



Prologue

„Memory is our imagination of the past...

...and imagination is our memory of the future“

Act I

Exposition

“This looks like science fiction. It’s not.”

- ▶ Tech elites regularly invoke SF as the inevitable time to come
 - ▶ Examples: Jeff Bezos drone delivery, Sam Altman on AI, Mark Zuckerberg on the Metaverse, Elon Musk on Mindupload

- ▶ Fiction is used to justify, inspire, or distance technological development.

- ▶ The paradox: SF is dismissed as fantasy while being essential to tech visioning.

- ▶ **How does fiction shape current futures?**



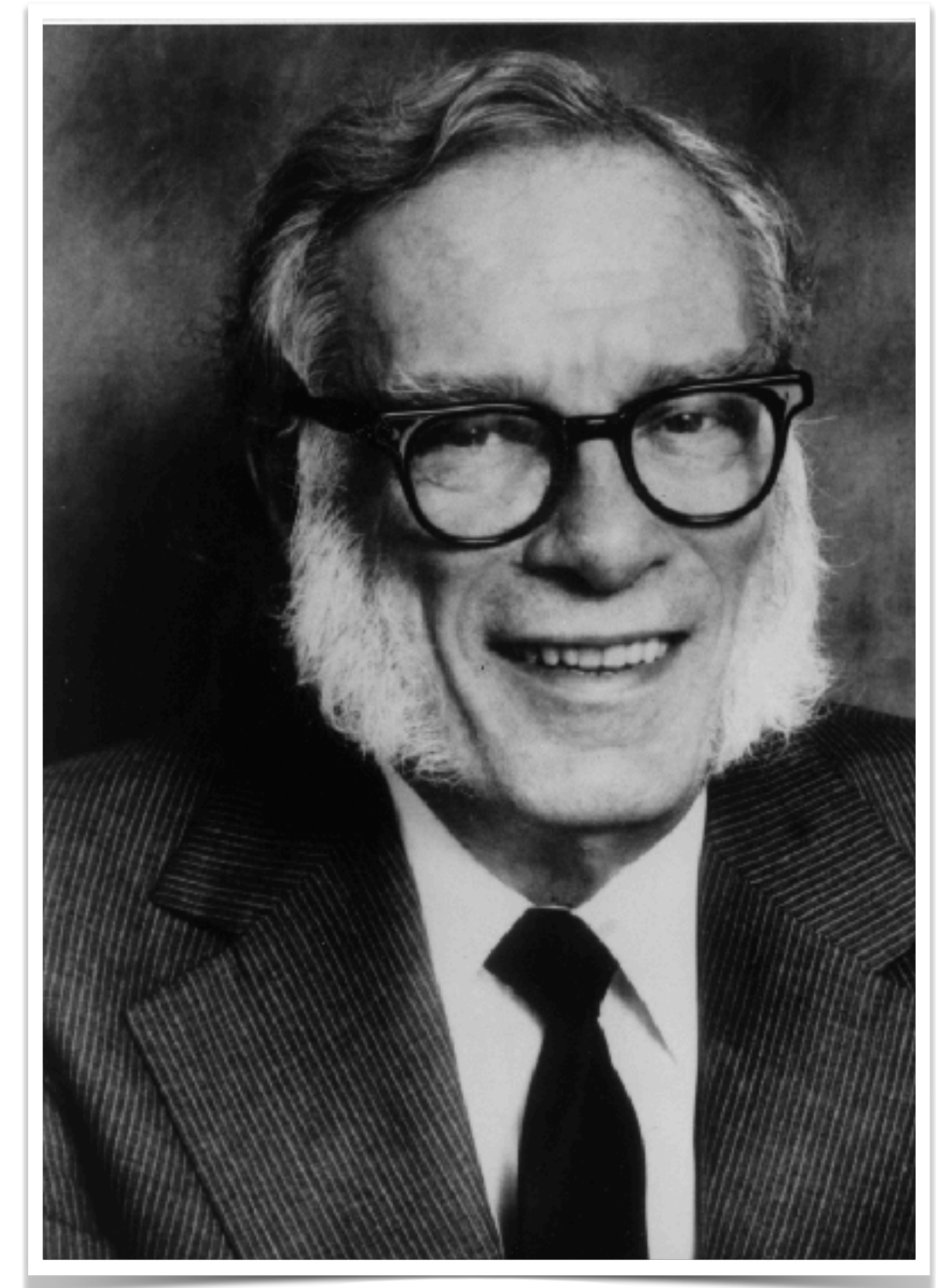
*“AI is the technology that the world always wanted. **Sci-Fi has been talking about this for a long time.**”*

