

The Delicate Art of Speculative Satire by Aurelio O'Brien

SCIENCE FICTION FANS ARE A PECULIAR BREED. Anyone who has attended one of their conventions knows how serious these folks are about objects and ideas that may appear silly to the rest of us. The almost religious reverence that this human subset has for their various versions of our future makes the injection of humor into their world a risky proposition. As a writer of humorous science fiction/fantasy, or what I prefer to call speculative satire, I continually struggle with bridging the gulf between these two seemingly incompatible things I dearly love: humor and science fiction/fantasy.

It is never good to alienate one's core audience. Since these fans are more likely to view my humorous spins on their treasured genre as ridicule rather than playfulness, I have given this dilemma more than cursory thought. I also respect them. These good folks have reason to reject ridicule, to be defensive. Science fiction has been right in many predictions in the past: organ transplants, genetic manipulation, technological advancements of every kind. Indeed, it is arguable that cell phones and flat-screens owe their development to science fiction. But, when I speculate on our future, humor springs forth naturally to me. It is an easy marriage. Look at it this way: science fiction takes the world we know and adds an element of surprise, pulls it out of the everyday, and humor does the very same thing. They both serve up twists on the norm in order to entertain. To combine them serves to enrich both; at least that is how I see it. Attacking the status quo is the goal of satire; it makes fun of the powerful, the established, and the ensconced. Speculative satire makes fun of established future views, be they utopian or dystopian. The philosopher George Santayana claimed that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it. I find humor in this thought. Further human evolution is unlikely to eradicate our funny bones. The props and locales may change, but our human foibles will remain, and we can see this borne out in many of science fiction's past predictions today. For example: celebrity cosmetic surgery - okay, perhaps this topic is more creepy than funny, but Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* could just as easily have been a comic novel about the King of Pop. We use powerful supercomputers to animate cartoon fart gags, and Hummers as commuter cars. We allow actors to lead governments and employ the internet as a dating service. We are like precocious children: simultaneously clever and naive, sophisticated and vulgar, and I doubt those aspects of our basic humanity will change any time soon.

It's hard to completely admit to myself that I write speculative satire because what I write is so firmly grounded in reality. To me, it is merely life as it will be. We writers all select and edit the things we observe to inform our writing, then reorganize them into something new.

We lend them our peculiar perspective. We do this whether we write historic non-fiction or comic books - the process is the same. Exploring serious things from a humorous perspective doesn't necessarily render them inconsequential. It can be a way to skew tired rhetoric and veer off of over-mined veins, creating fresh perspectives. Most current science fiction seems dominated by the dark, nihilistic, Blade Runnerish or Matrix-like thing - everybody runs around dressed in black and we're all doomed. There is no room for laughter in this clichéd future, and it is primarily because of the omission of such a core human element as laughter that it rings hollow. So much of real life is observably funny and this informs my writing. When I was creating my all organic, genetically designed future of *EVE*, things like McDonald's Characters directly inspired me to go further than I might otherwise think to go with my own Creature Comforts™. The fact that Mayor McCheese's head is actually a big slab of ground beef is pretty funny. Think about it. The little giggling "McNuggets" are chunks of dead fowl flesh with cute little smiles carved into them. They are urging you to eat them. I find these kinds of things to be so twisted and humorous and odd. Even more odd is the fact that most people don't see them as such. Most people don't think about these characters beyond their surface appeal. So, for example, when people tell me my Lick-n-Span© is gross, I think, is it really any grosser than having a hacked up piece of chicken flesh giggle at you? The satire or humor comes from taking only a very small step away from reality. Any form of satire makes publishers nervous. As George S. Kaufman said, "Satire closes on Saturday night." This is why I doubt there will ever be a speculative satire shelf at your local Barnes & Noble, but since most of us normal folks out here are not the establishment, it would follow that there is a large potential audience for it, shelf or no. It may be hard for publishers to get their brains around, but take it from me: whatever our future holds, there will be a healthy dose of satire in it.



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