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Science fiction parody in Don Rosa’s “Attack of the Hideous Space-Varmints”

Katja Kontturi

Abstract: This article concentrates on the comic “Attack of the Hideous Space Varmints” (1997) by Disney artist Don Rosa. The comic deals with Earthlings who invade the territory of one-eyed aliens. The aim is to study Rosa’s comic from a parodic perspective: how Rosa uses science fiction tropes characteristic to the 1950s cinema and comics and ridicules them. My methods consist of close reading followed by formalist comic analysis. While doing so, I also utilize the concept of metalepsis. The analysis will be supported by theoretical works on science fiction and the postmodern view of parody. One important source is Kimmo Ahonen’s recent doctoral dissertation concerning invasion films that offers background material concerning the societal conditions and the era in the United States that Rosa utilizes in his comic – the 1950s.

The article offers a new perspective on how funny animal comics as a narrative form can discuss the themes of invasion and “the Other”, and present them both in a parodic manner. The aim of the article is also to suggest that the whole subgenre of Disney comics should be more comprehensively introduced to the field of comics studies as a serious research topic.

Keywords: Disney comics, Don Rosa, parody, postmodernism, science fantasy, science fiction.

Biography and contact info: Katja Kontturi has a PhD in Contemporary Culture studies from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her doctoral dissertation dealt with Don Rosa’s Disney comics as postmodern fantasy and the ways that comics depict fantasy more generally. Kontturi’s research interests include speculative fiction, Disney comics, postmodernism, and the therapeutical use of autobiographical comics. She’s a member of NNCORE (Nordic Network for Comics Research) and FINFAR (The Finnish Society for Science Fiction and Fantasy Research). She’s also one of the editors of the peer reviewed Scandinavian Journal of Comic Art..

“Comic books and science fiction have always fed upon each other” (Benton 3). Indeed, Mike Benton has noted how it was comic books that made the most typical visual features of science fiction (SF) known for general public during the pulp era. Between the 1930s and 1940s, science fiction stories of comics and so-called pulp magazines¹ typically featured plots of three kinds: new inventions, explorations or alien invasions. These plots were then transferred onto SF films during

¹ The term “pulp” is based on the bad quality pulp mass paper that were used in the early magazines predating comics. Pulp mass made magazines and early comics cheap and disposable.

the 1950s. Through the early 1950s, the aliens (including Superman from comics) presented themselves as the saviors of mankind. Only later on the same decade, the invaders became scary, bug-eyed monsters whose mission was to conquer or destroy (Benton 3–4; Jancovich & Johnston 71, 72; Mendlesohn 54).

The historical events of the 1950s had a strong impact on SF dealing with space travel. Most of these SF stories can be read as simplified descriptions of the tension caused by the Cold War, where aliens serve as metaphors for the Soviet threat (Jancovich & Johnston 71). According to John Clute, the tense situation after the WWII manifested itself as fear of "the Other" in cinematic alien representations. At the same time, the fascination with unidentified flying objects rose to its peak during the 1950s. *The War of the Worlds*, both novel (H. G. Wells, 1898) and the original film (Haskin, 1953) made aliens more substantial by giving them a motif to leave their planet (Clute, *Science Fiction* 22–23). Filmmakers took advantage of the popularity of the phenomenon: the fear of the ultimate new war was written in SF movie scripts describing aliens taking over the Earth.

This article concentrates on the comic "Attack of the Hideous Space Varmints" (1997) by Disney artist Don Rosa (b. 1951), which was published in *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories* issues #614, #615 and #616.² As opposed to a classic SF theme of aliens visiting or invading Earth, the comic deals with Earthlings who invade the territory of one-eyed aliens. My aim is to study Rosa's comic from a parodic perspective: how Rosa uses SF tropes characteristic to 1950s cinema and early SF comics, and ridicules them with his narrative methods. I will support my analysis with the theoretical works on science fiction by Brian Attebery and John Clute among others, and the postmodern view of parody presented by literature scholar Linda Hutcheon. The article also discusses the concept of "the Other" in the context of SF based on comments by Farah Mendlesohn and Michelle Reid. Kimmo Ahonen's recent doctoral dissertation concerning invasion films also offers background material on the cultural context of the United States in the 1950s.

I study this comic by employing close reading and formalist comic analysis developed by Scott McCloud in his work *Understanding Comics, The Invisible Art* (1993), with a focus on the concept of metalepsis in comics. I ground my arguments on the works of comic scholars Jan Baetens and Karin Kukkonen and their notions of how comics' narration works in collaboration with the panels and the gutter but how this form can also be broken. I will also establish how Rosa's SF parody refers directly to a pair of famous SF stories thus connecting the world of Ducks intertextually to a broader cultural and historical context.