– Sam Altman (2023)

SF isn't prediction, it's futures thinking infrastructure

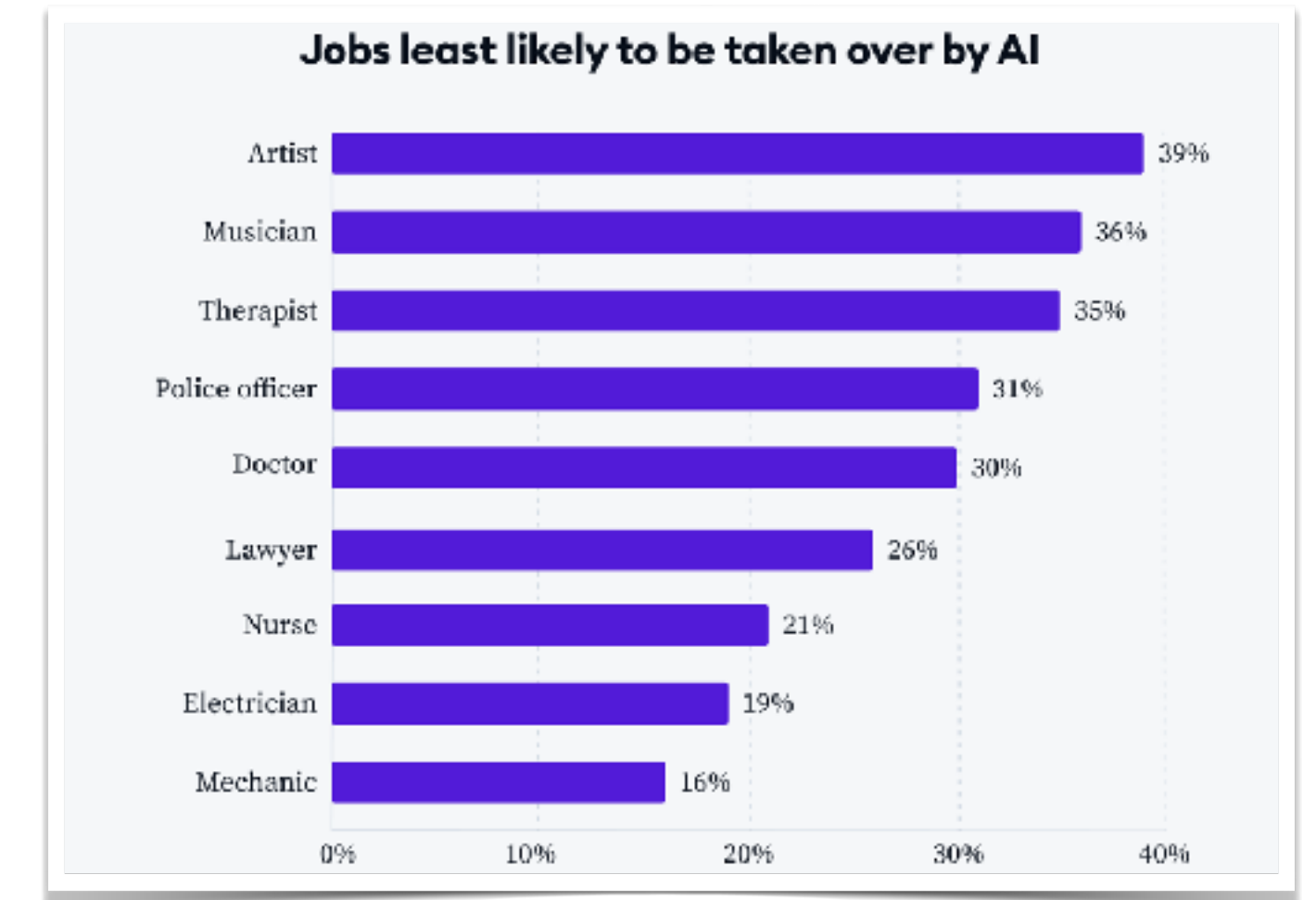
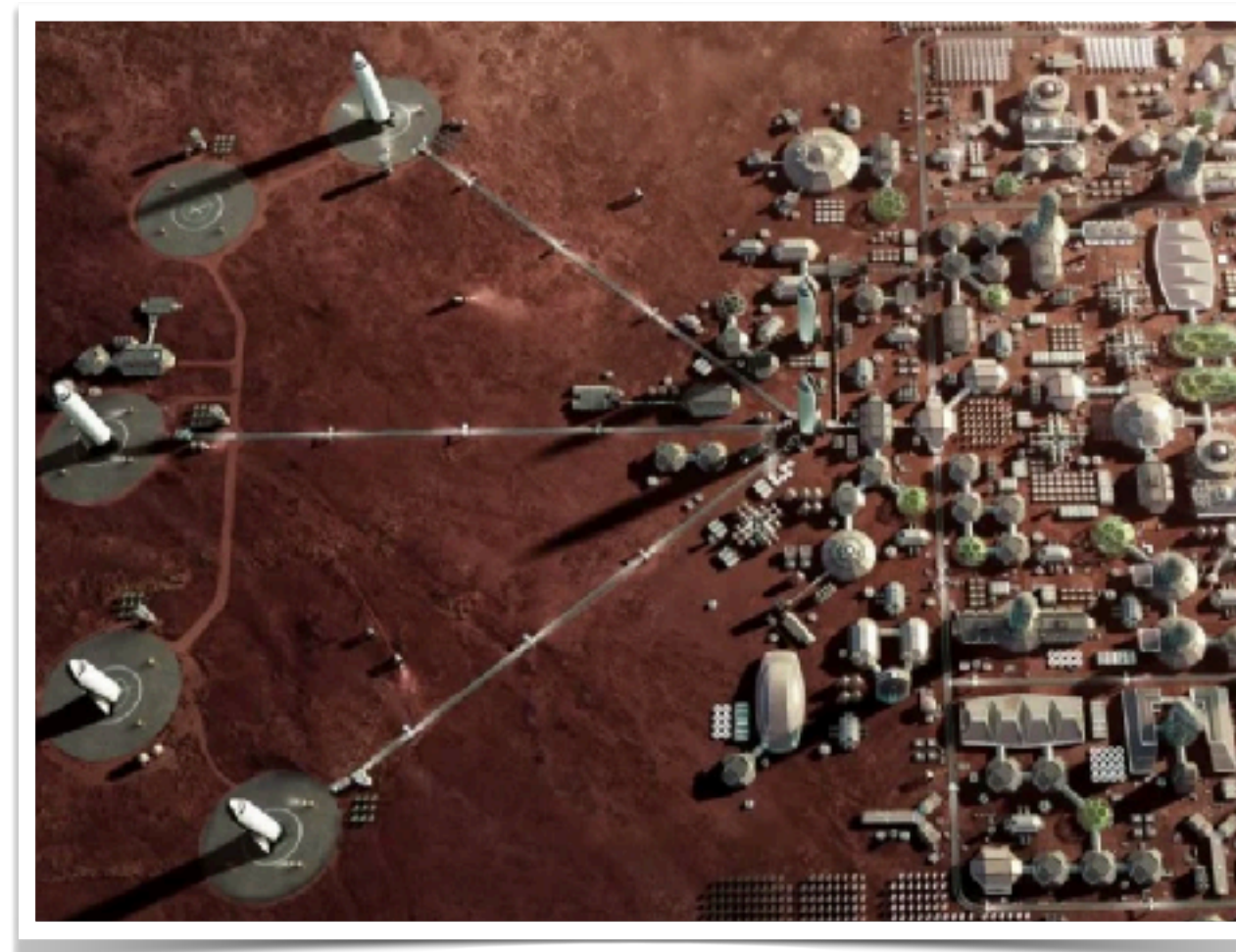
- ▶ SF as a **semiotic reservoir** for future imaginaries
- ▶ SF sets **frames of expectation** long before empirical facts are available.
- ▶ Foresight needs to engage not just with trendlines, but storylines.
 - ▶ What are the stories told in SF and how do they impact our **Future-Oriented Collective Expectations** (*not* intelligence)

