

Mutation or death!

John B. Michel

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Convention Committee, visitors, and friends:

What I am about to say is the result of much thinking and introspection on my part and on the part of the several of my friends here today who support a new program for the future of science fiction—which shall be the main topic of my talk this afternoon.

To open this discussion it would be well to put forward a statement pregnant with meaning, a statement above all appropriate to the speech, a statement heavily loaded with dynamite and fraught with shaking possibilities.

I hereby make that statement.

The Science Fiction Age, as we have known it during the past few years, is over. Definitely over and done with. Dead, gentlemen, of intellectual bankruptcy.

Unfortunately, for any persons who might still be harboring any thoughts of optimism while moping over the moldering corpse, the decision is entirely final. I am not fooling when I say this. You can take it or leave it. But I believe, in the light of what I shall say further on in this talk, you'll take it.

Naturally such a statement calls for proof, strong, unbending proof guaranteed to stand up under criticism of the most searching nature.

Need I offer any more positive a proof than the conduct of this convention itself?

Gentlemen, we are gathered here this afternoon in solemn conclave—to do what? To do precisely what?

In a few words let me put forth my opinion on what we are doing. My opinion is that we are baloney bending, throwing the bull, indulging in dull flights of fancy, tossing barrels of rhodomontade all over the place.

I see before me fans, writers, editors, and publishers, stf fans all and but a handful really awake to the enormous possibilities inherent in that fragile little thing called science fiction, that potentially mighty force which is rapidly being buried in a deluge of obscure issues, meaningless phrases, stupid interpretations, and aimless goals.

When the first science fiction fan organizations came into existence several years ago, they did so because of a need—a need, however obscure, which nevertheless existed.

That need was expression. We all know the various organizations that were formed. Why recall their history, their mistakes, their stupid, colossal, blundering mistakes of bickering and internal strife and more and still more baloney bending? In reviewing the field in its entirety we would be doing nothing more than adding to the dull, dreary reams upon reams of historical fact, consigned already to the limbo of forgotten things.

The very fact that no single science fiction organization has ever made any lasting impression on anything (except for the single exception of the ISA which did more or less practical research work on rockets before its dissolution) speaks for itself.

It speaks in a resounding question:

Just where has science fiction got to in six or seven years of loosely organized existence?

On a world scale, nowhere. Locally, practically nothing has been done. The great local organizations are gone, their banners furled and tossed on the scrap heap. Internationally, science fiction is but the last gasping beats of a never very strong and young and healthy heart. What remains of it all is a gigantic junk pile of stinking literature and less than puerile achievement.

Just what is this urge to organize, anyway? Why do science fiction fans gather all over the world in local clubs and sit up far in the nights to publish fan magazines and correspond on a scale almost unprecedented in its scope?

Certainly because they like science fiction. And why do they like science fiction? Wherein lies this mysterious attraction which prompts most of them to make a fetish out of a new form of literature, a little tin god, as it were, before which their souls bend and scrape? Is it because of the cadence of the words, the turn of the clever phrases, well constructed paragraphs, a temporary exaltation on reading some powerful descriptive scene? Is it to orate and argue endlessly about the qualities of this or that writer or the shortcomings of this or that writer? We all know that science fiction itself is something different in literature. But what form and shape has it given the ideas of its adherents? Again I repeat, wherein lies this mysterious compelling force which has made science fiction fans accomplish what little practical work they have accomplished?

The answer in great part is that science fiction is the smoothest form of escape literature known. In its infinite depths the lost, the lonesome, the inhibited, the frustrated soul finds understanding and expression, precisely because the world to which they escape is a world of their own fancies and imaginings—a world which they like. In this haven of refuge their creative instincts are given full rein.

I venture to predict that a heavy majority of science fiction fans are escapists. I think I'm right when I say that because I'm a more or less normal type of fan, and I was an escapist and in a certain sense I still am.

But why have the fans stopped at this point, content to revel in a seemingly unending debauch of good fellowship leading to what may seem to be a common end and purpose? As you can see by looking about you in the fan field, what remains of the great directive forces, the organizations proper, is nothing. Fandom has resounded for almost

a decade with the hullabaloo and the shouting, and now the hollow shell of a structure stopped suddenly in headlong growth sounds to nothing but a painful silence, sterile on the shores of a lost world.

What are you people looking for, anyway? Do you really intend to go on harping for more and better science fiction? Do you really think that merely asking for more and better science fiction is, in some miraculous way, to lift the field out of the slough? What makes you think that the editors and publishers of the magazines are going to give you their ears? Have they in the past? No. Can it actually be your intended purpose to continue arguing on the pros and cons of the literature of science fiction forever?

Can it? If such is your purpose, you are a pack of fools, content to sit smugly by while the fine talents inherent in your brains, the brains which provided the spark which sent science fiction leaping to a halted youth, stagnate.

But you cannot!

Because, gentlemen, the world is catching up with you and will pass you by.

Because, gentlemen, there is something in each and every one of you fans which places him automatically above the level of the average person; which, in short, gives him a vastly broadened view of things in general. The outlook is there, the brains are there. Yet, nothing has happened!

But why not give science fiction a meaning? Naturally all types of fiction are idealized versions of situations found in everyday life. Science fiction is an idealized type of vision of the life of the future.