The article offers a new perspective on how funny animal comics can present visual and textual parody of themes such as invasion and the Other. The fact that Rosa does this in a Disney comic makes it even more noteworthy since Disney comics should not deal with profound, controversial or political matters.³ Rosa invites the reader to identify not only with the Ducks but with the one-eyed aliens as well. He wants us to ask, who is the Other? Or is there an Other in the first place? The aim of my paper is not only to show how Disney comics can cover profound themes, but to remind that the whole subgenre of Disney comics should be given more attention within the academic field of comics studies.

Though comics and popular culture scholars like Martin Barker, David Kunzle, Thomas Andrae and most recently Peter Schilling Jr., have targeted the works of Carl Barks (1901–2000), the most (in)famous study of Disney comics is still Ariel Dorfman's and Armand Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck. Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic* (1971). Even though the analysis

² The American Disney publications such as these albums usually don't have page numbers. I have marked the issues on the Works cited page as "unpaginated" and counted the page numbers from the beginning of the Rosa's comic in each issue separately. The reference system of the comics studies is yet to be fully standardized.

³ In 1950s the noted Disney artist Carl Barks received a list containing the tabooed subjects in Disney comics. The list was called "Hints on writing for Dell Comics" and it included, among other things, the advice to "avoid sophisticated and adult themes", and not to show anything regarding politics, religion, suicides, death, torture, love, sex, etc., and that the comics should also avoid "international intrigue generally". For more details, see Andrae 233.

by Dorfman and Mattelart is rather incisive and historically valuable, it cannot be substantially described as a critical academic study, mainly because it functions as a pamphlet targeted against the cultural imperialism practiced by the USA during the 1970s in Chile. Moreover, it lacks a proper reference system and the sources used are only translations, not the original works. Furthermore, Dorfman and Mattelart (21) misleadingly target their criticism – against Walt Disney even though Disney himself never had anything to do with the contents of his company’s comics.

The most recent scholarly work, *Disney Comics: The Whole Story* (2016) by an Italian Disney historian Alberto Becattini, is more of an encyclopedic attempt to catalogue Disney comics than a critical study. In other words, Disney comics haven’t yet been widely discussed in the academic field concerning comics. My own doctoral dissertation in 2014, which is still to be translated in English, concentrated on Don Rosa’s comics as postmodern fantasy. As the popularity of Disney comics is remarkably strong in the Europe, comics studies need to cover this area more broadly than they have so far.

I now proceed to provide an introduction to the artist Don Rosa, his background influences and his works in Disney comics. It’ll be followed by the definition of the SF genre and a description of how Rosa uses the tropes typical for the genre. In the following chapter, I will move to discussing postmodern parody and how Rosa reverses the roles of the invader and the invaded. Here, I will talk about the concept of the Other and how Rosa discusses it in his comic. Lastly, I will shortly comment the intertextual references Rosa makes to SF classics.

Duck artist Don Rosa

Keno Don Hugo Rosa, commonly known as Don Rosa, started his career among Disney comics in 1986. During the 1970s, he had already made a non-Disney related underground-like comic series *The Pertwillaby Papers* for his college paper as a hobby. However, he always imagined these stories as Duck comics.⁴ In fact, Rosa’s first Disney comic, ”Son of the Sun” was based on his original story ”Lost in (an Alternate Section of) the Andes” (1973) of the *Pertwillaby Papers* series. This new Disney comic was nominated for Best Story in the Harvey Awards⁵ and was the beginning of Rosa’s recognized career as a Disney artist.

As described in Rosa’s autobiography, Rosa grew up with various SF and adventure magazines as well as comics such as *Spirit* by Will Eisner, *Prince Valiant* by Hal Foster and *Flash Gordon* by Alex Raymond. He was influenced by artists such as Harvey Kurtzman, Robert Crumb and Will Elder. Although not an actual underground artist, one can detect the typical characteristics of underground comics in Rosa’s drawing style. With his substantial use of background details, meticulous way of drawing Ducks, and strong shading uncharacteristic for traditional Disney comic, Rosa is quite a unique Disney artist. However, his biggest influence was naturally Carl Barks, or “the Good Artist” (Rosa, “Elämäkertani, osa 1” 11–12, 17–19).

