Cyberspace, Science Fiction and Geography

James Kneale

Science Fiction and Geography

Representing the future
- A science fiction of the present?
- Speculation and extrapolation
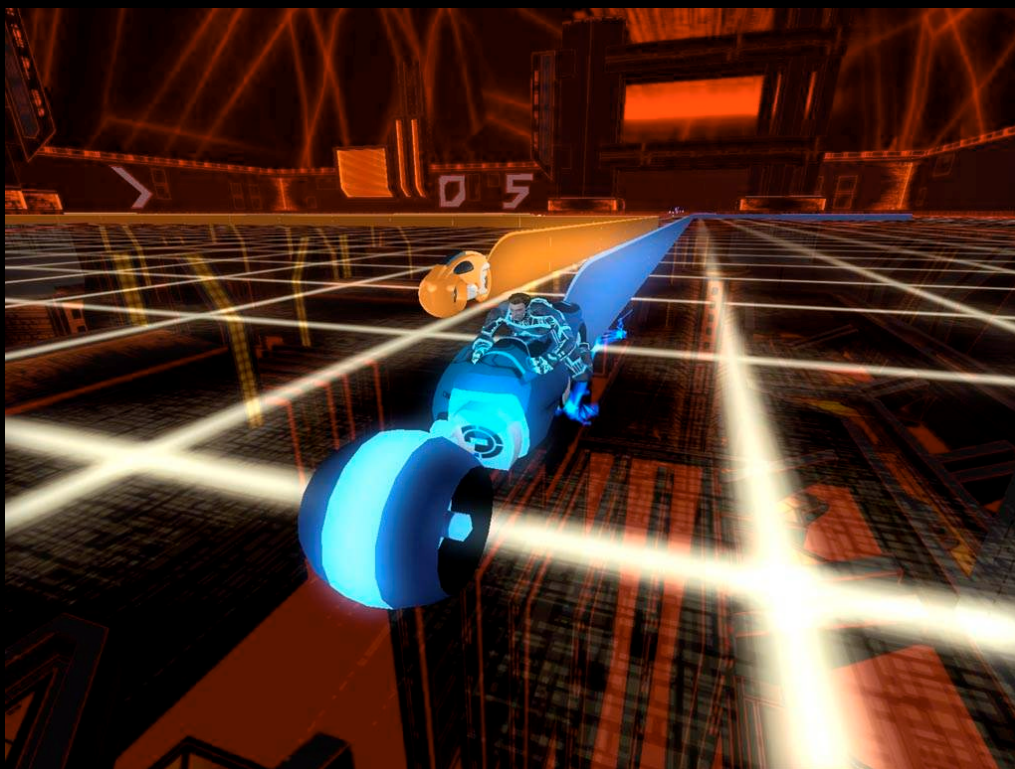- William Gibson's 'cyberspace'
- Utopias and dystopias

Star Wars (1977)

Cyberspace and SF

- Cyberspace is SF and much SF is cyberspace (e.g. *The Matrix*, 1999)
- The R&D for a technological culture
- A solution to the problem of "conceiving the inconceivable" (Bukatman)
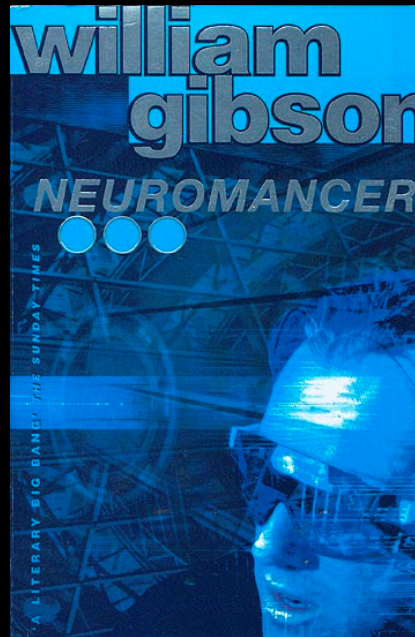 - Complex networks?
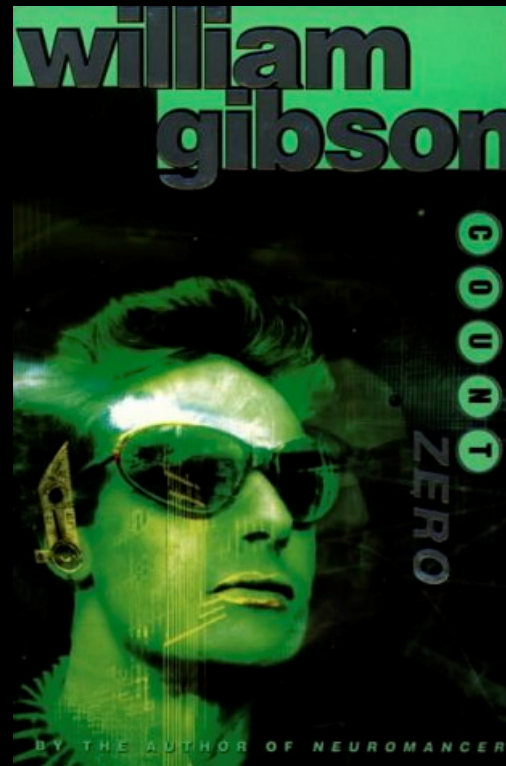 - Immersive virtual reality?

