

The Court Jesters of Science Fiction

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Reporters seem to serve as the dupes of the science fiction world. Why is it that the monster always eats the reporter first? Come to think of it, what has journalism got to do with sci-fi? It's supposed to be about lasers and space monsters, right? The media are represented in various ways; as storytelling devices, as cautionary tales, or as blind voyeurs.

One of the most dramatic uses of reporters-as-expositors happens in the 1951 sci-fi classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. The unthinkable has happened. Fiction has become reality — a spaceship has landed. Dramatic tension builds as hordes of reporters descend on the Mall in Washington D.C., where Klaatu, a friendly alien has come to warn the earth that it must learn to live in peace or it will be destroyed by alien civilizations intent on protecting themselves from our atomic recklessness. The film is memorable not only for its groundbreaking special effects, but for its surprising believability. All around the world folks of all nations turn on the radio to hear the news. Several minutes go by before any character but a newsman speaks. The scene is reminiscent of so many unprecedented events covered by news media. September 11, 2001. The day the United States' use of Shock and Awe during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Hurricane Katrina. There are days when the earth stands still, with everyone staring in blank shock at their television screens.

After so much jabber, the first word spoken by a principal character carries all the more weight. The message: "We have come to visit you in peace — and with good will."

Such a simple message; but of all the headlines that then fly around the world, none of them repeat these words. To actually accomplish any good, Klaatu must escape from bureaucrats and the swarming reporters, who are interested in the story about the spaceman, not his message.

Klaatu takes the name "Carpenter" and attempts to blend into society. The press is no help in this tale, as they only wish to take advantage of a sensational story to keep the world hooked on news. The government only views him in terms of the threat level he represents. Neither understands their dangerous level of myopia.

Throughout the film, the voyeuristic, jabbering reporters annoy and panic the public more than they educate it. As much as we need the media for information, it's no small wonder

they are a bit of a joke. “Getting a scoop” or gaining attention all too often wins out over fact checking, reporting what really matters, and paying attention to the larger significance of a story.

Bloom County, a cartoon strip that ran about twenty years back, often amused me with its trademark depiction of reporters as a rabid pack of dogs yelping from press conference to press conference. Individual reporters were portrayed as overdramatic and utterly mistaken regarding their self-importance.

Folks have mixed feelings about the press. There’s a thin line between “journalist” and “paparazzo.” On TV, winter rains get reported as “Storm Watch ‘09” and a new strain of flu is treated as the bubonic plague of our time, whether or not it has actually killed as many people as the ordinary flu kills every year. We vacillate between fascination and disgust as attention-hogging celebrities are given unlimited media exposure while they rollercoaster between stints in rehab and finding Jesus. Information is a highly competitive sphere, so presenting a nice unbiased story about Habitat for Humanity is hardly going to attract ratings or attention. There must be crisis. There must be urgency. The viewer must stay tuned to learn everything as it unfolds.

Because of the aggressive, often invasive approach reporters must take to be sure they have the most marketable product, the press can overstep beyond observing and reporting to stirring up controversy or even committing crimes to generate news. In the death of Princess Diana the reporters chasing her have widely been regarded as guilty of murder. But even though the media can often be pushy, overzealous, and wildly inaccurate, we need them. We need them to get vital information and we are dependent on them for nonvital information.

Our love/hate relationship with the media does not only reflect poorly on those who engage in sensationalistic reporting. Our voyeuristic, push-button, instant gratification culture is what fuels the twenty-four hour a day news industry. So when science fiction makes fools of the press, the general public are implicated as well. This serves various purposes in storytelling; moralizing about human folly, creating character depth, and good old fashioned comic relief. Some media characters have good intentions, like *Superman*’s Lois Lane. But most reporters in the sci-fi world threaten the cause of good because of arrogance, cluelessness, or stupidity.

In *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, galactic president Zaphod Beeblebrox artfully manipulates the press just before stealing the starship Heart of Gold at its unveiling:

“Hi,” [Zaphod] said to a small knot of creatures from the press who were standing nearby wishing that he would stop saying Hi and get on with the

quotes. He grinned at them particularly because he knew that in a few moments he would be giving them one hell of a quote.