In several interviews, Rosa has stated that first of all, he is a fan of Carl Barks. He considers himself to be, not a Disney artist, but a Carl Barks artist (Rosa, “Elämäkertani, osa 1” 11). As discussed in my earlier work, Barks’ satire and storytelling skills have affected Rosa’s laconic sense of humor and his wish to create sequels to Barks’ beloved Duck adventures. The most famous and noted work by Rosa, the twelve-part series *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck* (1991–1993), was inspired by the details Barks gave in his stories. The series won the Best Serialized Story

⁴ The first comic by Rosa that included Disney characters was in fact an underground parody called “Return to Duckburg Place”. It includes Gladstone Gander killing himself in Russian roulette, the nephews destroying Scrooge’s money bin with a bomb, and senile grandma Duck accidentally baking Gus Goose in the oven. It was never published – until Disney gave a rare permission to print it in the first issue of the collection of Rosa’s works published in Finland, Sweden, Norway and Germany in 2011.

⁵ The Harvey Awards (1988–present), named after the founder of *MAD* magazine Harvey Kurtzman, are given for achievements in the field of comic books in several categories.

category in The Will Eisner Comic Industry Awards in 1995.⁶ Don Rosa is yet the only Disney artist ever to receive this honor (Kontturi 33–34).

What makes Rosa's comics exceptional, however, is the fact that his stories have continuity, which I have also elaborated on in my earlier work. Barks' comics, like Disney comics in general, are episodic tales of the lives of the Ducks (or Mice and other animal-like characters in the works of the other artists). What happens in one comic is disregarded in the following. Rosa's Ducks, on the contrary, have history. They remember what has happened previously and also refer to those events. However, although Rosa breaks the episode format of Disney comics, even his stories are frozen in time: their events take place in the 1950s, the time when Barks created most of his comics⁷ (Kontturi 36).

In addition to the continuum of the Ducks, Rosa follows quite an European style of comic artists by mixing fact with fiction in a similar manner as, for instance, Goscinny and Uderzo, the creators of *Asterix*, of which Rosa heard from his history professor during his engineer studies (Rosa, "Elämäkertani, osa 1" 20-21). Like Goscinny and Uderzo, Rosa contextualizes his adventure stories to historical events and correct milieu. He uses reference photos and studies the background information thoroughly, although altering the facts occasionally to adapt them properly to Barks' works. This makes Rosa's comics a postmodern piece of work: historical facts and fantastic fiction are combined into a unique hybrid with intertextual references to specific events in cultural history.

The science fiction of the Ducks

The term "science fiction" was popularized by Hugo Gernsback who connected science to fiction in his magazines in the 1920s (Attebery, "Science Fictional Parabolas" 5). Importantly, according to Mike Benton (3), it was comics that made SF known to the general public. Benton, the author of *Science Fiction Comics: The Illustrated History* (1992), adds: "science fiction comic book is the most natural expression of the literature of the fantastic and fanciful" (3). It follows the so-called "primal dream state" by using exaggeration, caricatures and archetypes, formulated and action driven plots and colorful images from the other worlds. The visual elements and themes of science fiction were "refined, defined and popularized" in comics; thus, they were easier to transform to films and television series later on (Benton 3–5).

Today, SF doesn't have distinct borders that would separate it from the other genres of the speculative fiction spectrum. Science fiction scholar Brian Attebery suggests that genres and subgenres could be described as "fuzzy sets". By that, he means that every author both uses the existing material as well as adds something of their own. The genre is in constant development and its borders shift whenever a new piece of work is published (Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* 126).

It's easy to agree with Attebery, since SF's classical motifs like the rocket ship, space travel and robots are rather rare in the modern SF literature. In this sense, the genre has developed to fit contemporary societal needs, which is also visible in the description provided by George Mann:

SF is a form of fantastic literature that attempts to portray, in rational and realistic terms, future times and environments that are different from our own. It will nevertheless show an awareness of the concerns of the times in which it is written and provide implicit commentary on contemporary society, exploring the effects, material and psychological, that any new technologies may have upon it. (Mann 6)

⁶ In addition, Rosa won his second Eisner Award in a category of Best Writer/Artist: Humor in 1997.

⁷ With the exception of the events of *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, which naturally take place before the 1950s.

Thus, the most essential feature of science fiction is not the futuristic topics and subjects such as aliens, space travel or robots, but how the story comments on modern society and its problems, in addition to speculating on the prospects of our future. Even though Rosa's comics take place in the past, he writes them from contemporary context and comments on our past or present culture.

