a political valuation of the present social effects that the combination of trauma and posthumanity have brought forth in present life.

More specifically, Gibson's short story offers a radical political way to evaluate the power that American pulp Sci-Fi and architecture might have had in the Thirties formation of a collective imaginary future for the end of the millennium. Thus, the story follows concerns and, in fact, shows interesting coincidences with Kubrick's cult film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). However, in more explicit terms than Kubrick did, Gibson's narrator concludes that a past narrative about a future that never came to happen reveals the proto-fascist, patriarchal, and racist nature of the collective dreamers. At the same time as Europe was becoming, in the Thirties, a conflicting ground where fascism, democracy, and populisms were soon to collide in the breaking up of WW2, in Gibson's story America was dreaming of a future that the narrator does not seem to judge in very positive terms.

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[3] First published in the magazine *Universe* vol. 11, 1981.

The hypothesis that trauma and posthumanity imbricate in the cyberpunk genre as an early warning against a future perceived as strongly dystopic requires the necessary evaluation of the definition of human as posthuman and the conviction that popular culture offers the grounds where cultural artifacts (such as Sci-Fi stories) and information may become instruments to hint at a new process of enslavement based on trauma, computerized life, and expectations for the future. Accordingly, this paper approaches, first of all, a basic definition of the posthuman in line with theories developed by well-known scholars of the field. Then, following the narrator's lead in Gibson's story, it addresses popular culture and, more specifically, the pictorial and narrative cultural impact some American pulp magazines of the Twenties and Thirties together with some instances of futuristic architecture allegedly had in the formation of the collective imaginary the narrator scrutinizes in Gibson's narrative. In addition, the poststructuralist approach the narrator uses to trace back this Thirties collective dream of the future to come—which never actually happened—is also taken into consideration. Finally, the ideological quality of this unfulfilled collective imaginary will allow for the analysis of the narrator's personal ideology.

I-What do we mean when we say "posthuman"?

Possibly, the most important attribute that differentiates our present times from past ages is the excess of information that frequently saturates our lives. We live in a world overflowed and overloaded with information, where traditional beliefs in truth and solid knowledge have been gradually displaced by the economy of a relativistic "post-truth" (an elegant and political way to refer to lies, multiple versions of the truth, or manipulated messages) once we have experienced the painful post-postmodern realization that truth might not make us free

ever because, like the electron in quantum physics, it always escapes when we come close to it. Following the importance that modernism gave to the individual observer, who realized he was trapped in his personal relative spatial-temporal conditions, and the subsequent postmodernist hero who literally became dissolved in the pages of the novel (Slothrop in Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* is a well-known case in point), the Twenty-First Century has brought with it the ultimate reduction of being and life to informational bits. If stereotypical golddiggers from the Far West eventually became replaced in popular narratives by Mad Max and his acolytes in a quest for gasoline that substituted for the older quest for gold, at the end of the millennium gasoline had also been forgotten as the ultimate reward in life for the benefit of information, the new center and motor of an ever-changing reality of simulations and copies.[4] Man had become posthuman, a reflecting and gradually disempowered image of those robots, computers, and AIs that the father of cybernetics Norbert Wiener had conceived and designed in his own human image.[5] At some moment in the cybernetic process, robots and computers stopped imitating the mental capabilities of their human creators and man started to imitate his own creation: when this process of reflection turned around, humans saw themselves as posthuman, as nothing but bits of information and patterns to process it that, as Gibson put it in his first cyberpunk novel, have to "leave the meat behind" when entering a reality now turned virtual.[6] Years later, scholars ranging from C. Katherine Hayles (1999) to Rosi Braidotti (2013) confirmed the paradigmatic shift: the new posthuman age opened with the emphasis put

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[4] Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* [1988], trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: U. of Michigan P., 1995).

[5] Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Da Capo P., 1954).

