Boundaries of the Future in Two William Gibson Novels

Joe Hoffman

Abstract:

Actuality is a border between the world that is and the future worlds that could be. Science-fiction stories look across the border, into the frontiers of 'the future'. William Gibson did his part in the 1980s to invent cyberpunk fiction as a slick, stylish view into a bleak dystopian future, but by the turn of the century, much of what he'd written about had recognizably come to pass. For Gibson, adapting to a fiction-writer's worst nightmare meant returning to one of his old books. *Pattern Recognition* (2003) is essentially the same story as *Count Zero* (1986), but aimed sideways along the frontier instead of across it. This paper explores the relationships between the two novels, showing how the common theme, the relationship of art to society, turns from a quasi-religious respect to a cynical quest for commercial exploitation. In our new dystopian present, a transformed frontier emerges between the reader and the story.

A version of this paper was presented at Mythmoot V: Fantastic Frontiers, in Leesburg, VA, USA, June 21-24, 2018.

These Proceedings by the respective authors are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.
Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at contact the respective author(s).

Introduction: Cyberpunk versus the 21st Century

When William Gibson started writing, science fiction (SF) was still dominated by Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein. The 1970s had introduced a number of counter-currents that we still see today, but they explicitly identified themselves as counter-currents, existing in contrast to the dominant style. Then Gibson and his colleagues created Cyberpunk, which overturned the old conventions, like the transition from realism to naturalism in mainstream fiction. The way cyberpunk engaged with the information revolution gave their works a visceral impact which, to this reader at least, traditional SF did not have.

The impact on readers was there because by 1984 we could see signs all around us that the precursors of cyberpunk dystopia were emerging. Corporations were becoming transnational, playing off legal systems in different countries against each other for their financial benefit. (Freedman, p.197) Military operations were becoming oriented towards small units, technology, and special forces, not masses of drafted recruits. The USA had stopped being the world's banker and become the world's biggest borrower. Most important of all, the flow of information was accelerating to the point that we the regular citizens knew about all of these things and were starting to see the connections among them. Even though we usually saw the connections incorrectly, the mere fact of connecting them was enough. Cyberpunk was believable in a way that SF hadn't been since the dawn of the Space Age.

But there turned out to be a drawback to creating such a believable world: What if the world happens? Then what remains of the fiction? We now live in a world that is recognizable from descriptions in 1980s cyberpunk. A conspicuous example in Gibson's *Count Zero* comes when the hero is in a jam, but can't call a friend because she's put a program on her phone that makes it reject calls from anyone she doesn't know. The only thing Gibson got wrong about that is that he thought it would be something you had to buy, where for us it comes free with the phone.

A good joke can contain more truth than ten critical papers. This is a case where that truism is useful. The economist Noah Smith wisecracked on Twitter (paraphrasing for the change of medium), "The cool thing about cyberpunk coming true is that we got *all* the cyberpunk futures: Universal surveillance and social control are in China; cool gadgets and staggering inequality are in America; shadowy plots, covert ops, and assassins are in Russia; and Japan is in Japan."

A work of SF is a relationship between future and present. So what happens to a SF novel when there's no longer a clear line between them? When the frontier is paved over? For William Gibson, it means you go rewrite *Count Zero* as a present-day adventure story. *Pattern Recognition*, written in 2003, is the result. Is it still "science fiction"? The idea of frontiers and boundaries gives us a useful way to think about the relationship between the two books.

Science Fiction & its boundaries

Science Fiction, unfortunately, gets defined in many different ways. Carl Freedman in *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* points us to Darko Suvin, who defines science fiction as “the literature of cognitive estrangement.” Whether we accept that or no, it’s a perfect description of science-fiction *fans*. SF fans are not only cognitively estranged from the mundane world, we positively embrace that status. We’re proud of how differently we think, and judge our ways superior. We say, “Reality is a crutch for people who can’t handle science fiction.” We give non-fans scornful names like “mundanes” or “muggles”. That last term, of course, comes from fantasy, not SF. The fans overlap by quite a bit, so we still need a way to distinguish SF from fantasy. Fortunately, Suvin actually said something rather different. (Suvin, Ch. 1.)

