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"Introducing the All New eyePhone!" – The Future of Mobile Media (as Seen on TV)

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Abstract

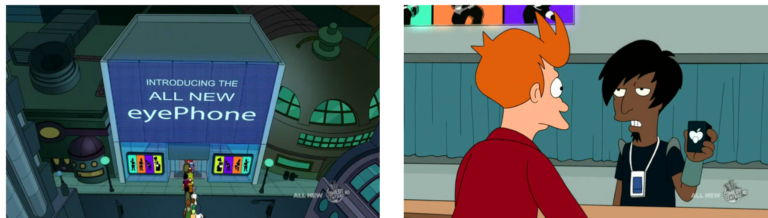
The contemporary science fiction series no longer works as a genre projecting the future of media technologies. It seems rather inspired by its own genre history, creating a pastiche of prediction and nostalgia. Therefore, a lot of contemporary science fiction stories tend to fade down the representation of current computer and telecommunication technologies, replacing them with older or 'classical retro-future' media devices. Using the example of the animated science fiction series *Futurama,* this chapter shows how the 'old' medium television imagines the future by revisiting the past.

Fry: "I'm gonna be a science-fiction hero. Just like Uhura, or Captain Janeway, or Xena."

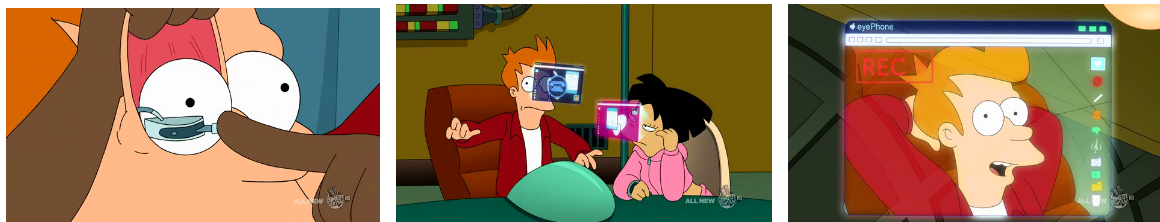
Leela: "Fry, this isn't TV. It's real life. Can't you tell the difference?"

Fry: "Sure. I just like TV better."

The episode *Attack of the Killer App* of the animated science fiction series *Futurama* introduces a revolutionary new media device: the eyePhone. The futuristic gadget is produced by Momcorp – the powerful (and, of course, evil) media corporation of the world of *Futurama* – and despite the costs of five-hundred dollars, issues with reception, and extremely poor battery life, the members of the Planet Express crew (the main cast of *Futurama*) immediately throw away their current phones when an ad for the new eyePhone appears on television. The crew heads to the Mom Store, only to wait for several hours in a queue since the new device is, naturally, in short supply.



The Mom Store (*Futurama: Attack of the Killer App*).



The new eyePhone (*Futurama: Attack of the Killer App*).

The eyePhone lives up to its name by being directly inserted into the user's eye socket, projecting a floating holographic screen in front of him or her. The ad for the new device promises: "With the new eyePhone, you can watch, listen, ignore your

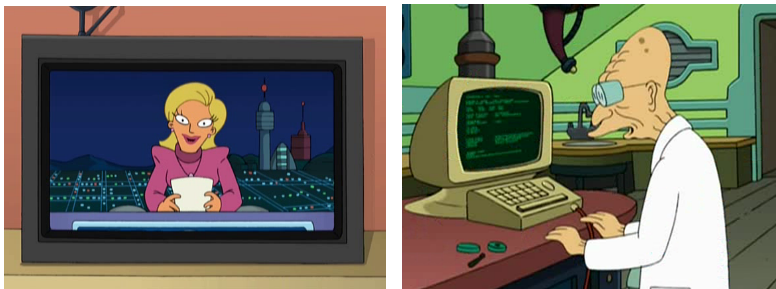
friends, stalk your ex, download porno on a crowded bus, even check your e-mail while getting hit by a train.” And, indeed, the members of the Planet Express crew hardly use their eyePhones as phones, but almost exclusively for browsing the World Wide Web. The main attraction is a service called Twitcher, which allows the user to send small video messages to friends and followers – and which is, of course, a spy program allowing Momcorp to gather personal information from the eyePhone users.