[6] William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984).

on our capacities to process information and to truly believe that we are basically information. In her notable work *How We Became Posthuman*,[7] Hayles described the feedback process that connects us to our environment, called her readers' attention to the idea that the brain functions as a neural network, and put the emphasis on (Wiener's) cybernetics to conclude that human brains and machines operate in similar terms, thus bringing down the old ideological barriers existing between human and non-human organisms.[8] However, Hayles also warned readers against a disembodied posthumanity: to put somebody's consciousness into a computer (as Gibson already does in *Neuromancer*[9]) is, at least, unnerving. Only fourteen years later, Braidotti added to Hayles's contentions a whole new field for research, evaluating different categories that go from the post- through the in- to the trans-human, and offering very positive feelings about our non-human futures.

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[7] C. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1999).

[8] Hayles summarized the beginning of the posthuman paradigm as follows: "The Macy Conferences of Cybernetics, held from 1942 to 1954, were instrumental in forging a new paradigm. To succeed, they needed a theory of information (Shannon's bailiwick), a model of neural functioning that showed how neurons worked as information-processing systems (McCulloch's lifework), computers that processed binary code and that could conceivably reproduce themselves, thus reinforcing the analogy with biological systems (von Neumann's specialty), and a visionary who could articulate the larger implications of the cybernetic paradigm and make clear its cosmic significance (Wiener's contribution). The result of this breathtaking enterprise was nothing less than a new way of looking at human beings. Henceforth, humans were to be seen primarily as information-processing entities who are essentially similar to intelligent machines." (*Ibidem*, p. 7; emphasis in the original).

[9] This is the case of the Dixie Flatline in *Neuromancer*, a computer hacker named McCoy Pauley whose mind is saved onto a ROM. Cf. Benjamin Fair, "Stepping Razor in Orbit: Postmodern Identity and Political Alternatives in William Gibson's *Neuromancer*," *Critique*, vol. 46, n. 2 (2005): 92-103.

Optimism for Braidotti is still possible within the coordinates of the posthuman map even if cyberpunk had insistently warned readers that we are heading towards dystopic territories.[10] Unfortunately, so far history seems to be closer to the predictions advanced by Gibson and his fellow writers of the cyberpunk project rather than to Braidotti's optimistic views.

II-Cyberpunk Sci-Fi, Gernsback, and Gibson's narrator as cultural processor

In his sixth and last column for the magazine *Interzone*, writer Bruce Sterling informed his readers about the brief history of cyberpunk, a Sci-Fi subgenre created by himself and fellow authors William Gibson, Lewis Shiner, Rudy Rucker, and John Shirley. Coming into literary life in the early Eighties, Cyberpunk, Sterling argued, "simply means 'anything cyberpunks write'."[11] However, there are at least two characteristics that mark the new subgenre's distinctiveness from traditional Sci-Fi narratives: the dystopic nature of the future illustrated in its stories and the posthuman condition that many of its protagonists share. The bleak interpretation of traumatizing life that cyberpunk writers describe in their fiction is explicitly addressed by Sterling in his report on the genre:

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[10] Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity P., 2013). This thinker bases her understanding of the posthuman in the existence of a universal blueprint where matter and information are basically the same and evolve into a positive future: "My monistic philosophy of becoming rests on the idea that matter, including the specific slice of matter that is human embodiment, is intelligent and self-organizing. This means that matter is not dialectically opposed to culture, nor to technological mediation, but continuous with them" (*Ibidem*, p. 35).

[11] Bruce Sterling, "Cyberpunk in the Nineties," *Sixth Interzone Column* (1998). <http://www.streettech.com/ bcp/BCPtext/Manifestos/CPInThe 90s. html>. Accessed April 16, 2017.

Our place in the universe is basically accidental. We are weak and mortal, but it's not the holy will of the gods; it's just the way things happen to be at the moment. And this is radically unsatisfactory; not because we direly miss the shelter of the Deity, but because, looked at objectively, the vale of human suffering is basically a dump. The human condition can be changed, and it will be changed, and is changing; the only real questions are how and to what end.[12]