What is wrong with science fiction today is that its outlook on the future has changed; or rather, has never existed in a rational sense.

How can science fiction have any rational outlook on the future when today exists the greatest confusion in world affairs since the dawn of recorded history?

What is important to us is what science fiction is going to do about it.

Science fiction has to do something about it because its very life is bound up with the future and today practical events are working to shape the outline of that future in bold, sharp relief.

Today we are face to face, *face to face*, I repeat, with the choice: Civilization or Barbarism—*reason or ignorance*.

As idealists, as visionaries, we cannot retreat before this challenge. We must accept it and carry the battle into the enemy's camp. Hitherto, this challenge has not even been recognized, much less accepted.

So come out of your secure cubbyholes of clubrooms and laboratories and meeting places and look at the world before you.

It is swiftly sinking in darkness and chaos. Why? Because the masses are being led by stupid men to a dreary doom.

Dare any of you deny this? Look at the daily newspapers. Look at the authoritative weeklies and monthlies. You see nothing but confusion and the abandonment of every decent instinct left to this mad system under which we live.

As *idealists* we cannot refuse to accept the challenge of the future.

Science fiction has finally come to the parting of the ways with meaningless idealism, and, with that idealism, dies. Science fiction must mutate—must change into a new form of idealism, a fighting, practical idealism, an idealism based on action and not on words, on experience and achievements and not on bombastic and irrelevant swaggerings.

The main point of this whole discussion is that you fans must prepare to incept this new state of things, else nothing is left but a slow, gradual decay of the gaunt corpse of the body stf until it disappears, eaten up by the fiery acid of mighty world events.

Thus today the world of science fiction totters. Even science, its mainstay, wavers increasingly toward the vague and obscure.

It would seem as though science were too secure in its ivory tower to pay much heed to the wails and groans (and pardon me if I use this old bromide) of suffering humanity. In its lofty and utterly pure elevation it squats safely amidst its own escapist atmosphere and does precisely nothing practical in the way of saving itself from the consequences of the coming world smash.

Out of its test tubes and instruments it extracts life and the energy of the atom and with them both it fills up our war machine and vomits death and terror throughout the world.

On one hand we are faced with the sickening spectacle of scientists throughout the world turning their backs on cold logic for the magic tinsel of colored military trappings, of a Pirandello in art and a Marconi in radio stooging for the Fascist dictator and general dirty rat, Benito Mussolini. On our own side of the Atlantic, renowned scientists and savants such as Millikan and others bow hypocritically before a standardized version of a God (of which none of them could possibly conceive) and attend rallies and demonstrations to uphold our military pride and honor.

As the technical brains of the world in their supreme cynicism line up on the side of reaction, the backbone of science fiction itself dies, dies of inaction, of do-nothingness, of an inability to forget for a while its above-it-allness and lead humanity out of the Valley of the Shadow into the dazzling light of a triumphant future.

Why all this? Because we have become stale and we stink in our staleness to the high heavens. Because we are conventional and set in our ways and the old way of life is easier to go on living because it demands little effort on the part of the haves and near-haves. We continue to do the same old things in the same old way and are smug and content in our pipe-dreams of super-scientific smoke. "Why change?" we cry.

Why *not* change? Why in hell not *do* something about it?

Great guns! We have brains, technical brains, introspective brains, thoughts and ideals that would put the greatest minds to shame for scope and insight. Put these brains to work *before it is too late!* The planet is ready for work, for practical work to wipe clean the slate and start anew. We *must* start anew if we have to smash every old superstition and outworn idea to do it.

We fans can do a lot towards the realization of this rational idea. We can do that because determination very often means achievement. And how sick we are at base of this dull, unsatisfying world, this stupid asininely organized system of ours which demands that a man brutalize and cynicize himself for the possession of a few dollars in a savage, barbarous, and utterly boring struggle to exist.

We say: "Put a stop to this—*now!*"

We say: "Smash this status quo of ours by smashing the present existing forms of economic and social life!" Boldly, perhaps a bit crudely, we say: "Down with it!" Down with it before the war-lovers clamp on the screws and bind us in submission for who knows how long!

Let humanity swing along in its goalless rut for more hundreds and thousands of years while the universe beckons for our participation in its active life?

Not for us!

Fearlessly and before the entire world we state our platform and beliefs (and I speak for all the visitors here today wearing the red delegate badges of the NYFA).

We come out wholly and completely in support of every force seeking the advancement of civilization along strictly scientific and humanitarian lines.

All help to the democratic forces of the world!

All help to the heroic defenders of Madrid and Shanghai, defenders of democracy!

Death and destruction to all forms of reaction!

The machine that will shatter forever the reactionary assault on civilization is already in motion. Let us become part of it.

It is our job to work and plan and prepare, to teach and expound for the coming of that day when the human race shall stand erect as should a man and gaze on the stark, naked cosmos with firm eyes, to feel the solid, inconceivable impact of the grim void, to flood its consciousness with the realization that in the vast emptiness we must stand on our own feet and fight it out!

Therefore:

Be it moved that this, the Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention, shall place itself on record as opposing all forces leading to barbarism, the advancement of pseudo-sciences and militaristic ideologies, and shall further resolve that science fiction should by nature stand for all forces working for a more unified world, a more Utopian existence, the application of science to human happiness, and a saner outlook on life.