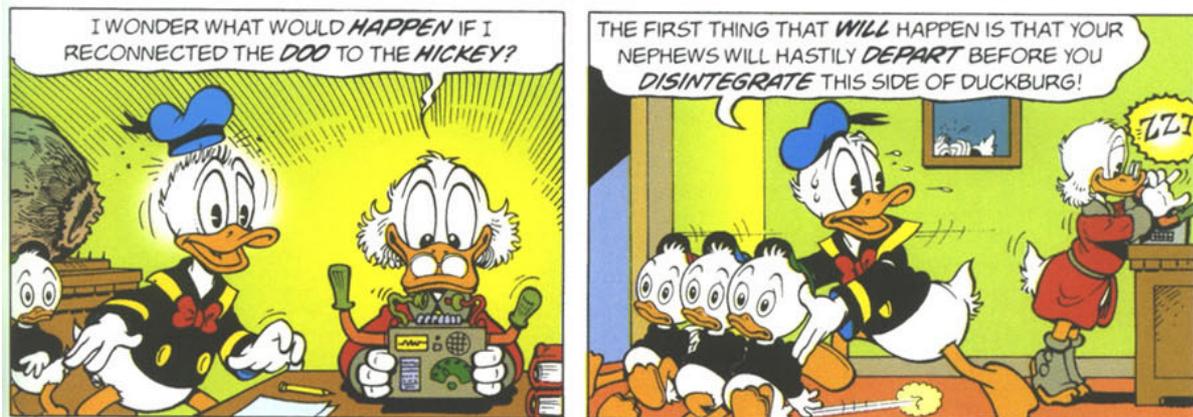


Figure 1: © Disney (Rosa 1997, #614, 3.)

In the comic that this article analyzes, Scrooge McDuck gets an extraterrestrial machine from Antarctica which makes his money bin turn into a flying object with inter-planetary hyper drive. Ducks have to chase the bin into space with an old spaceship, and the hyper drive accidentally takes them further from Earth than they think. Finally, the bin is found from the asteroid field between Mars and Jupiter where the Ducks encounter an alien family.

The technology that enables the Ducks to travel to the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter is extraterrestrial. The nephews notice this when they study the mechanical meteorite sent to Scrooge: “This mechanism is **not of this earth!**” they claim (emphasis in the original) (#614, 2–3). Scrooge wants to know more about the alien technology and accidentally turns on the hyper drive inside the meteorite. The electric “zzt” balloon pops a bit out of the panel (figure 1) which is Rosa’s visual method to indicate that the machine doesn’t belong to the world of the Ducks.

Accordingly, comics scholar Jan Baetens suggests that the world of comics lies inside the panels. Whenever the borders are crossed, the world of comics is left behind (Baetens 374). This is called the metalepsis of comics. According to comics scholar Karin Kukkonen (“Metalepsis in Popular Culture: An Introduction” 1), metalepsis occurs when “the boundaries of a fictional world are glanced, travelled or transported across”. It includes, for example, the cases when fictive characters talk to the reader or the author, and when the author steps inside her fictive world, or has conversations with her characters. Kukkonen follows Baetens:

If the panel images work as windows into the fictional world, then what we see in the images is part of the fictional world: the panel frame acts as the boundary between the fictional world and the real world, and the real world is potentially represented in the spaces between the panels. (Kukkonen “Metalepsis in Comics and Graphic Novels” 215–216)

We see from figure 1, that Rosa highlights the conventions of the comic narration by breaking the borders of the panels. This is quite typical a method of his and its purpose is to show the readers that something special that cannot even fit within the panels is about to happen in the story. This is proved later, when the hyper drive makes Scrooge’s money bin a massive spaceship that is guided to the location of its owner – the alien grandfather living in the asteroid belt. Here, the metalepsis indicates a science fictional event occurring in otherwise reasonably normal Duckburg.

The same metaleptic narrative method is used somewhat meticulously to indicate extraterrestrial activity around the Ducks. The hyper drive envelops the bin into an energy field and lifts it up to the air. As it moves first through Duckburg, it crashes through Scrooge's new twin towers⁸ and moves across the panel border to the gutter, and even behind the following panel (#614, 4). The hyper drive mechanism appears as the main cause of the metalepsis: the massive asteroid that Scrooge's money bin is anchored to by the aliens turns into a "spaceship" when the Ducks flee from the alien authorities. Scrooge pilots the asteroid with the hyper drive and there are two occasions when the asteroid crosses the panel border while the Ducks travel in space (#616, 5–6).