> *SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment.*

“Estrangement” is easy, and obviously correct, but the word “cognition” doesn’t quite fit. Suvin means that the writer isn’t trying to give authoritative statements about characters, relationships, or phenomena. The writer poses them as problems to be solved, to expose them to inquiry. The reader of SF is expected to think about the story in the same way as a scientist approaches an experiment: “What am I observing here? How does this work? What processes are happening here? What can I learn from this?”

Fantasy is read completely differently. The reader is supposed to think, “What a wonderful world! What a terrifying world! Can I go there?” This distinction in reader response is what distinguishes SF from fantasy, and from all other genres of estrangement. In fact, it may be what gives SF the right to have the word “science” in its name. By the way, it is common for fans to swerve across the line, and try to read fantasy like it's science fiction. The “Prancing Pony Podcast” had a section in the Spring of 2018 where a listener asked them to try and figure out exactly what things Tolkien’s Ring makes invisible. The attempt ended in chaos, which usually happens when you try to mix up genres like that.

The definition to be used in this work, then, is a slight difference from Suvin’s formulation. Fiction is science fiction if the reader is looking at a strange environment, and interrogating it about how it works: Cognition and Inquiry.

Boundaries in Science Fiction

“Science fiction is fiction that is based, before all else, on certain explicit framing hypotheses.” said Victor Wallis. (Wallis, 2006) Isaac Asimov said it more authoritatively, though less concisely, when he was talking about detective stories. (Asimov, 1981, p.33)

> *The writer must carefully explain to the reader all their boundary conditions of the imaginary society. It must be perfectly clear what can be done and what can't be done and with those boundaries fixed, the reader must then see and hear everything the investigator sees and hears, and he must be aware of every clue the investigator comes across. There may be misdirection and red herrings to obscure and confuse, but it must remain possible for the reader to introduce the investigator, however outré the society.*

This is a good rule for all SF stories if you replace "investigator" with "protagonist". Readers are willing to make great leaps of faith to enjoy a story, as long as the boundaries are fixed and we know how far the author wants us to jump. There is one side, though, on which the boundary is fuzzy and permeable. That's the side that faces the reader. Anything that's familiar to us in our mundane world can be in a science fiction story. In fact, it's almost essential to include things from our world to keep the reader properly anchored in the text. *Star Trek* was famous for doing this in triads such as, "I'll go down in history like Newton, Einstein, and Surak." (Sowards, 1982) Those three names are the guides who walk us across the frontier from actuality to the imagined Future. That frontier is how we're going to look at the evolution of the story between the 20th and 21st centuries. So let's begin by comparing them.

Comparing the two stories: Framework

A young woman with a rare aesthetic sense is hiding from her demons in a friend's apartment in Europe. She is approached by an eccentric zillionaire to track down the creator of a mysterious work of art. She is given a ridiculously-large expense account. She jets around the globe investigating possibilities, pursued by industrial spies. She gets essential clues from an assortment of oddball information-technology experts. She finds the artist, whom she discovers is a damaged entity assembling found objects into original compositions of inexplicable beauty.

This is the main plot of both novels. Is that sufficient to say they're the same story? We need a brief excursion to define "the same story". A story has lots of parts; some of them allow for more difference than others.

Setting doesn't have to be the same. If authors couldn't tell the same story in a different setting, most of literature would never have happened. Resetting Homer's *Odyssey* in 1900's Dublin is great literature. *Romeo and Juliet* in mid-20th-Century New York was brilliant.

Plot The arc of the main plot has to be the same, though subplots can be different, and usually are. The presence of different minor characters is the primary driver of variation in subplots.

Characters don't have to be the same, but major characters have to be isomorphic. That is, we have to be able to make a mapping of one major character in work A to exactly one character in work B. Minor characters don't have to match at all. King Arthur stories, for example, have a literal army of extras around the perimeter. Authors who are re-telling an old story use

differences in minor characters to add individual flourishes. We define a “major character” to be one who participates in the core conflict.