„Science-Fiction writers and readers didn't put a man on the moon all by themselves, but they created a climate of opinion in which the goal of putting a man on the moon became acceptable“



Technofutures...

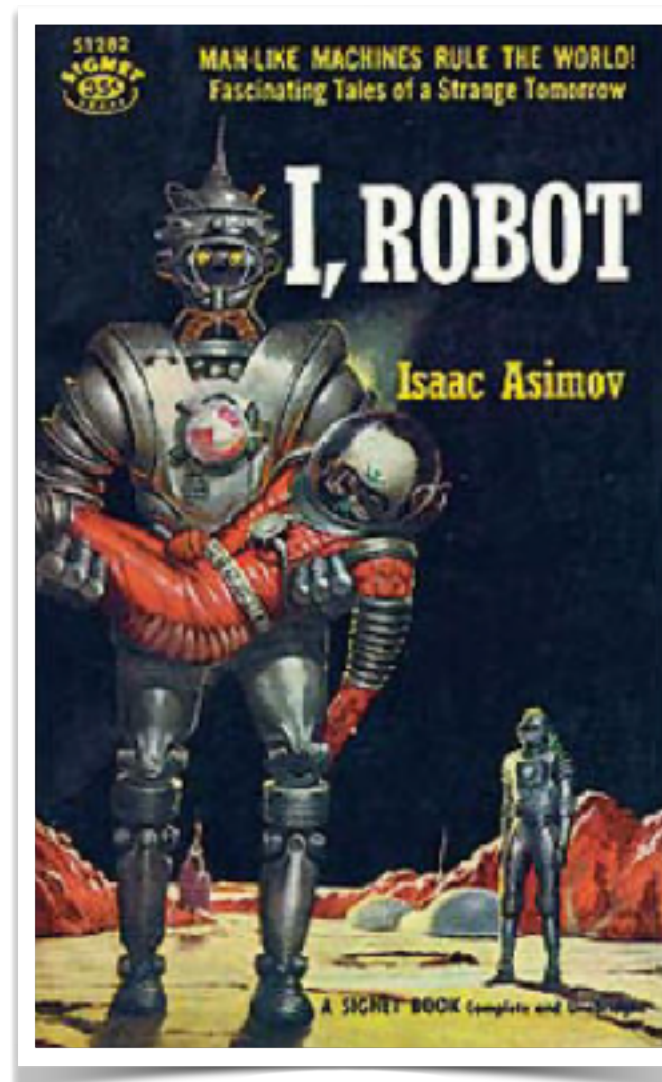
- ▶ ...are **mediated statements** about our world being changed by new sciences or **technologies**, at a time when these technologies **have not yet materialised**.
- ▶ ... come in the form of **presentations**, foresight reports, advertising, corporate visions, **images**, etc.
- ▶ ... are fictional by nature, but they are "a fiction that **masks its fictionality**" (Iser 1993, 13)
- ▶ ... **attribute meaning** to a technology that does not exist yet
 - ▶ ... which **forges alliances** (Ferrari & Lösch, 2017)
 - ▶ ... or **decides on promotion and regulation** of the technology (Grunwald, 2019, p. 106)



Fictional Technofutures are...