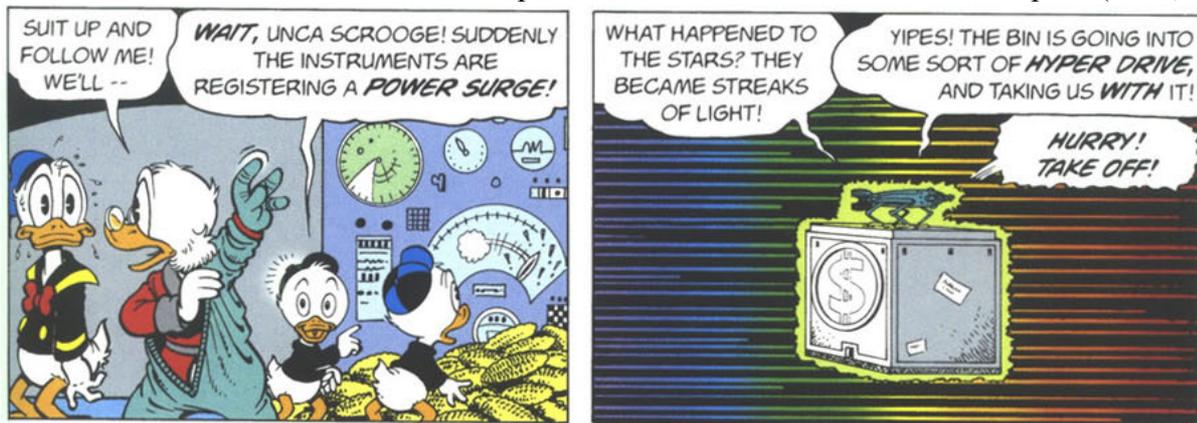


Figure 2: © Disney (Rosa 1997, #614, 7.)

In figure 2, the Ducks mention the term "hyper drive" for the first time. Rosa visualizes the mechanism of the hyper drive with the light of the stars turning into speed lines, highlighted with multiple colors, which is quite typical a method also in several SF movies and TV shows. The money bin is enveloped by a yellow light, making it appear like there was a force field around them, separating the fast-moving bin from space.

The term "hyper drive" originates from Isaac Asimov's short story "Little Last Robot" (1947). By using the term hyper drive, Rosa fulfills the condition Brian Attebery presents about SF discourse. According to him, SF uses science as a base of the literary expressions; telepathy replaces magic, for instance. Even though the term might not be "actual science", the discourse itself will bring the science to the story's background (Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* 107). This was also used in the comics of the 1940s: "To make things sound futuristic, writers smashed words together to create a hyphenated hodgepodge" (Benton 32). When Rosa makes the Ducks use terms and phrases such as "power surge", "inter-planetary", "We've lost our **air pressure!**" and "I'm shifting into **hyper-space!**" (emphasis in the original), he follows the discourse typical for SF.

However, the alien technology is so futuristic in the eyes of the Ducks that it could easily be seen as magic. When the hyper drive takes over the money bin and starts to move it off the Killmotor Hill, the Ducks wonder: "Er... Aren't there various and sundry laws of **physics** being violated here?" (#614, 4, emphasis in the original). For the Ducks, their world is normal and follows the natural laws. The hyper drive breaks these laws and for a while it seems more like magic or fantasy than SF.

Mixing science and fantasy brings us to the concept of science fantasy; "a genre in which devices of fantasy are employed in 'science-fictional' context (related to but distanced from the 'real world' by time, space or dimension)" (Clute, "Science fantasy" 843). SF writer Thomas M. Disch points out that:

⁸ We must remember that this comic was published in 1997, so we should abstain from drawing the parallel with the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre twin towers here.

Once such a voyage [to the moon] began to seem a concrete possibility, science fiction established itself as a separate genre, but the tropism toward fantasy remained in its genes, and now that the moon and Mars and most of our solar system have come to seem red – but barren destinations, SF has reverted to its origins as fantasy. For every SF story that posits interstellar travel and adventures among aliens is a trip to Oz, given what we know of interstellar distances and the constraints of relativity theory. (Disch 77)

These observations pointed out by Disch about the relationship between SF and fantasy are present also in Rosa's comic. The natural laws such as gravity and pressure can be disregarded in a fantastic way, when Ducks lose the windshield of their ship and walk in space with cracked helmets (#616, 4). Notably, whenever they look for an explanation for a scientific mystery, like the loss of inertia, the explanation is based on alien technology: "The hyper drive box must eliminate **inertia!** That's why we didn't feel any acceleration when it shifted to warp drive!" (#616, 6, emphasis in the original) Rosa's comic doesn't aspire to follow exact science; the science is brought to the story by SF lingo whenever the plot requires so.

Lastly, we should note that Attebery sees science fantasy as a parodic genre itself: by mixing the elements of the two genres, science fantasy sees their possible clichés, narrow imagery and rigid narrative patterns and is therefore able to ridicule them. Science fantasy in its hybrid form develops the genres and brings humor to both their language and traditional conventions (Attebery, *Strategies of Fantasy* 117–118). Rosa's comic follows Attebery's notions and turns science fiction into a parody which I will discuss further in the following section.

Attack of the Earthlings

It should be mentioned here that parody in this article is understood based on the literature theories of postmodernism. Linda Hutcheon (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 26) suggests that parody should be redefined as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity". Parody both installs and ironizes present representations that are derived from previous ones and notes "what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference" (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 93). Though often connoted to ridicule, parody rather uses irony to show its separation from the past. Postmodern parody invites to read history in a new way and paradoxically both strengthens and weakens the representations of the history it refers to (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 94–95, 98).