Conflict in literature takes the form of protagonist vs. some element of the set {self, antagonist, society, nature, fate}. For these purposes, the core conflict has to remain in the same category, though sub-conflicts can be of all sorts. Conflicts with a different element of the set make a different story.[1]

Resolution can be tricky. At first glance the resolution has to be the same, but a counter-example is seen in the movie *Roxanne* . (Martin, 1987) This movie is unquestionably the same story as Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*, with a change of setting and the addition of the character of Dixie, who replaces Roxane’s duègne. Adding a person to the plot who moves easily between the social classes and can talk straightforwardly to both the leads makes the resolution of Rostand’s play impossible. (Lucky for them!) So the resolution can be different if the logic of the new setting and characters requires it. There are limits, certainly. *Hamlet* can’t have an ending where everyone lives happily ever after, and still be the same story. This raises the question of which kinds of stories can keep their integrity through a change in resolution. The answer lies in the core conflict. Cyrano/Charlie is struggling against himself, and “snapping out of it” is always a possible outcome of such a conflict. Hamlet has a generous helping of internal conflict, but it is subsidiary to the political battles and the inertia of armed forces moving around him. The outcome of *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is constrained in ways that *The Tragedy of Charlie, Small-town Fire Chief* is not.

I conclude that two stories are the same if: their Plot is recognizably the same, their Conflict fits into the same class, and their major Characters are isomorphic. The Resolution must be the same if the type of conflict requires it. Setting may change without restriction, as long as the other four properties of the story are still sensible in its context.

Comparing the two stories: Similarities and Differences

Count Zero and *Pattern Recognition* share a plot, as we have seen. The major characters map well, with one exception that I’ll get to in a minute. The conflict is our protagonist against a corporation so big that it’s effectively “vs. society”. The resolution is the same, though its meaning is quite different.

Industrial espionage is a huge part of *Count Zero*. It's there in *Pattern Recognition* as well, but it has been demoted to a sub-plot that doesn't actually tie in at the end. Retro technology is always

[1] When I was looking around the Web to make sure I’d gotten them all, I found two other possible elements of the set: technology and the supernatural. (Nichol, 2013) Since the topic here is imaginative literature, those two drop out. Conflicts vs. technology don’t exist in these genres — one of the most important lessons of science fiction is that technology isn’t an enemy. Any time technology looks like an adversary, there is a person behind it. And in fantasy, supernatural entities are just characters like anybody else.

there in cyberpunk, and these two stories are no exception. Fascinatingly, Gibson's own previous-century fiction makes an appearance as a retro-technology when Hobbs-Baranov "jacked a cigarette into his mouth", echoing the literal jack in the head of Count Zero and his fellow futuristic cyber-cowboys.

The theme of the relationship between art and society is intact between the two books. Keith Booker puts it well: "...the most vivid technological creations in Gibson's work tend to be such assemblages of pre-existing materials rather than the kind of bold new scientific and technological advances often associated with science fiction." (p.77) This is familiar to any Tolkien scholar; it's amusing that he doesn't seem to realize he's talking about subcreation. One difference between the books comes in the nature of the mysterious subcreator. In the 20th Century, the subcreator is an artificial intelligence of uncertain sanity. In our century, the subcreator is a human being, wounded in the endless low-level gang wars of oligarchic Russia. The materials from which she builds the Footage are the images floating around cyberspace.

The biggest difference between the two novels is that Count Zero himself disappears from the scene, taking his sub-plot with him. The Count falls in with a network of Voodoo adepts, who are trying to use ancient metaphors to hack their way to fame and fortune in cyberspace. They personify the change in theme between the 20th Century and our own. They're the key to the "urban sublime".

Edmund Burke defined the "sublime" as something that has the power to compel and even destroy us. It's beautiful, but it has its origin in fear. Christophe Den Tandt writes in "The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism" that cyberpunk does this today (just as Dreiser did a century ago with Gilded Age cities). Gibson puts a glossy, stylized surface on stories of harshly unequal worlds, where staggering wealth and mass poverty exist side by side.

The voodoo adepts in *Count Zero* are attempting to deal with sublime cyberspace using the same tools Afro-Caribbeans invented to deal with the industrial world. They're sensing the presence of incomprehensible Powers and trying to turn their activities to their own advantage. They hold out the hope that it's possible to keep the dialog going; that mediation is possible between the physical and cyber-worlds. Instead of placating gods, though, they're trying to hack the artificial intelligence Wintermute/Neuromancer, who has become a sort of electronic demiurge. In *Pattern Recognition*, there is no such transcendent force. The zillionaire who funds the plot isn't looking for Art, he's looking for an innovation in marketing. The mythological aspect is gone, and with it the Voodoo. The transcendent characters who can travel easily between the worlds aren't cyberjockeys who carry around demigods in their minds, they are artists who exist at varying levels of selling out to the corporate world.