... statements about the future, that **impact our thinking about the future** and are **clearly labeled as fictional**.

- ▶ Prominent examples:
 - ▶ R.U.R. – Rossum’s Universal Robots (Capek, 1920)
 - ▶ The three laws of Robotic by Isaac Asimov



"We have: One, a robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm."

"Right!"

"Two," continued Powell, "a robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law."

"Right!"

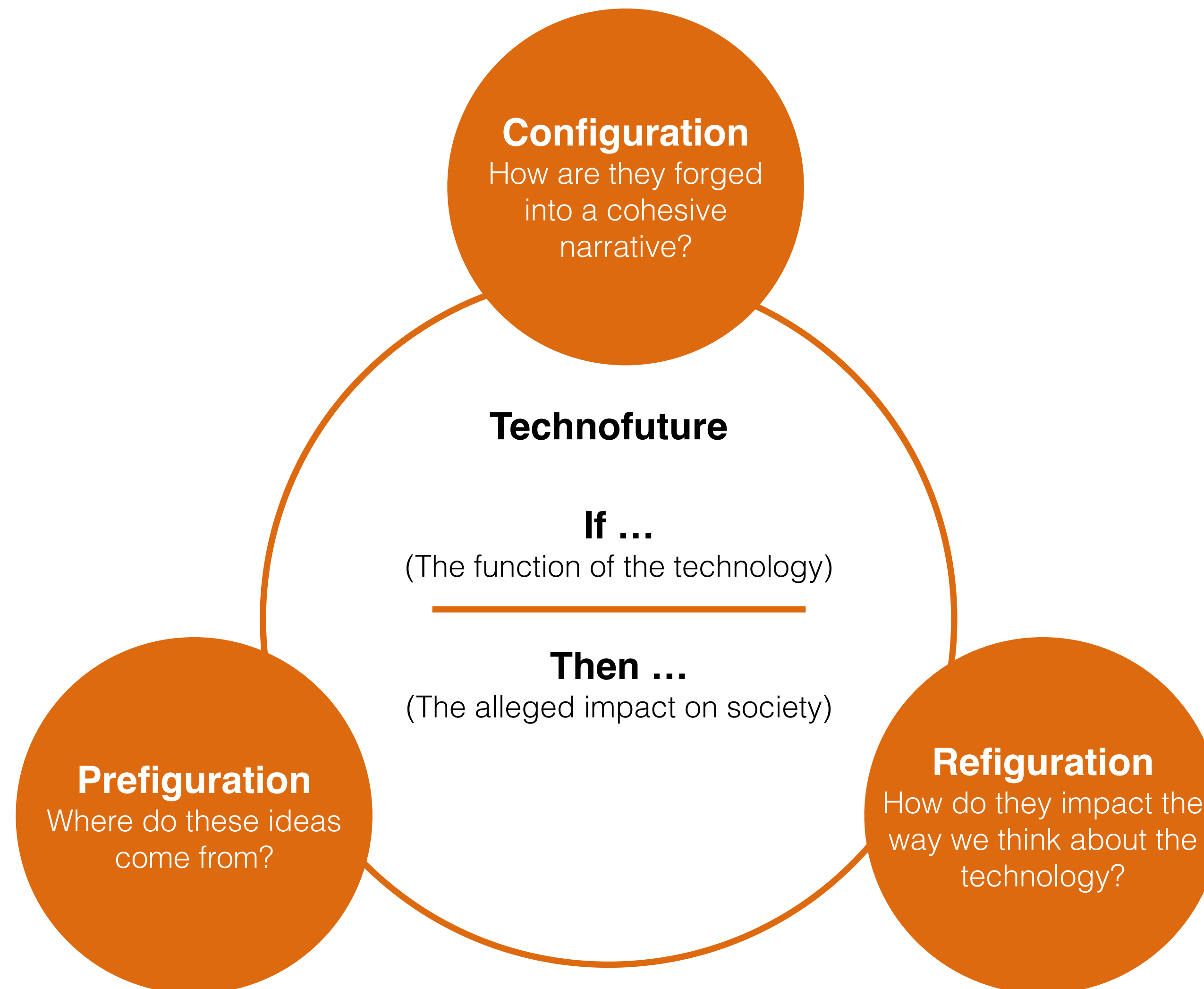
"And three, a robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Laws."