Disney comics, especially the comics by Italian artists have a long tradition of parody. Italian artists take literature and film classics, and recreate them with Disney characters. These parodic adaptations originated by artist Guido Martina (1906–1991) and his parody of Dante's *Inferno* ("L'inferno di Topolino")⁹ already in 1949. Although Rosa never uses Ducks to represent fictive characters in his stories, he is a descendant of Disney tradition, and has recreated covers of famous comic magazines with suitable Ducks as fan art.¹⁰ However, his Duck stories are rarely adaptations themselves.¹¹

Following Hutcheon, I argue that Rosa makes a critical commentary of both the invasion theme and the alien discourse by reversing these roles in his comic. The threat and possibility of alien encounter were the key themes of 1950s' SF films. According to Kimmo Ahonen, after the World War II, the Cold War evoked fear for communism by defining and recognizing the ideological enemy. Keeping up the image of the enemy not only affected the American identity but

⁹ Publication details of this comic can be found from *InDucks*: <https://coa.inducks.org/story.php?c=I+TL+++7-AP>.

¹⁰ Examples of Rosa's parody covers have been included in *Don Rosan kootut* #4, the collection of Rosa's works (Rosa, "Kansipojanhommia" 246–272).

¹¹ There is an exception though, "The Duck Who Never Was" (1994) is Rosa's Duck version of Frank Capra's movie *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

was also visible in the cultural products of the time as they supported the American system and slandered the enemy. Popular culture, especially fiction films, was used as a propaganda tool (Ahonen 12). Encountering the Other and defining one's identity and communality against the other group, race and culture, have always been part of the history of the USA. At worst, the political culture was all about demonizing the enemy. Stigmatizing and dehumanization were useful tools to promote one's own agenda (Ahonen 15).

Using aliens as the new enemy overlaps with the concept of the fear of the Other – which is something Entertainment Comics (EC Comics) also did during the 1940s. Because of the more mature readership, EC's SF comics included irony and cynicism. They even commented nuclear weapons and racial prejudices: "Alien races were often used in the EC science fiction comics to make a point about our own racism on Earth" (Benton 38, 42). Rosa uses these same tropes within the funny animal comic genre.

When Scrooge, Donald and the nephews have landed their spaceship on a large meteor, they encounter an alien family that has taken the money bin as their new habitat. At this point, Rosa shifts the view for the reader: we not only see things from the side of the Ducks, but the side of the aliens, who – despite some physical differences like one eye, three-fingered hands, very wide mouth and different molecule structure – are reminiscent of the human characters in Disney comics (figure 3).

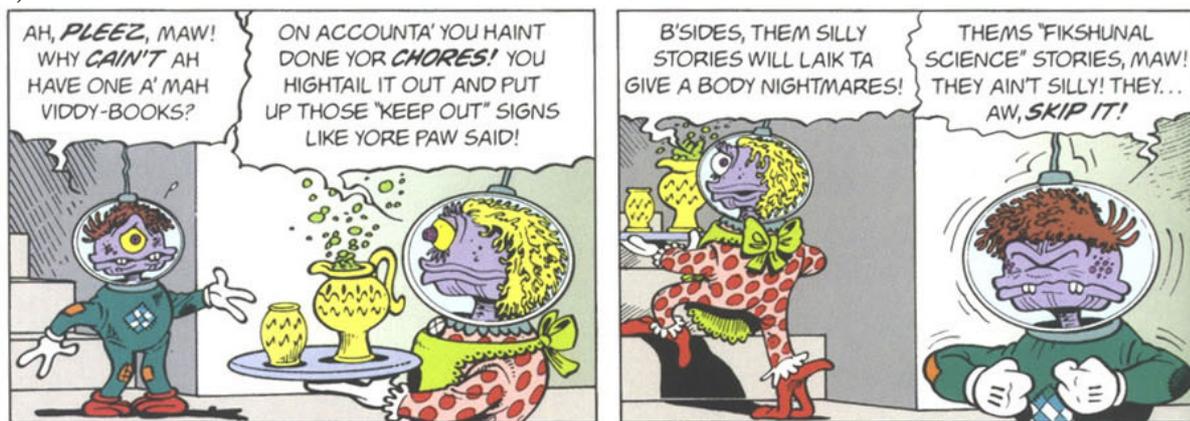


Figure 3: © Disney (Rosa 1997, #615, 2.)