The answers given to Sterling's two final questions in the quote above soon led to literary representations of posthuman beings that spend or waste a substantial part of their lives in cyberspace, in a virtual reality of information—that according to C.K. Hayles marks the third stage of posthumanism—where the links with the physical are gradually lost and forgotten. Johnny Mnemonic, Gibson's first cyberpunk protagonist, is already a cyborg, a walking computer in human flesh with a hard disc in his head and a basic need to escape from the physical, where he behaves as a cowardly antiheroic character.[13] Three years later, with the publication of his first novel, *Neuromancer* (1984), Gibson consolidated the era of the cybernetic hacker as protagonist and rider of cyberspace. Henry Dorsett Case is the first most popular literary character to "leave the meat behind" when entering, not the Wachowskis' film version, but the original *matrix* of the cybernetic universe. As the narrator explains in *Neuromancer,* Gibson called his own literary precursor of the Internet "the matrix":

[It] has its roots in primitive arcade games [...] Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nati-

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[12] *Ibidem*, p. 4.
[13] William Gibson, "Johnny Mnemonic," *Omni Magazine*, vol. 32 (May 1981): 56–63 and 98–99.

on, by children being taught mathematical concepts
[...] A graphic representation of data abstracted from
the banks of every computer in the human system.
Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the
nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of
data. Like city lights, receding [...].[14]

What comes out of this new mother is obviously the posthu-
man creature that has "left its meat behind" and swims now by
the "banks of every computer in the human system." Once our
bodies are discarded and left behind, we remain only as pro-
cessing patterns and bits of information.[15] Life turns into a
complex embroidery of messages and information in need of
processing, and the past acquires new meanings: our memori-
es can be transported in different devices, transplanted, usur-
ped, dislocated, influenced, erased, created, counterfeited...
Following the lead of modernist literature and its myriad puzz-
led heroes who still wanted to impose their meaning on life,
the cyberpunk protagonist is mentally unstable but also con-
scious of his or her role as a processor of information, a mac-
hine still momentarily exposed to the traumas of the flesh.
Breaking the new cyberpunk path for the sake of political
commitment, Gibson's narrator in "The Gernsback
Continuum" becomes aware of his own miserable condition as
a processor of information in a world where the physical is
giving way to manipulative semantic networks. In them, life
flows and is understood in messages, pictures, collections of
photos which have turned the human "I" into a mere posthu-

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[14] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, cit. p. 51.
[15] Cf. Wiener's definition of the human being: "Our tissues change as
we live: the food we eat and the air we breathe become flesh of our flesh and
bone of our bone, and the momentary elements of our flesh and bone pass
out of our body everyday with our excreta. We are but whirlpools in a river
of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpet-
uate themselves." (*The Human Use of Human Beings*, cit. p. 96).

man "eye" forced to see reality from the perspectives imposed on it by the networks that inscribe, manipulate, condition, and even make sick—by means of computational viruses—the entity that used to be the human being.

III-Gernsback, his "Continuum," and the American Dream of a Future Past

Originally published in 1981 in *Omni Magazine*, "The Gernsback Continuum" became the first story to be reissued in *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*, edited by Sterling in 1986, and it also appeared listed as the second story (after "Johnny Mnemonic") in Gibson's personal collection *Burning Chrome*, released that same year, facts that clearly point to the importance Gibson (and Sterling) conferred to the first story our author wrote at the beginning of their cyberpunk project.

Although a very short piece of fiction, "The Gernsback Continuum" is rich both in cultural references and in the use of a complex syntax that seem to evoke the importance that notions of complexity and chaos already had in the arena of critical theory in the Eighties.[16] The first feature that deserves credit in this story that marks the beginning of cyberpunk is its metafictional quality: it is a quest for meaning production that tries to unveil and evaluate an old narrative of the past about its future; along the quest its protagonist becomes infected by elements of his own target, the unveiled narrative of the future, already a past that never happened. The narrator is also the protagonist of the story, which he narrates in retrospect, once all the events have happened, but when he is still recovering from his "semiotic" disease. He is clearly a cultivated man who knows about and uses terms from critical theory and Jungian

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[16] Cf. Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, cit., pp. 81-89.