"Right!"

Act II

How to understand
Science-Fiction

Futures Circle for Hermeneutic TA



Mehnert, W. (2024). The Futures Circle—A Framework for Hermeneutic Technology Assessment. *Technology and Language*, 14(1), 129–151. <https://doi.org/10.48417/technolang.2024.01.10>

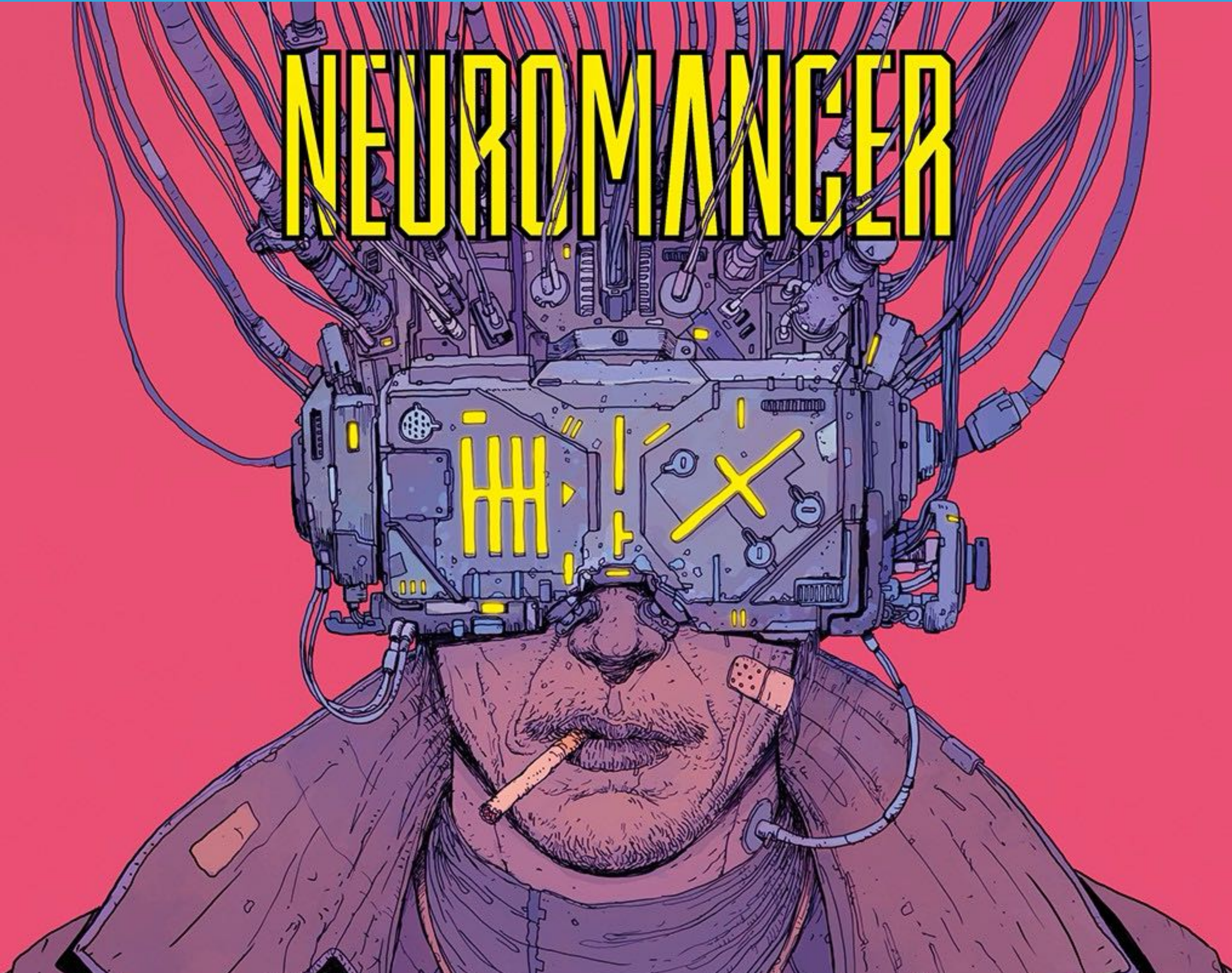
I – Culture Prefigures Science-Fiction

*“Science fiction is not predictive; it is **descriptive**. (...) Prediction is the business of prophets, clairvoyants, and futurologists. It is not the business of novelists. A novelist’s business is lying. (...) They don’t tell you what you will see and hear. **All they can tell you is what they have seen and heard, in their time in this world.**”*

— Ursula K. Le Guin (1976, p. 9)



NEURONMANGER



Gibson's Reality

Prefiguring „Structure of Feeling“ (Williams 1978, 133)

- ▶ **Technology enters Everyday Life**
 - ▶ Consumer electronics became ubiquitous (Casio watches, Sony Walkman, Nintendo Gameboy, Personal Computers, etc.)
- ▶ **Neoliberalism and Globalization**
 - ▶ Deregulation of markets empower multinational corporations
- ▶ **„Structure of Feeling“**
 - ▶ Overwhelming by **rapid pace** of technological and social change.
- ▶ Neuromancer reflects this disorientation
 - ▶ **disaffected loners** trapped in **cyberspace**
 - ▶ They need to **hack the technology to regain autonomy**