Aliens walk on two feet, speak English (with the so called southern "hillbilly" accent) and have families and the same fears and dreams a human being might have. They even refer themselves as "hoomins" or "hoomin beans" which makes them a metaphor for humans. According to Farah Mendelsohn, in SF's visual narrative, the aliens of the 1950s were described either as beautiful, terribly ugly or as insects which separated them from humans, thus making them the fearful Other. The background reason for the descriptive choices might be the belief of a hierarchy between so called human races around the 1920s to 1940s (Mendlesohn 57). As Ahonen notes, anyone unknown, weird and deviating from one's own image was seen as threatening. Invasion films used a different threat than other SF cinema: the encounter, the invasion of a different life form into "the real" American life was seen as menace (Ahonen 432). Rosa notes this phenomenon in his comic parodically by turning the roles upside down: a young alien child tells the nephews how *he* thought *they* were "brainless monsters on account ay' all is so disgustin'ly **ugly!**" (#615, 3, emphasis in the original).

"Normality" in 1950s context was thus endangered by alien invasion. Peace in the society, the norm of heterosexuality and the nuclear family were all under a threat by physically deviant aliens in the science fiction films (Ahonen 214). Rosa comments on the physical deviance through Donald and the alien grandfather. Donald is worried about the "big green monsters" or "slimy green

monsters” they might counter in space (#614, 2, 8). The alien grandfather, on the other hand, wonders: “How come yore imaginary space critters ain’t never **normal** color – laik **green?**” (#615, 3, emphasis in the original). Similarly, as Rosa challenges the concept of normality, he comments on the way SF movies describe aliens completely and exaggeratingly different from humans. The reason behind this imagery in the 1950s invasion films was that the lack of human features would deny the humanity and civilization of the aliens thus justifying for instance the colonization of their planet (Reid 257).

Concerning the definition of a human being, this comparison is especially interesting since it is made in a Disney comic: Ducks themselves are representations of human beings hidden inside of animal characters. They are slightly altered with four-fingered palms and flippers, but they walk on two feet and talk like us. Now the Ducks represent the human race in opposition to an even more altered versions of us, the aliens.

On the other hand, in Rosa’s comic, it’s the *alien family* that represents the “proper” nuclear family. There is a mother, a father, a son, and the grandfather. The (white) Ducks – who are the actual invaders – are represented as all male characters. In fact, it is *their* family that is deviant from the norm, which puts another layer on Rosa’s parodic storytelling.¹² This time, it is the alien family that is worried about other life forms invading their home and destroying their civilization (#615, 6).

By turning the roles of the invader–invaded inside out, Rosa makes his comic a parodic version of the old 1950s alien invasion movies and comics. Similar to humans, the aliens wonder what is beyond the asteroid belt, the young alien boy reads “fikshunal science’ stories” and the alien authorities deny all the existence of the “aliens” – referring of course to Earthlings (#615, 2–3, #616, 3).

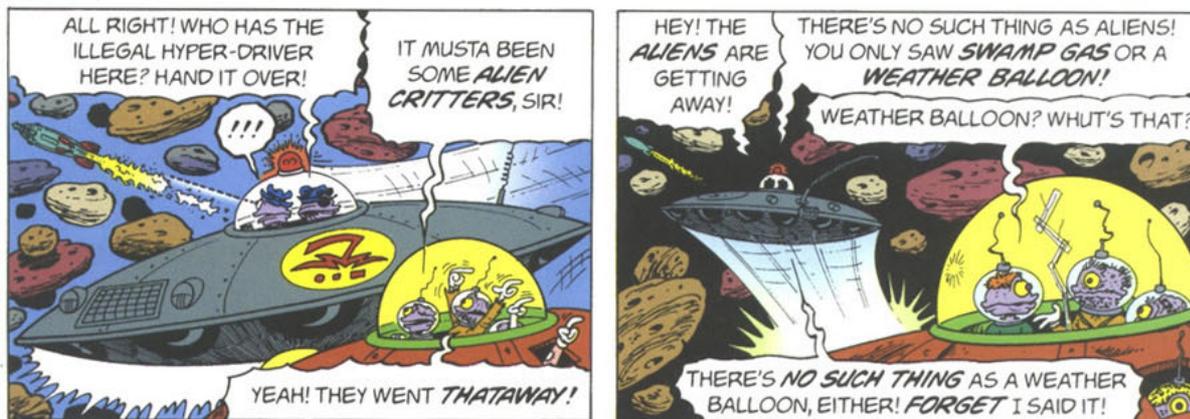


Figure 4: © Disney (Rosa 1997, #616, 3.)

