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It is likely that most of you who read this journal have also seen Ali Rıza Taşkale's recent *Aeon* article, "[The Looting of Science Fiction](#)", but if you have not yet had the opportunity, please take the time. The article gives a number of excellent and well-sourced examples of how our unelected tech overlords consistently take the form and aesthetics of influential works of SF to create or frame their endeavors, but they completely miss the points these works make about power, corruption and collaboration, to the extent that it cannot be anything but deliberate.

Taşkale quotes Peter Thiel, last seen in the pages of *SFRA Review* giving us his blueprint for the transformation of what remains of American democracy into a violent white supremacist "Christian" corporatocracy, from a 2009 essay where he writes, "Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women—two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians—have rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron." More than half the population needs to be suppressed, which in SF usually only happens in the kinds of evil empires that plucky heroes overthrow, yet Thiel, Musk, Bezos and our other unelected, unaccountable and child-raping overlords clearly fancy themselves the plucky heroes. Most quality SF would subtly point out that libertarians are driving on public roads.

As another of these many examples, Mark Zuckerberg, whose Facebook and other platforms enable us both to connect and share with friends and also to recoil from AI slop feeding right-wing propaganda directly into our Boomer relatives' minds, took the inspiration for changing the company's name to Meta from Neal Stephenson's 1992 *Snow Crash*, set in a world where corporate control is so complete that "the Metaverse is a consolation prize for a society that has collapsed":

Stephenson intended the contrast between digital glamour and material poverty to be horrifying. He saw it as a cautionary vision of where platform capitalism leads. Zuckerberg's presentation did not engage with any of this. The platform economy—where corporations are protected from democratic accountability while providing essential services—echoes Stephenson's model precisely, and Zuckerberg read it as inspiration.

Taşkale has other examples to give, so he does not comment on how Stephenson himself rapidly descended into a libertarian caricature. His overall point, that these oligarchs consistently misread SF, remains solid and well-sourced throughout: "The aesthetics got materialised. The warnings did not." He says much the same of William Gibson's *Neuromancer*:

Gibson imagined cyberspace as a space of corporate dominance from the start; Silicon Valley built the open internet first, then converged on his dystopia anyway. The difference is that, in *Neuromancer*, that convergence was the disaster to be resisted. They turned his warning into a product roadmap.

One can only hope that none of these evil clowns has read Gibson's 2014 *The Peripheral*, which gives us "Party Time", an aerosol drug that transforms its victims into ax-crazy combat sadomasochists, though undoubtedly there is a Thiel- or Musk-adjacent laboratory working hard on this right now for use on protestors. It's highly unlikely that those among the oligarchs who have read or watched *The Peripheral* regard "The Jackpot" in the same ironic light Gibson and the rest of us do.

There are two points to be made here, above and beyond what Taşkale has to say—and what he says is very much worth reading, so please take the opportunity. One is that for those of us who have spent our adult lives with literature and literary criticism, it's far too easy to look at the oligarchs and call them *bad readers*: they understand only the surface of SF, not the estrangement, allegory, irony or actual political message. They're clueless; they don't get it. This is something I certainly used to think.

But it's not true. They're *excellent* readers: they're just reading SF for completely different reasons than those for which it's written and we critics and fans read it. We look to the message; they're just looting it. They understand the message, and disdain it. We can look at Musk naming his seagoing ships and exploding rockets after ships in the Culture novels and facepalm, because Musk is Culture villain Joiler Veppers from *Surface Detail*, and then groan further when he baldly states that Iain M. Banks was not a socialist. Yet we do this at our peril: he and his cronies own the media, and he can loot the Culture while deliberately ignoring its message. He can make his own truth, and we have perilously little with which to oppose it.

The second point is more of a question: what are we, insofar as "we" represent SF, going to do about it? This looting is an existential threat to human society: the oligarchs think of Skynet as a stretch goal, not a warning about AI. But in the nearer term, it's also a threat to SF. The general public is already agitating against data centers, AI in everything, Flock cameras, and all the other SF-adjacent means by which we're surveilled and controlled. It's not inconceivable that soon, the public will sour on anything SF or SF-adjacent, because it too clearly reminds them of the extent to which our oligarchy uses technology to surveil, manipulate and control us. It's no wonder fantasy is becoming the dominant mode in speculative fiction.

Perhaps it's a reading comprehension problem: too many people don't see the estrangement or irony or allegory, and miss the message of SF. If you're currently teaching in a university environment, you've likely witnessed the sharp and catastrophic decline in reading skills, reading comprehension and attention span since the pandemic. This process is also driven by deliberate action by our oligarchy: a massive, coordinated assault on education so as to produce voters easily fooled by propaganda. Perhaps we all need to shift to today's dominant mode, which is 40-second

videos of questionably-informed and overconfident people speaking forcefully from the driver's seat of their car. Perhaps we need to be less subtle.

I don't have *the* answer, or even really *an* answer. I'm not an SF writer, just a guy with a quarterly column in an obscure journal. Yet I think it's a question worth pondering. In an age where there's so much pressure to accept the dominant (and comprehensibly false, and racist, etc.) narrative, maybe it's the duty of SF to oppose it more forcefully. Or at least more directly. Share your thoughts on the matter or any other at icampbell@gsu.edu. Enjoy this issue of the *Review*, where in addition to our usual compendium of reviews, we have statements from the SFRA award winners and a thoughtful article on work in the age of AI.