Another dramatic difference, following directly from this, is the loss of mythology. Dani Cavallaro treats this extensively. (Cavallaro, p.54) *Count Zero* is full of chimeras, hybrids, and cyborgs. It opens with a character in surgery after a bombing, getting a new body made of pieces

of hardware and other people's flesh. The new technology over which the corporations are warring is biological implants. The Holy Virgin worshipped by the voodoo cult is an actual girl, who has an electronically-augmented nervous system that gives her tremendous computational power in cyberspace.

So we have the matching plots, identical conflicts, isomorphic characters (though they change their importance). The resolution is different in implication, though the surface details are the same. When Marly in *Count Zero* finds the insane computer artist and tries to report back, she learns that Virek the zillionaire has died and his empire will be tied up in litigation indefinitely. A huge change in the corporate structure of the world has just happened. When Cayce in *Pattern Recognition* finds the brain-damaged artist in a warehouse in Moscow, she has to run away from the industrial spies, but other than that nothing of consequence occurs. She is given a suitcase full of cash and some Russian intelligence reports about her missing father. Both protagonists are told to go away and not to bother any of the important people ever again.

Paul Youngquist agrees that they're the same story. (p. 217). And, to quote Booker again, "The rise of Wintermute/Neuromancer is the only real image of change in Gibson's fiction." (p.78). Booker was writing in 1994. On September 11, 2001, another real change happened in Gibson's view of the world. The sharp boundary for him was now in the past. The frontier between actuality and the future had moved. It was no longer between him and his stories.

Conclusion: Rotating the Frontier

A clue about what's happening comes from something Gibson said many times: "The future is here, it's just not very evenly distributed." Frontiers don't have to be straight lines, after all. By moving along a straight line, a traveler can fly from the 21st century to the 18th in our world. Cayce is doing that in *Pattern Recognition*. Europe, Japan, Russia… the one place she never is, is "home".

C.S. Lewis pointed out in *An Experiment in Criticism* that, "A great many use [SF] for satire; nearly all the most pungent American criticism of the American way of life takes this form, and would at once be denounced as un-American if it ventured into any other." What Gibson has done is to notice that early satirists rotated the frontier so it lay between the reader and the future, instead of between the reader and the powerful figures they wished to bring low. Gibson has rotated it back. The "estrangement and inquiry" that defines science fiction is thereby modified. "Our world" is now the world of the middle and lower classes. The alien world is that of the very rich, the Eloi to our Morlocks. The inquiry isn't physics or biology any more. The inquiry is economics, happening just as economics is starting to turn into an empirical science. So yes, William Gibson is still a science-fiction writer, in a time when science itself is changing. He assumes his readers are science-fiction readers. The estrangement is only vestigial, now, but the spirit of inquiry is something we should keep.

Works Cited

Asimov, Isaac. *Asimov on Science Fiction*. New York: Doubleday, 1981.

Booker, M. Keith. "Technology, History, and the Postmodern Imagination: The Cyberpunk Fiction of William Gibson". *Arizona Quarterly* **50**, Winter 1994, pp. 63-87

Cavallaro, Dani. *Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson*. Athlone Press, 2000.

Den Tandt, Christophe. *The Urban Sublime in American Literary Naturalism*. University of Illinois Press, 1998.

Freedman, Carl. *Critical theory and science fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

Gibson, William. *Count Zero*. New York: Ace, 1986.

--------. *Pattern Recognition*. New York: Bantam, 2003.

Lewis, Clive Staples. *An experiment in criticism*. Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Martin, Steve, screenwriter. *Roxanne*. Columbia Pictures Industries, 1987.

Nichol, Mark. *Daily Writing Tips*. Web. https://www.dailywritingtips.com/7-types-of-narrative-conflict/ . 2013. Downloaded 10 June 2018.

Rabkin, Eric S. "Science fiction and the future of criticism." PMLA 119.3 (2004): 457-473.

Sowards, Jack B, screenwriter. *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. Paramount Pictures, 1982.

Suvin, Darko. "Estrangement and Cognition", in *Metamorphoses of science fiction: On the poetics and history of a literary genre*. Yale University Press, 1979.

Wallis, Victor. Introduction to "Socialism and Social Critique in Science Fiction", *Socialism and Democracy* **42** (2006). http://sdonline.org/42/introduction-11/

Youngquist, Paul. *Cyberfiction: After the Future*. Springer, 2010