One of the most comical reversed roles is the patrol of the alien authorities. The moment the alien “police force” finds out about the illegal hyper drive (#615, 8), they come to question the aliens. The authorities use excuses like “swamp gas” and “weather balloons” to hide the truth about the possible alien visitors (figure 4). These are classic examples of the same excuses the government of the United States used to calm down the UFO fanatics in the 1950s (Ahonen 59, 61). Correspondingly, Rosa makes a reference to these alleged visitations: the alien authorities are not worried about the contact with the Ducks, because no one would believe it to be true. That’s the reason why they “only contact rural hayseeds when our patrols visit their planet!” (#616, 3) Even their spaceship is shaped like a saucer, which was one of the most common UFO type described by the people who claimed to have seen a “flying saucer”.

¹² Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart have analyzed the family relationships of the Ducks in *How to Read Donald Duck* and see them as malfunctioning since the nuclear family is indeed missing – there are only uncles and nephews.

In addition, Rosa mentions other minor SF clichés like the threat taking an unknown species into the laboratory for examination might pose (#616, 3), or the phrase “We-come-in-peace! Take-us-to-your-leader!” (#615, 4). This falls in line not just with Hutcheon’s conceptualization of parody but also with Attebery’s definition of the science fantasy genre: Rosa makes fun of these clichés and turns his comic into a critical commentary of SF conventions.



Figure 5: © Disney (Rosa 1997, #615, 5.)

In addition to the parodic elements and the use of SF’s genre conventions, Rosa makes intertextual references to specific works that belong to the SF genre. Donald’s line: “Klaatu barada nikto” (#615, 5) in the panel below (figure 5) is from the SF classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Wise, 1951). According to Cordell and Cordell, the literal meaning of the phrase was never fully explained in the movie, but it’s kind of a safety clause. The human protagonist is told to say the phrase to the big robot Gort, so he doesn’t destroy the Earth in case of his alien companion Klaatu should be harmed (Cordell & Cordell). Following the movie, Donald tries out the sentence as a safe clause – the try is made obvious by the question mark in his speech balloon – so the angry-looking alien mother won’t hurt him and Scrooge.

The other reference is visual: the famous Vulcan salute from the *Star Trek* series, made known by the half-Vulcan character Mr. Spock (Leonard Nimoy). This reference to *Star Trek* functions as visual reference Rosa uses to connect his comic as part of SF’s fuzzy set.

Thematically “Attack of the Hideous Space-Varmints” deals with Scrooge’s desire for new adventures and his longing for the past. Scrooge sees the alien grandfather as his double, a prospector whose domain was not Klondike, but the planets, moons and meteors of space. Space is depicted with endless possibilities, a new world for Scrooge to explore, an actual final frontier (#615, 8, figure 6). This is another reference to *Star Trek*, which used the line “Space, the final frontier” in the beginning of every episode aired.



Figure 6: © Disney (Rosa 1997, #615, 8.)

Characteristic to SF, the explorations to uncharted territories of outer space can comment on the colonialist tendencies of human race, by depicting the bug-eyed aliens as Other and thus oppressed (Reid 257). However, Rosa chooses to depict the aliens as a metaphor for humans: they can be seen as equal to (white) Ducks who don’t regard the one-eyed aliens uncivilized or inferior.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the parodic and intertextual elements Disney artist Don Rosa uses in his comic “Attack of the Hideous Space-Varmints”. My aim was to discover how the comic comments the 1950s invasion films and early SF comics ironically, and analyze the visual language of comics.

Rosa’s comic parodies the features typical for 1950s SF films and comics by turning the invasion upside down. Even though SF invasion stories can be read through a colonialist agenda, the Ducks never intend to oppress the aliens they meet. Rosa drew his comic in the 1990s, and through this context colonialist and imperialist features are considered politically incorrect. As a medium, Disney comics are still mainly targeted to child audiences so their content must also be appropriate – demonizing another race or people is not acceptable¹³.

Moreover, Rosa combines SF with fantasy to produce a hybrid science fantasy which takes an ironic approach to SF genre’s conventional features, such as aliens’ appearance. The terms like “hyper drive”, “space station”, and “mothership” create a pseudo-scientific discourse typical for SF. Both the clichés in imagery and the terminology Rosa uses connect his comic to SF genre. Simultaneously, Rosa remarks the motif typical for any (SF) quest story: the longing for new adventures, because the Earth has already been discovered.

With these parodic elements, Rosa turns the reader’s gaze from the Ducks that serve as representations of humans to aliens of outer space. While doing so, Rosa uses the tropes of the early half of the 20th century science fiction ironically and contests the reader’s competence to see the ideological problems of the early imagery concerning aliens.

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¹³ This became highly relevant and topical during this year, when the Finnish publication company Sanoma Magazines started applying warning labels to those old Disney comics with politically incorrect descriptions of race, violence and such. The label reminds the (child) reader about the different era and context of the comic’s original publication date.

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