Futurama shows us the world of the 31st century. It takes place in New New York City (built over the ruins of present-day New York City) and follows the adventures of a late-20th-century pizza delivery boy, Philip J. Fry, who, after being unwittingly cryogenically frozen for one thousand years, finds employment at Planet Express, an interplanetary delivery company. Developed by David X. Cohen and Matt Groening (the famous creator of *The Simpsons*), *Futurama* presents a satirical look at all too familiar themes. Between “utopian raves” and “dystopian rants” (Silver, 2000, p. 20), present-day problems have become both more extreme and more common – like the sometimes useful but more often questionable and dubious functions of new media technologies.

Like most contemporary science fiction narrations, *Futurama* is not so much an actual ‘prophecy’ but rather a reflection on the present – or, as Darko Suvin argues in his much-cited *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction,* “The aliens – utopians, monsters, or simply differing strangers – are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world. But the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a

transforming one." (Suvin, 1979, p. 25)

Yet, the most appealing aspect of *Futurama's* vision of the future seems to be less the series' connection to current technological developments but rather its obsession with the past. On the one hand, *Futurama's* world contains typical science fiction icons like spaceships, robots, and futuristic megacities. On the other hand, most of the communication and entertainment devices appear strangely outdated: television sets are bulky CRT monitors, computers look a lot like their C64 and Atari ancestors, and many of the telephones still have a cord. With the exception of the eyePhone, mobile phones have much more in common with the communicators of the original *Star Trek* series than with contemporary smartphones – or sometimes they look like bizarre hybrids like a clamshell phone with a dial plate.



Futuristic televisions sets and computers (*Futurama: A Bicyclops Built for Two*).

Futuristic phones (*Futurama: Attack of the Killer App*).

It is unsurprising, in this regard, that the most important medium of this fictional 31st century is television, along with its most prevalent type of viewer, the couch potato (cf. Booker, 2006, p. 123). Even the television programs do not seem to have changed noticeably; apart from the robots and aliens, one can now find amongst the talk show hosts, news anchors, TV chefs and daily soap opera actors (cf. Geraghty, 2009, p. 156-157). Occasionally, 'new' technologies – like the eyePhone or, ten years before that, a no less revolutionary virtual reality device called Netsuit – threaten this dominant position of television, but all of them turn out as short-lived hypes, usually lasting no longer than the episode in which they were introduced. In the end, *Futurama's* protagonists always come together in front of their beloved television set.

At first glance, *Futurama's* reserved or even reluctant attitude regarding the representation of new media technologies seems surprising. Considering it is a science fiction series and, as such, (usually) appealing to a tech-savvy audience, should *Futurama* not rather embrace an accelerated media change? This would appear particularly appropriate also given the erratic (broadcast) history of the show: *Futurama* was cancelled by FOX in 2003, but after several online petitions and excellent DVD sales it was picked up by Comedy Central in 2008. Thus, the *Futurama* fan community 'revived' the series by demonstrating the new power of dedicated online fan cultures in the digital age (cf. Bailey, 2005, p. 157-201; Jenkins, 2006).

This article aims to show how science fiction series have shifted their focus from

imagining possible futures to referencing their genre's history. This happens partly as a consequence of the aging of television and the passing of the banner of innovation on to younger media. A first look at the discussion surrounding the concept of *New Television* and its positive and negative connotations is followed by an examination of the role of science fiction in the context of this problematic, with special emphasis on the case of *Futurama*. The article closes with an analysis of the relation between *Futurama* and new media like social networks or video games.

The future of television

In the last several years, a lot has been written about the so called *New Television* (cf. Stauff, 2005). However, this debate often appears contradictory. On the one hand, a new *Golden Age of Television* (Thompson, 1996) is proclaimed, which is particularly shaped be the rise of the *Quality TV* series (McCabe/AkasHammond, 2007; Michael/Mazdon, 2005; Leverette/Ott/Buckley, 2008). On the other hand, the supplement *new* often turns out to be a euphemism for the decay or even 'the end' of television as a technological device or rather as a media dispositif. I will first take a closer look at this latter 'pessimistic' prediction, because it seems to be the more obvious approach regarding *Futurama* and other contemporary science fiction series. Nonetheless, at the end of this chapter, I will try to draw a line back to the more 'optimistic' theories of the future of television.