symbolism, and shows no doubts about the power the media have in the construction of reality. In addition, he is a photographer, that is to say, he produces visual "memories" that can be manipulated, published or inserted in different contexts and stored in physical or virtual folders. The story starts with his own recollection, *in medias res*, of an episode that "is starting to fade"[17]: his visualization of abnormal artifacts, such as a "flying-wing liner" over San Francisco. The narrative progresses with a self-analysis of the narrator's memory, where he speculates that this entrance of the fantastic or uncanny into his life originated in a job he accepted in London to take a number of photos for an illustrated history book that the editor, Dialta Downes, calls "American Streamlined Moderne" and his own agent "raygun Gothic."[18] The protagonist's specific task is to take pictures of the futuristic architecture of the

> Thirties and Forties you pass daily in American cities without noticing: the movie marquees ribbed to radiate some mysterious energy, the dime stores faced with fluted aluminum, the chrome-tube chairs gathering dust in the lobbies of transient hotels. She saw these things as segments of a dreamworld, abandoned in the uncaring present; she wanted me to photograph them for her.[19]

The nostalgic task of hunting for visual traces of a cultural past that dreamed about a future that never came to happen propitiates the narrator's cultural rambling once he is fed with a large amount of books, pictures and artistic samples from the Thirties. Thus, Gibson cunningly draws the portrait of somebody who, above all, becomes overloaded with information

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[17] William Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," *Burning Chrome* (New York: Ace Books, 1986), p. 23.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 24.

[19] *Ibidem*, pp. 24-25.

about the period, a circumstance that will eventually cause his apparent mental sickness. The protagonist tries to process a huge amount of cultural information and put some order in his quest by linking different ideas, which eventually results in his condition taking him to draw interesting connections. Thus, he informs readers that the Thirties saw the first generation of American industrial designers, that Frank Lloyd Wright's futuristic architecture can also be connected to Ming the Merciless, the evil Emperor of Mongo in Flash Gordon's graphic and film adventures, as exemplified in the former's Oriental-like gas station (in Cloquet, Minnesota),[20] or that all the architectural examples he had to photograph share the same dream for the future that you can see in the covers "of old *Amazing Stories* pulps, by an artist named Frank R. Paul."[21] In fact, *Amazing Stories* offers the cultural link to the title given to the story: Hugo Gernsback was the editor of this pulp magazine that featured covers by Paul and Sci-Fi stories by different authors. Eventually, the narrator's overload of images and other cultural artifacts mumbling in his brain forces the dissolution between his own reality and Dialta Downes's dream of the American Thirties, and he actually enters the dreamy territory of such futuristic cultural iconography, even experiencing visions of fantastic artifacts in it. Although eventually, from the present tense of his narration, he is capable to separate the two different ontologies being processed by his brain, the narrator also starts to dissociate the political value of the two planes; from the collective dream in which he has intruded, represented by Downes's collective dream of the Thirties, he progresses to a recollection of his own bleak and traumatizing present:

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[20] Although, in fact, Wright's famous station was designed and built already in the Fifties, not the Thirties, and the narrator talks about gas stations, in the plural, that he locates in the southwest of the country. See <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/tip/2486>. Accessed April 14, 2017.

[21] Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," cit., p. 25.

> And that was my frame of mind as I made the stations of her convoluted socioarchitectural cross in my red Toyota—as I gradually tuned in to her image of a shadowy America-that-wasn't, of Coca-Cola plants like beached submarines, and fifth-run movie houses like the temples of some lost sect that had worshiped blue mirrors and geometry. And as I moved among these secret ruins, I found myself wondering what the inhabitants of that lost future would think of the world I lived in. The Thirties dreamed white marble and slipstream chrome, immortal crystal and burnished bronze, but the rockets on the covers of the Gernsback pulps had fallen on London in the dead of night, screaming. After the war, everyone had a car—no wings for it—and the promised superhighway to drive it down, so that the sky itself darkened, and the fumes ate the marble and pitted the miracle crystal.…[22]

Thus, by means of an intertextual reference to the powerful beginning of Pynchon's encyclopedic third novel ("A screaming comes across the sky"), the traumatic echoes of the actual WW2 supersede the colorful rockets drawn on the covers of *Amazing Stories.*[23] The narrator draws, processes, and gets lost in the parallel images of what he thinks was the collective imaginary that the Thirties had for the future, while checking them against the actual bleaker period he is—we are—living in: an image of the present as the ecological disaster and dystopic dump pointed out by Bruce Sterling in his analysis of cyberpunk poetics.

