

# Will Sci-Fi Destroy The World? [C2]

I magnati della tecnologia si sono spesso ispirati ai classici della fantascienza. Ma il futuro che sognano è davvero migliore?

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One can only imagine the horror the [late](#) Iain Banks would have felt on learning his legendary Culture series is a favourite of Elon Musk. The Scottish author was an [outspoken](#) socialist who could never understand why right-wing fans liked novels that were so obviously an attack on their worldview. But that hasn't stopped Musk, whose Neuralink company — which develops implantable brain-to-computer interfaces — was directly inspired by Banks's concept of [neural lace](#). The [barges](#) used by SpaceX to land their [booster rockets](#) are all named after spaceships from the Culture books. Musk's entire career [stems](#) from trying to replicate sci-fi novels. His desire to colonise Mars was [sparked](#) by the Foundation novels of Isaac Asimov (another [staunch](#) left-winger.) Tesla's Cybertruck is something that — in Musk's words — "Bladerunner [sic] would have driven." And it's true that if you want to imagine you're living in a bleak hellscape, a Cybertruck would work well. His AI tool Grok is named after the Martian word for 'understand' in Robert Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land, and its tone is apparently based on The [Hitchhiker's](#) Guide to the Galaxy. I'm sure Douglas Adams — who wrote with an anti-apartheid [sticker](#) on his [typewriter](#) — wouldn't have been thrilled with the association, either. Musk isn't alone in his enthusiasms. Mark Zuckerberg has renamed his company and [sunk \\$100bn](#) in pursuit of the Metaverse, a word that first appeared in Neal Stephenson's 1992 novel Snow Crash. So obsessed is Zuckerberg with the book — in which people [plug](#) into a [simulated](#) world to avoid a real one fallen into dystopian chaos — that at one point all product managers at Facebook were asked to read it as part of their training. Snow Crash also inspired the development of Google Earth, and was mandatory reading for the Xbox development team at Microsoft. Jeff Bezos loves Stephenson so much that he hired him to work for his Blue Origin rocket company. If sci-fi's influence was simply on product design, it wouldn't be a problem. If Zuckerberg wants to burn his own cash in pursuit of a personal fantasy, or Musk wants to build [hideous](#) cars, that's their [call](#). It may even inspire something genuinely useful from time to time.

The real issue is that sci-fi hasn't just infused the tech moguls' commercial ideas but also their warped understanding of society and politics. The dominant genre of sci-fi in the 80s and 90s, when today's Silicon Valley overlords were growing up, was Cyberpunk — as exemplified in the novels of William Gibson (who invented the term 'cyberspace') and Stephenson, as well as any number of films and video games. The grandfather of the genre was Philip K. Dick, whose novels and short stories spawned films including Blade Runner, Total Recall and Minority Report. Dick's stories were fuelled by amphetamine-driven paranoia. Nothing can be trusted and nobody is who they appear to be. It's a style that's arguably had more impact on modern culture and aesthetics than any other. The Matrix (1999) is just one example of Dick's wider influence: he had often spoken of other worlds and suggested our own reality was a simulation. As historian Richard Hofstadter noted in his famous 1964 essay, the "paranoid style" has been a feature of right-wing American politics for a long time — but The Matrix has given it a new vocabulary and imagery. The red pill Neo takes, choosing to escape his simulation and see reality, was repurposed by the far-right blogger Curtis Yarvin, an associate of J. D. Vance, as the guiding metaphor for the alt-right. That the transgender Wachowski sisters, who directed the film, had in mind a metaphor for their own oppression is bitterly ironic. This inversion of meaning, though, is common. We can see this most clearly in the way the dystopian settings of so much cyberpunk fiction are seen by today's tech leaders as prophetic visions of a world they need to try to escape — whether by colonising Mars, building metaverses or, in the case of Vance's billionaire patron Peter Thiel, backing efforts to create new city states by buying land in developing countries. In the original novels it tended to be people like them responsible for creating the dystopias in the first place, but they've somehow projected the blame onto the masses. In Snow Crash there's something called "the Raft" — a collection of boats filled with infected, mind-controlled refugees headed for America's west coast. It's an image that recalls the viciously racist 1973 French sci-fi novel The Camp of the Saints by Jean Raspail, in which a huge fleet of Indian refugees destroy Western civilisation. It's had a far-right fandom ever since and has been referenced by former Donald Trump campaign manager Steve Bannon. It's not much of a jump to see the actions

of Thiel and Musk, and many of those around them, as an attempt to forestall this fate, linking, as they do, the racial obsessions of the far right with their odd brand of tech-utopianism. When Thiel writes that “I no longer believe freedom and democracy are compatible”, or when Musk makes up wild stories about the Democrats using benefit fraud to import migrants, they are unabashedly expressing this fear of being overrun. The greatest irony of all is that in their desperation to build escape routes, they risk creating the very dystopias they fear. Thiel often names companies he backs after Lord of the Rings artefacts. J. D. Vance, now America’s vice president and troll-in-chief, worked at two of them, Mithril Capital and Narya Capital (referencing a precious metal and a magical ring of fire, respectively.) A third, Palantir, is a global data analytics and software company, a major supplier to the NHS and a defence contractor for numerous governments. It’s named after the powerful seeing stone used by both Saruman and Sauron in their attempts to control the world. Thiel is clearly a Lord of the Rings obsessive – the problem is, it’s not entirely clear which side he wanted to win. Published in The Guardian on 14 April 2025. Reprinted with permission.

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# Glossary

- **overrun** = invasi
- **infused** = infondere, ispirare
- **Raft** = zattera
- **fleet** = flotta
- **forestall** = prevenire
- **unabashedly** = sfacciatamente
- **barges** = chiatte
- **sticker** = adesivo
- **sunk** = investire, perdere
- **warped** = distorta, deformata
- **benefit fraud** = frode fiscale sulle erogazioni pubbliche
- **Hitchhiker** = autostoppista
- **plug** = connettere
- **overlords** = capi supremi
- **backing** = sostenere
- **odd brand** = strano tipo
- **moguls** = magnati
- **fuelled** = alimentare, fomentare
- **hideous** = orribili
- **spawned** = generare
- **bitterly** = amaramente
- **outspoken** = schietto, esplicito
- **neural lace** = laccio neurale
- **staunch** = convinto
- **\$100bn** = cento miliardi (one hundred billion)
- **call** = decisione
- **defence contractor** = appaltatore della difesa
- **booster rockets** = razzi propulsori
- **repurposed** = riutilizzare, riadattare
- **blame** = colpa
- **fate** = destino, futuro
- **NHS** = Servizio Sanitario Nazionale (National Health Service)
- **late** = compianto

- **stems** = derivare
- **sparked** = accendere, innescare
- **typewriter** = macchina da scrivere
- **troll-in-chief** = capo dei 'troll'