As Elisabeth Evans noted:

> "Even in the late 1990s, when recording devices and digital multi-channel

> technology was radicalizing the television landscape, the concept of television as a medium retained a level of stability. It involved a certain group of companies creating a certain kind of content and delivering that content via a television set and broadcasting apparatus to their audience. Now, none of those things are stable." (Evans, 2011, p. 175)

The formerly undisputed *Leitmedium* television becomes part of – or rather dissolves into – a *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins, 2006) dominated by new digital media technologies. As early as 2004, Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson wrote about *Television after TV*; the television of the *Post-Network-Era* (Lotz, 2007) merges with new digital media, evolving into *Transmedia Television* (Evans, 2011) or *Television 2.0* (Askwith, 2007); the familiar *television flow* (Williams, 1975) mutates into a *Post TV hyperflow* (Nicholas, 2006, p. 159). Some theorists have even already discarded television as an essential media dispositif: in 2009 William Uricchio wrote about *The Future of a Medium Once Known as Television,* analyzing the prospective 'successor to the throne' YouTube (which is often already integrated in current smart-TV sets). It seems that at the beginning of the 21th century television is only, as Goedart Palm puts it, a "living media fossil" (2004, p. 74) which will soon be entirely replaced by new media technologies like the internet or videogames.

Against this background, *Futurama's* representation of a futuristic world obsessed with the past (of its own medium) must be understood as a (self-)reflexive strategy of the medium television undergoing a radical change. Therefore, the starting point of the following analysis will be the 'new' science fiction television, a television

presenting itself as a very lively media fossil.

The past and the future of science fiction television

For a more precise description of the – from a media historic perspective – strangely heterogeneous world of *Futurama,* Fred Miller's and Nicolas Smith's concept of *explorative* and *speculative science fiction* provides a useful terminological differentiation:

> "Explorative science fiction takes for granted present day scientific and philosophical knowledge and asks, What *will* happen if this goes on? Speculative science fiction projects future developments of knowledge and asks, What *would* happen if these were to occur?" (Miller/Smith, 1982, p. 6-7)

By connecting to – or rather building up on – present technologies, explorative science fiction, which is often labeled as *hard science fiction*, tries to create a likely or at least plausible future world. In contrast, speculative science fiction revolves around a *novum* (cf. Suvin, 1979) which seems (at least at the time the story is written) technically impossible, often blurring the lines between futuristic and magical elements (cf. Spiegel, 2007, p. 46).

To apply these two categories to *Futurama*, it is striking that the series features a number of 'classical' speculative nova (like the aforementioned robots and spaceships) but almost no explorative elements. This is particularly noticeable in the

case of new media technologies, which usually only appear in the form of short interludes but never become a central narrative theme. Thus, the world of Futurama is inspired by a distant future as well as a not so distant past, but it seems strangely detached from today's media landscape. Moreover, even the speculative futuristic elements often allude to a form of retro science fiction. This starts with the title of the series referencing Norman Bel Geddes's legendary *Futurama* pavilion, which presented the visitor of the 1939 New York World's Fair "the world of tomorrow" (in this case a futuristic city of the year 1959).

Norman Bel Geddes's *Futurama* pavilion.

Geddes's work was strongly influenced by popular science fiction stories (cf. Morshed, 2004) – and it is precisely this *golden age of science fiction* (cf. Roberts, 2006), spanning from the 1930s to the 1950s, which is also a main source of the 'futuristic' world of the *Futurama* television series. From the architecture of New New York, to the spaceships, to the robot models, all elements present a kind of innocent fascination for technological wonders of days long gone by.

"[In the 1950s] new technologies, whether the simple electric can opener or

> the most advanced space rocket, were a sign of national and human achievement. The future depicted in *Futurama* not only acknowledges this reality through the abundance of spaceships, useless Farnsworth inventions, and multitude of labor-saving robots, but also illustrates that how we imagine such technological advancement has not progressed much beyond the genre's early visualizations of the future made popular in the B-movies, of the 1950s." (Geraghty, 2009, p. 158)

In a nutshell: "[*Futurama* uses] new technologies and techniques in order to imagine the future by revisiting the past." (Geraghty, p. 162)

New New York City and a Humorbot (*Futurama: A Bicyclops Built for Two*).