The Heart of Gold is revealed and Zaphod waves aside the prepared speech he's supposed to read. But instead he decides to toy with the reporters and the billions of galactic citizens watching through them:

“Wow,” said Zaphod Beeblebrox to the Heart of Gold. There wasn't much else he could say. He said it again because he knew it would annoy the press. “Wow . . . That is really amazing.” he said. “That really is truly amazing. That is so amazingly amazing I think I'd like to steal it.”

A marvelous presidential quote, absolutely true to form. The crowd laughed appreciatively, the newsmen gleefully punched buttons on their Sub-Etha News-Matics and the President grinned.”

In almost the same way as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (but for humorous rather than political purposes) Adams is mocking the tendency of the press to value the entertainment quality of a sound bite over its significance. He also shows that the press often forgets that their job can be risky. It is arrogant and naive for journalists to assume that they are immune from danger. Zaphod lets the press have its moment of pleasure before hurling a Paralyso-Matic bomb at them and making off with the ship.

Adams' reporters are just made fools of, but other press characters don't do so well, serving as warnings of what happens when voyeurism overrides common sense. A more tragic fictional death occurred in Orson Welles' interpretation of *The War of the Worlds*. This 1938 radio classic tells most of its tale through “news broadcasts,” which was a major component in the panic it sparked. If *The Day the Earth Stood Still* showed a plausible version of how things might happen, Welles made radio listeners believe aliens actually had arrived, and with no benevolent intentions.

The program begins with ballroom music interrupted by a news report that a strange object has crash-landed on a farm near Grover's Mill, New Jersey. The pod turns out to be one of many invading Martian spaceships, and the tale unfolds in the form of increasingly desperate news reports of the imminent destruction of mankind. The first casualty of the Martian invaders is CBS reporter Carl Phillips, who creeps too close to the crash-landed pod in an effort to get an exclusive scoop on the unfolding story. He narrates:

Good heavens, something's wriggling out of the shadow like a gray snake. Now it's another one, and another one, and another one! They look like tentacles to me. I can see the thing's body now. It's large, large as a bear and it

glistens like wet leather. But that face, it... Ladies and gentlemen, it's indescribable. I can hardly force myself to keep looking at it, so awful . . .

The thing's... rising up now, and the crowd falls back now. They've seen plenty. This is the most extraordinary experience, ladies and gentlemen. I can't find words... I'll pull this microphone with me as I talk. I'll have to stop the description until I can take a new position. Hold on, will you please, I'll be right back in a minute . . .

Carl Phillips' dedication to reporting gets him killed, as he is standing right in the path of the Martian heat ray while he jabbers away to an eagerly listening public. His character is a powerful storytelling device. As a journalist, he can give incredibly detailed descriptions and not sound hokey. As a human being, he can be killed, sending the message to listeners that if they look too close, they too may suffer the same fate. This is a key element of Orson Welles' success in convincing the radio listeners. When we hear Mr. Phillips' description of black, gleaming eyes and a mouth dripping with saliva, we don't think, "Gee, I hope he can get a better vantage point." We think, "run, you idiot." He inspires fear and panic, and in that heightened emotional state an audience member can be drawn into the tale all the easier. Phillips' "charred body" is all that remains after the Martians are done with him, but he kept reporting to the very end.

The effect of *The War of the Worlds* on America was astounding. Although Welles was careful to remind the audience that the program was fictional, almost two million Americans believed the story to be true and thousands of frightened phone calls came into police stations pleading for aid. CBS vowed never to use the words "we interrupt this broadcast" ever again as a storytelling device.

This phenomenon is unlikely to be repeated and could only have occurred during the nascence of mass media. Americans in the 1930's had trust in media reliability, and the sort of citizen reporting and debunking that the Internet allows was completely nonexistent. The rhetoric of the show's journalists continually emphasizes the obligation of the press to the public. One of the most harrowing deaths in the show comes from a broadcaster in CBS headquarters who is determined to serve the public until his painful end. He describes the eerie silence descending over New York City, and reports on the poison gas creeping toward him, despite knowing that it means his death. This sympathetic portrayal of a reporter who dies on the job is a far cry from the buffoonish death of a battlefield reporter in the film version of *Starship Troopers*. Live on location, a reporter is gruesomely chomped by an alien bug while in the act of reporting how dangerous the location is.