NEUROMANCER

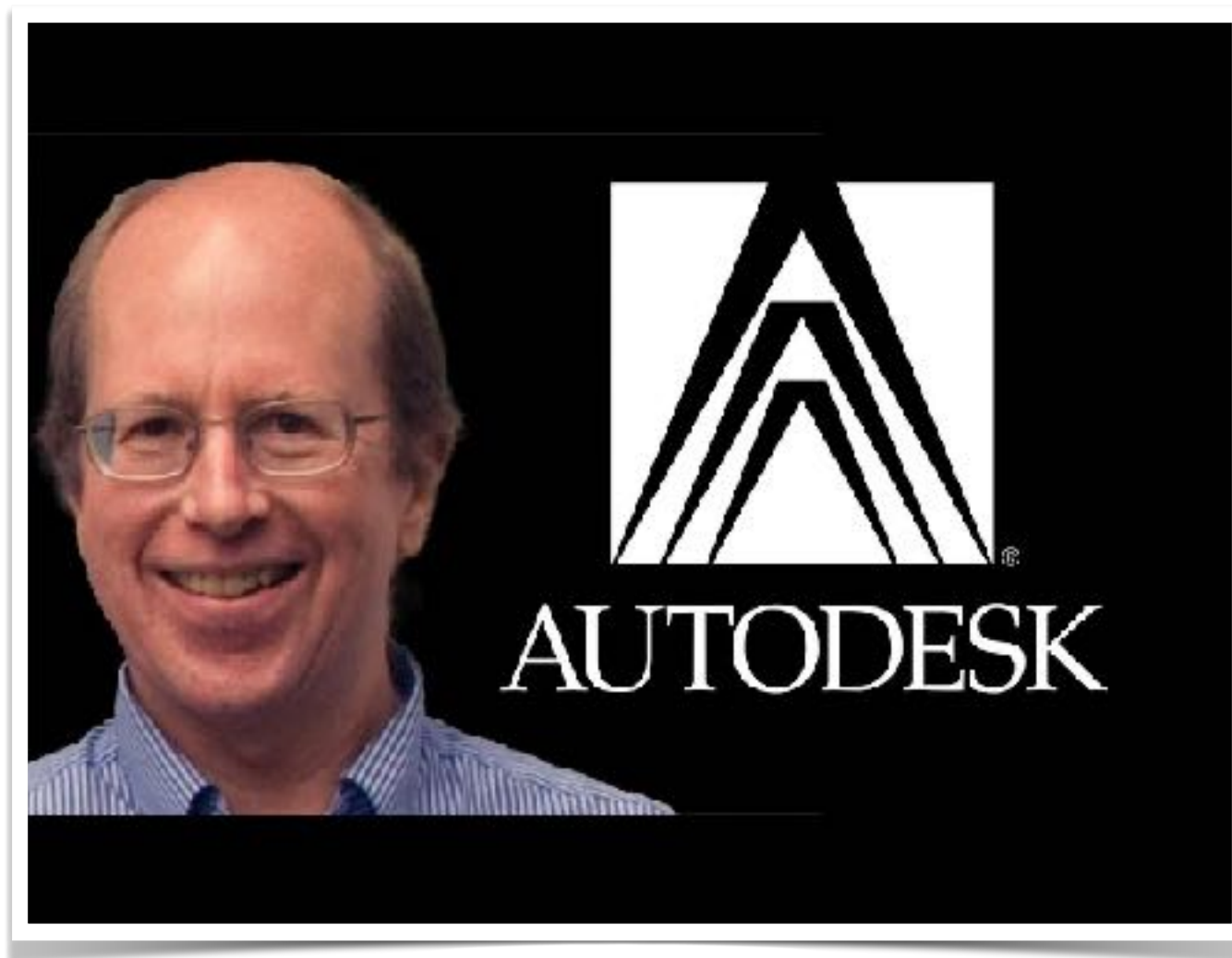


"So the bastard who ran the place, he had some custom software cooked up. Berlin, that's the place for snuff, you know? Big market for mean kicks, Berlin. I never knew who wrote the program they switched me to, but it was based on all the classics. ... And they didn't tell me. They switched the software and started renting [my body] to specialty markets." (Gibson 1984, p. 162)

III – Fiction as Orientation Knowledge

"To move beyond the current generation of graphics screen and mouse, to transport the user through the screen into the computer, we need hardware and software that provide the user a three dimensional simulacrum of a world and allows interaction in ways that mimic interaction with real world objects. (...) **I will use 'cyberspace' here to avoid burdening the discourse with still another term.** Since I'm talking about means of man/machine interaction, I can make the case that 'cyberspace' means a three dimensional domain in which cybernetic feedback and control occur."

— John Walker from Autodesk (1989)



NEURONMÄNCHER

Configuration

Antiheroes suffering from technology

Technikzukunft Technofuture

If we can connect our brain and mind to immerse in cyberspace

Prefiguration

„Structure of feeling“ of the 1980s

Then the mind (and the body) becomes a commodity and can be controlled or sold by others – without consent

Refiguration

Neologisms appropriated by the industry

Act III

To take away...

SF Continuum (Hermann, 2023)

▶ **Future Orientation:**

- ▶ Understanding SF as possible future
- ▶ Depicted technologies become inspiration for development or as objectives on how to shape the future.

▶ **Metaphor:**

- ▶ SF as a cultural commentary
- ▶ Cyberspace as critical comment on capitalism and unjust power structures
- ▶ Depicted technologies become a vehicle for the reflection on fundamental questions about human nature, contemporary social issues or the current structure of feelings.



Future Orientation

Metaphor

Conclusion: Understanding SF

- ▶ SF is a mirror, not a crystal ball
 - ▶ reflects the values, fears, and desires of its time

- ▶ SF is biased by its narrative configuration
 - ▶ Conflict is an important element of storytelling
 - ▶ Technology often reduced to conflict as a narrative device

- ▶ SF creates plausibility frames for NESTs before they're technically possible.
 - ▶ It becomes discursive capital — shaping what is fundable, imaginable, inevitable.

Thank you

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