Ever since the beginning of the new millennium, this strong link to the past seems to be a characteristic genre strategy used not only by *Futurama*, but by a number of contemporary science fiction television series. But what is the reason for this longing for the past?

At first glance science fiction may still be regarded as a particularly suitable genre for projecting technological evolution, but on closer inspection such an explorative or

even 'prophetic character' is questionable. For example: during the mid-1980s the cyberpunk genre may have had a huge influence on the cultural awareness of new network technologies (cf. Gözen, 2012; Alvarado, 2011) – but in the end it simply could not keep up with the actual technical progress accelerated through digital media technologies (cf. Murphy & Vint, 2010). Of course, there are some examples of recent technical inventions which were inspired by science fiction stories (cf. Disch, 1998; Cuneo, 2011; Shedroff & Noessel 2012), but most science fiction scenarios ultimately turn out to be poor examples of a "narrative futurology" (Spiegel, 2007, p. 47).

Thus, the contemporary science fiction series finds itself struggling with a kind of twofold dilemma: firstly, because technological and social developments of the so called 'digital revolution' seem to be accelerated and therefore more unpredictable – especially the "success disaster" (Barabási, 2003, p. 149) called World Wide Web. Secondly, because most of the great visions of science fiction, above all the dream of intergalactic travel, turned out to be wrong, or at least strongly exaggerated. Against this background, M. Keith Booker observes a "growing maturity (or perhaps exhaustion) of the genre of science fiction television" (2004, p. 192):

> "After all, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, what had once been the science fiction future was now the present day of the real world, a present that had not, in general, lived up to the expectations of the science fiction novels, films, and television series of earlier decades. While technological advances, especially in computers and communications, continued at a rapid

> rate, space travel (the heart of earlier science fiction visions of the future) had not lived up to previous expectations, and the space program had in fact slowed to a virtual standstill." (Booker, p.192)

In this sense, the contemporary science fiction series no longer works (at least not primarily) as a genre projecting the future of media technologies. It rather seems more inspired by its own genre history creating a pastiche of "prediction" and "nostalgia" (Roberts, 2000, p. 30). Therefore, a significant portion of contemporary science fiction tends to tone down the representation of current computer and telecommunication technologies, replacing them with older or 'classical retro-future' media devices.

Futuristic phones and the Galactica museum (*Battlestar Galactica*).

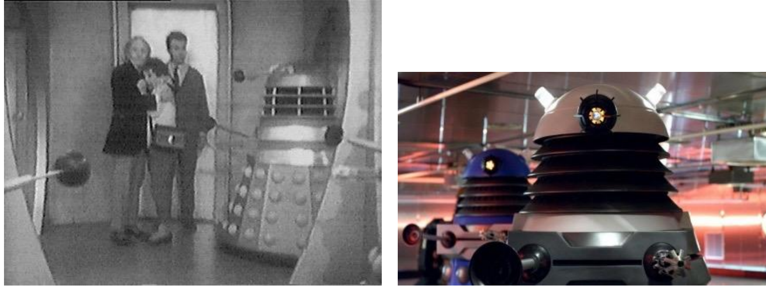
To give a further instance, in the future world of the re-imagined *Battlestar Galactica* series one can find giant spaceships and hostile intelligent robots (called cylons), but also fax machines and (again) telephones with a cord (cf. Pank & Caro, 2009).

> "[I]nstead of embracing the 'hyper real', 'larger-than-life', futuristic sets of

> the original, BATTLESTAR production designer Richard Hudolin embraced a retro look that combined old-style telephones and maps you would see on 1940s battleships with computer screens and other elements form the 1980s and '90s. [...] The designers embraced discontinuity with the visual history of the franchise, inviting distinction between the two Battlestars' alternately futuristic and retro looks." (Johnson, 2013, p. 136)

Moreover, the spaceship Galactica itself is a flying relict (cf. Beil et al., 2012). As the last ship of the first cylon war, it gets decommissioned and remodeled into a war museum exhibiting old spaceship and cylon models known from the original 1970s *Battlestar Galactica* series. Furthermore, this change of (fictional) media technology is reflected in an interesting plot twist in the pilot episode of the series, since the Galactica can only escape the cylon attack because of its dated technology. When the cylons succeed in immobilizing the human spaceship fleet by using a computer virus, the computer systems of the Galactica are not infected simply because they are too old and therefore not connected to the defense network.