However, the obvious contrast between the apparently neat, clean, and utopic future ("white marble and slipstream

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[22] *Ibidem*, p. 27.
[23] For a sample of Paul's covers in *Amazing Stories*, visit <http://www.philsp.com/mags/amazing_stories. html>. Accessed April 16, 2017.

chrome, immortal crystal and burnished bronze") that the Thirties expected the Eighties to become and what actually became of human civilization is not the only issue the narrator is committed to scrutinize and eventually denounce. As already pointed out, being a posthuman processor of images and signs, he is exposed to the effects of information overload, which override his analytical capacity to discriminate between reality and the collective dream of the Thirties to the point that elements from the imaginary territory start to be perceived as part of his own "real" experiences.[24] It is here that Gibson elaborates on a second social issue: the collective dream of the Thirties, as described in those samples of architecture and pulp fiction the narrator has been processing, is portrayed as clean, shiny, and ruled by the racist patriarchy typically exemplified by Flash Gordon narratives. The narrator refers to different uncanny manifestations of this collective dream entering his reality, such as his first vision of a flying wing:

> And one day, on the outskirts of Bolinas, when I was setting up to shoot a particularly lavish example of Ming's martial architecture, I penetrated a fine membrane, a membrane of probability...
> Ever so gently, I went over the Edge—
> And looked up to see a twelve-engined thing like a bloated boomerang, all wing, thrumming its way east with an elephantine grace, so low that I could count the rivets in its dull silver skin, and hear maybe the echo of jazz.[25]

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[24] A device that clearly echoes Borges's well-known story "Tlön, Uqbar y Orbis Tertius," where artifacts from an encyclopedia start to populate and eventually take over the real world of the narrator. The reference of Gibson's narrator to his own experience "among these secret ruins" in the quotation above also points to the intertextual debt the cyberpunk author owes to Borges's short-story collection *The Garden of Forking Paths* (in Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* [Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1944]).

[25] Gibson, "The Gernsback Continuum," cit., pp. 27-28.

The episode represents his first experience in this land of the future that was never to exist but it also incorporates a touch of authorial irony. Cunningly, Gibson decided to set the portal of entrance into the Gernsback Continuum in California. As cultural icon, California is the prototypical land where the American Dream of riches came to an end for the frontier man at the end of the nineteenth century but it is also the place that represents the power of the simulacrum in American life, being the site of both American cinema and well-known amusement parks. Not surprisingly, his friend Merv—an expert in paranormal experiences—tells the narrator that what he saw was a "semiotic ghost,"[26] that is to say, an uncanny creature made of signs, of informational bits. On his way back to Los Angeles, the narrator experiences his strongest vision of the Continuum; in the Arizona desert, at night, he sees a couple talking, in a city of the future. The description he draws of the futuristic city might, once again, have come out of the pages of an issue of *Amazing Stories*:

> Roads of crystal soared between the spires, crossed and recrossed by smooth silver shapes like beads of running mercury. The air was thick with ships: giant wing-liners, little darting silver things (sometimes one of the quicksilver shapes from the sky bridges rose gracefully into the air and flew up to join the dance), mile-long blimps, hovering dragonfly things that were gyrocopters...[27]

In fact, the narrator's description of the couple and the city strongly resembles actual illustrations by artist Frank R. Paul—the above-mentioned author of many covers of *Amazing Stories*—such as the following one:

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[26] *Ibidem*, p. 29.
[27] *Ibidem*, pp. 31-32.