Tron (1982)

William Gibson and Cyberpunk

Neuromancer (1984)

Count Zero (1986)

Mona Lisa Overdrive (1988)

A consensual hallucination...

"A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation... 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..." (*Neuromancer*, 67)

Cyberspace as a tool of the powerful?

- "The heady cartographic fantasy of the powerful" (Ross, 1991: 148)

- "Cyberspace is a vehicle for allowing the fluidity of social and sexual relations to be confined within the rationalist configurations of information technology" (Wolmark, 1994: 118)

SF is cyberspace

- Virtual reality and cyberspace are key settings
- The *Matrix* series
  - Linked theme of artificial intelligence or consciousness (*Terminator*, etc).
- Key concerns are identity and the body
- But what *is* cyberspace?

SF and the city

- Information as wealth: rich/poor, corporations/streets
- Expressed in city fabric
- *Blade Runner* and junk spaces

Blade Runner (1982)
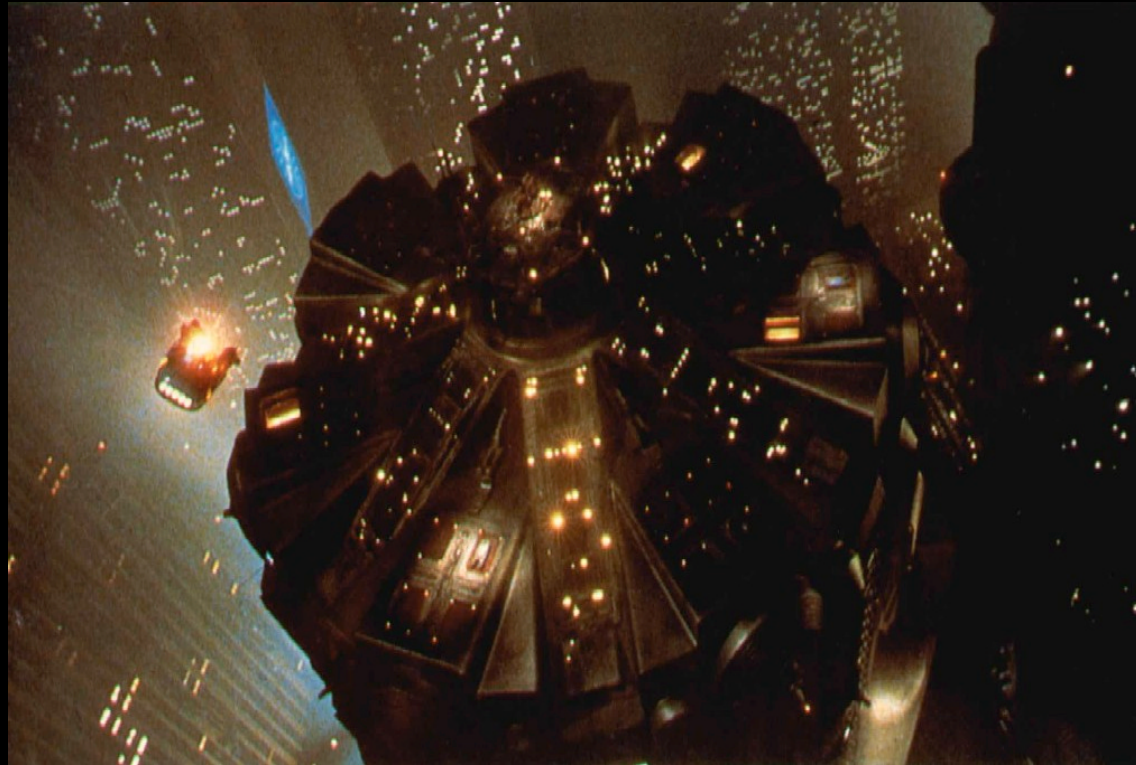
Kowloon Walled City (1899-1993)

- Influences
- Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* (1990)
- Reciprocal influence

Postmodernist SF?

"There is simply no overstating the importance of science fiction to the present cultural moment, a moment that sees itself *as* science fiction... Science fiction has, in many ways, prefigured the dominant issues of postmodern culture"

(Bukatman, 1993: 6)

Reflections of the present

Postmodernists question boundaries:

"SF has rushed in with a treasury of powerful metaphors and icons capturing the reality of insecure borders" (Csicsery-Ronay Jr. 1991: 306)

Nature-Culture

"The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel" (*Neuromancer*, 9)

Cyborgs;

"I have seen the future - and it morphs" (Dery, 1992)

Reality-Simulation

The 'Dixie Flatline'
Neuromancer and Wintermute
Blade Runner and *The Terminator* (1984)
The Matrix

…Or the same old paranoia?

The Matrix

1. Revelation
2. Escaping the virtual environment

Not postmodern?

Philip K. Dick

Blade Runner (1982),
Total Recall (1990),
Minority Report (2002)

Conspiracy, paranoia,
hallucinations

Conclusions

- Cyberspace and SF are closely related
- Initial explorations in fiction
- Cyberspace and cities – fiction and fact
- Now moving towards metaphor for conspiracy, surveillance, etc
- Because we're very comfortable with the Internet, WWW etc

Additional references

Dery, M. (1992) 'Cyberculture', <u>South Atlantic Quarterly</u> 91, 501-23.