The scene demonstrates how ridiculous it is to think that a war zone is a good place to report from. "Journalistic immunity" means nothing to the enemy, and the reporters should

have been carrying guns, not cameras. This media death drew no sympathy, but rather got one of the biggest laughs in the film, reflecting the more cynical modern view of press logic and reliability when it comes to covering high-risk situations.

There are cases where reporters who deliberately ventured into more risky situations are no laughing matter, but whether or not they should have

Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and executed in Pakistan in 2002. In 2006 Christian Science Monitor reporter Jill Carroll was lucky enough to escape her captivity in Iraq alive, and the same year FOX news reporters Steve Centanni and Olaf Wiig became prisoners of the Holy Jihad Brigades in Gaza, where they were converted to Islam at gunpoint, spurring debate both about whether or not reporters deserved sympathy after putting themselves in harm's way as well as fueling the debate over media attention to religious extremists. Their cases are no laughing matter, but there is a difficult question to answer: is it surprising that when outsiders venture into an area controlled by religious extremists that their "journalistic neutrality" is not respected?

The Mideast conflicts of the last decade hasn't gone without at least one true buffoon, showing that the satire in *Starship Troopers* wasn't far off from reality. In March 2003, Geraldo Rivera was kicked out of his position as an embedded reporter with troops in Iraq. Rivera was idiotic enough to draw a map in the sand on live television, detailing the secret location and battle plans of the 101st Airborne unit. Pentagon didn't take kindly to military intelligence being leaked on live TV, and he was sent home to even more jeering than when he took a chair to the face on his talk show. "What an idiot," it was easy to think. "First he makes a career out of hanging out with crazy people, and now he endangers not just himself but American soldiers because he feels the need to command attention."

Public interest in these media buffoon drives home the point, though: we keep the press around to feel superior and to fulfill our sense of voyeurism. We might not be crazy enough to sneak up to a Martian spacecraft with a microphone or paint a battle plan in the sand, but we're grateful Carl and Geraldo do, because it's incredibly entertaining. The idiocy of the media in sci-fi strokes our egos. "I certainly wouldn't be that stupid," we tell ourselves as we watch journalists laying their own death trap.

At times journalists' rash actions endanger more than just themselves. The biggest media clown in comic books is J. Jonah Jameson, the loudmouthed, stogie-sucking, die-hard editor of the *Daily Bugle*. He provides excellent comic relief in the often psychologically heavy *Spider-man* comic with his gruff, obnoxious treatment of everyone, especially Peter Parker. By taking a job at the *Daily Bugle*, Peter adheres to one of Sun-Tzu's best bits of advice in *The Art of War*: "Keep your enemies close." Jameson is most definitely an enemy to Peter, as he seeks to vilify and exploit Spider-man to sell more newspapers and get a bit of personal

revenge. Spider-man, as a media sensation, draws attention away from Jameson's astronaut son. For the Spidey-hating Jameson to employ the super hero is ironic, but for Peter it's a smart move. He needs the cash, and it's a way to keep an eye on those who seek to unmask him.

Spider-man isn't the only superhero that uses the press to hide in plain sight. Superman, also known as mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent, has a similar boss at *The Daily Planet*. Editor Perry White has much in common with Jameson — they share hairstyles, fashion sense, nicotine addiction, journalistic zeal, and devotion to printing the truth. However, White is less angry and biased. He is also less interesting than Jameson. Superman generally has a better deal in his work as a journalist; Peter Parker has a rotten boss at a job he must work at for mere survival. Clark Kent works for the *Daily Planet* to help him be aware of how he can serve humanity.