Interior art by Frank R. Paul for winter 1929
Amazing Stories Quarterly, illustrating "Ralph 124C41+"
by Hugo Gernsback (Copyright free – courtesy of Google - Frank
R. Paul gallery)

The covers and pictures in *Amazing Stories* provided readers with an ideological understanding of the future in which good guys were always white and frequently blond—the Aryan heroic prototype Flash Gordon represented—or, as seen above, dressed up in militaristic clothes while women were

always pretty and the object of the man's stare, and villains were monsters, huge insects, robots or Asian wicked men such as Ming. But evil was always defeated and the cities of the future soon recovered the spotless, chrome, and neon cleanliness featured in the one above, as the narrator can also testify on account of his experience in the desert. He further comments that the man and woman he saw were dressed in white and wore "spotless white sun shoes […] They were the children of Dialta Downes's '80-that-wasn't; they were Heirs to the Dream. They were white, blond, and they probably had blue eyes. They were American."[28] A shiver cuts across his description when the narrator realizes that these semiotic ghosts of a collective dream that never came to happen resemble "the sinister fruitiness of Hitler Youth propaganda,"[29] an observation that explicitly marks Gibson's story also as a political commentary on the American Thirties, now portrayed as a period in which a fascist narrative exerted an enormous influence over the country's culture, to the point of giving form to their collective dream for a patriarchal white supremacist future.

In an attempt to close such a dangerous mental portal to the Gernsback Nazi Continuum, his friend Merv, in line with the narrator's posthuman condition, recommends him to watch "lots of television, particularly game shows and soaps. Go to porn movies. Ever see *Nazi Love Motel*?"[30] Trash media is the answer to exorcise the semiotic ghosts: in the narrator's posthuman economy, mass media saturation can help by short-circuiting the information flow, thus blocking the portal and its evil connotations.

In line with Gibson's political irony, the story resolves in a brief episode in which the narrator, in his role as posthuman being, buys a newspaper to feed on more information, this

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[28] *Ibidem*, p. 32.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 33.
[30] *Ibidem*.

time about the present. He has been in Los Angeles for two weeks, which he thinks was a bad idea because "Hollywood was full of people who looked too much like the couple I'd seen in Arizona."[31] In contrast with the portraits of the futuristic couple he saw in the desert, when the visions are starting to fade he buys in San Francisco the newspaper from a "thin black man with bad teeth and an obvious wig" in a final scene in which the cyberpunk perception of a dystopic traumatic present dispels the grips of the projected white patriarchal imaginary: the world could be worse, the narrator answers the newspaper seller, "it could be perfect."[32]

IV-In Conclusion: The imperfect flesh of Cyberpunk

Three main issues have surfaced in this reading of Gibson's first short story: The posthuman condition the author attributes to the narrator, the important role the mass media traditionally play in the creation and development of ideologies, and the socio-political denunciatory character that Gibson confers to Sci-Fi at the very start of cyberpunk.

As contended above, the narrator sees himself basically as a processor of information in a time in which information overload has already become the most characteristic trend of our present hyper-technological civilization. Thus, he also becomes a predecessor of Gibson's popular character Johnny Mnemonic, the cyborg protagonist of his second cyberpunk story and the first cyberpunk hacker who, far from being a free creature, perfectly epitomizes Wiener's assertion that when "human atoms are knit into an organization in which they are used, not in their full right as responsible human beings, but

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[31] *Ibidem*, p. 34.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 35.

as cogs and levers and rods, it matters little that their raw material is flesh and blood. What is used as an element in a machine, is in fact an element in the machine."[33] Although not yet a technological slave of the system, the narrator in "The Gernsback Continuum" becomes aware of the use it makes of popular culture to control and ideologically subdue American democracy. In this sense, the nameless narrator is a new type of hero, whose main mission becomes to process informational traces of the past, realize its Nazi itches for the "purification" of the species, and contrast it to our gloomy multiracial present of poverty and environmental disaster. It is in his protagonist's final choice of the actual present over the perverted future past announced by the Thirties collective dream that Gibson elevates cyberpunk to the category of socially committed literature, providing readers with a first indication of the "seriousness" of the new Sci-Fi genre and breaking the path for the reevaluation of this field of popular literature. From "The Gersback Continuum" onwards, Sci-Fi has become exemplary and ethically firm to stand the attacks of the hyper-technological enslaving society of our times.

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[33] Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings*, cit., p. 185.