Superman's dupe at the paper is not his boss but rather his love interest, Lois Lane. Although in the current incarnation of DC Comics Lois is married to Clark Kent and finally in on the secret of Superman's identity, for years she remained unaware of the truth. Lois Lane is the star reporter of *The Daily Planet*. Her job is to pay attention to important facts, figure out what they mean, and report them. Yet she has difficulty making a connection between two men who are identical save for a suit and a pair of glasses. Her inability to note the ridiculously obvious sends a message: sometimes we are blind to something that is right before our eyes. Granted, Superman has utilized various techniques over the years to hide his identity, including "Super-hypnosis," spinal compression to make Clark Kent shorter, and even Method Acting. But honestly.

The idiocy of the media here serves the same function as it does in Spider-man — comedy, dramatic irony, and reflection on human flaws. The authors comment on how blind people can be to obvious realities, and give the reader a sense of ownership in the tale by allowing them to be "in the know" on the hero's secret and the anguish that goes along with it. Superman and Spider-man would be uninteresting to the reader if they did not include private, personal asides illustrating how difficult and painful it can be to be a hero in disguise. One of the biggest reasons these comic franchises are so successful is their geek appeal. The reader can sympathize with an under appreciated and conflicted protagonist, as well as share in the excitement and nervous tension of operating right under the noses of powerful media figures who could expose everything in an instant should they learn the truth.

The theme of human blindness to truth and the important role that mass media plays in distracting us from reality is common in science fiction. It was central to the plot of *The Matrix*, in which all of creation turned out to be nothing but a computer-generated dream world designed to keep human beings ignorant cogs, peons in a giant machine they weren't even aware of.

The 1997 film *The Fifth Element* borrowed from Orson Welles, using the delightfully obnoxious radio host Ruby Rhod to help tell the tale. The radio star narrates the most action-packed parts of the film while live on the air. He nearly gets his head blown off several times as he follows hero Korben Dallas in his one-man battle to save the entire universe. His only comment at the end of the ordeal is: "Dear listeners, your favorite DJ is alive and kicking. It's seven o'clock and time for the news. Tune in tomorrow for another adventure. That was the best show I ever did."

So now, back to my question: Why does the monster always kill the reporter first? The simple answer is because they're dumb. The real answer is that desire for personal recognition and fulfilling our voyeurism leads to the prideful or naive assumption that they are simply reporting events and are not a part of them.

In the film *Independence Day*, some of the first casualties are news reporters who are eager to get the scoop on the recently arrived aliens. The same thing happens in Tim Burton's dark comedy *Mars Attacks!* It never occurs to the press that the aliens could be dangerous, and even if they are, what does it matter? It's a great news story. By the time the journalists see the foolishness of their actions, it is too late; they are about to be burnt to a crisp. Foolish journalists serve as a cautionary tale to the Science Fiction fan: curiosity killed the cat. Sometimes the errors of journalists in works of Science Fiction are not just the result of being naive. At times the actions of the mass media are the direct and only cause of tragedy. This happens more often in monster tales like *King Kong*.

In all versions of this story, it is the exploitative forces of powerful men in search of a profit that brings Kong from his natural environment to New York City, where nothing but death and destruction result. The attempt to exploit wild and dangerous creatures through the stage, screen, and news media always goes wrong. In Peter Jackson's version of *King Kong*, Jack Black's character, movie producer Carl Denham shows callous commitment to making his film at all costs. Whenever a member of his team is lost to hostile natives, ravenous dinosaurs, or giant slugs, his reaction is something like "we've got to keep going. We can't let him die in vain. We'll finish this picture for him." Denham doesn't actually mean this — it's just a shallow justification for continuing to do as he pleases, no matter what the human cost. Jackson's film shows the cost of exploitation, of entertainers assuming that delving into dangerous environments will never have consequences.

The media are the court jesters of science fiction because journalists they represent humanity's best and worst characteristics: curiosity, a drive to learn, desire for personal recognition, and the need to understand our place in the world. They are cautionary examples of what happens when we fail to consider that our actions to fulfill these impulses may be exploitative, cruel, selfish, or dangerous. It's not likely that the press will ever escape

from this role. As long as reporters continue to be both entertaining and foolish, they will continue to be used to get laughs and help the story unfold.

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