A similar self-reflexive play with its own (media) history can be observed in the science fiction cult series *Doctor Who*. The program originally ran from 1963 to 1989 and was re-launched in 2005. Yet, most of the robots and aliens of the 2005 series – like the Daleks or the Cybermen – still look exactly like their counterparts from the 1960s. Though the new *Doctor Who* series uses modern digital special effects, it relies heavily on the nostalgic effect of the original series' designs, creating a mash up of contemporary and classical science fiction aesthetics (cf. Hills, 2009).



Doctor Who 1963 & 2013.

Futurama and new media

But how does *Futurama's* reflexive retro strategy manifest itself on an extradiegetic level? *Futurama's* history is, as mentioned above, strongly interconnected with the rise of new media and new forms of fan culture. But despite the vivid activities of these online fan communities, the official transmedia expansions of the series seem rather underdeveloped. On the distribution side, *Futurama* has already completed a change from 'classical' (analogue) television *flow* to a more flexible model of (digital) *publishing* (cf. Kompare, 2006; Mittell, 2011): the series is available on DVD and on several digital platforms, like the iTunes store. But, beyond that, its transmedia expansions are rather unimaginative (cf. Bailey, 2005, p. 170-188): there is a rather rudimentary official website, a Facebook page, and an (unsuccessful) video game adaptation. *Futurama* is far from becoming a transmedia phenomenon like other contemporary television series, like *Lost*, *Heroes*, or more recently *The Walking Dead*. Apart from several (unofficial) *Futurama* Websites featuring episode guides, wikis, or fan fiction collections, an actual narrative *overflow* (cf. Brooker, 2004; Pane, 2010) is missing.

Of course, the limited amount of transmedial expansions to *Futurama* could simply be explained with the 'pre-convergent-era origin' of the series. However, I would rather argue that the fictional world of *Futurama*, which is (for the most part) restricted to the television series, can also be seen as a certain form of stabilization of television's digital transformation process. Television has already become a digital medium (cf. Bennet 2008): its content is produced with digital cameras and editing software, distributed through digital technology, and watched on flat-screen television sets or computer monitors – but, apart from this change on a technical level, television's most popular formats have turned out to be quite stable, just like *Futurama's* 'futuristic' television programs. From this point of view, *Futurama's* vision of the future of media can also be interpreted as a plea for a certain *serenity* regarding media change (cf. Schwaab, 2010). *Futurama* shows us that new media technologies are often only short-lived hypes – and in this respect our attitude towards new media seems to be not so different from the naïve technological enthusiasm of the golden age of science fiction.

Epilogue: media and the future (and the past)

William Gibson once said: "The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed." (Berkun, 2007, p. 66) And with Kurt Möser one can add: "The opposite is also true: The past is here. It's just not evenly distributed anymore" (Möser, 2010, p. 18). Media change is never shaped by one (dominant) technology; it is rather characterized by constant overlaps and combinations of 'older' and 'newer' media

practices. Sometimes allegedly old technologies get 'revived' through retro trends (cf. Dika, 2003; Sprengler, 2009) or simply because they turn out to be more stable and more reliable than their modern counterparts (cf. Möser 2010). The result is a much more 'chaotic' media history and constant negotiation between new media practices and nostalgic recollection.

> "Below the surface of the current trend towards media nostalgia, there is a broad current of musealization to counterbalance the hype about progress which the new media cause. [...]The nostalgia of the media does not only extend to the material remains which have been collected in media archives, personal collections, or which have been exhibited in museums and cultural centers. Media nostalgia is also apparent in the way the media represent the media and in the way they let us see the world narrated by them. [...] Media nostalgia in the media is a manifestation of self-reference in the media because the media refer to themselves, show how they have been the source of entertainment, how they have been subject to historical changes or even destruction, and how they have been remembered or consigned to oblivion." (Böhn, 2007, p. 152)

Three futuristic phones: *Futurama's* clamshell phone, the iPhone dial plate app, and a retro handset.

Against this background, the use of contemporary and antiquated technology in *Futurama*, *Battlestar Galactica*, and other science fiction series can be considered "as a central indication for the abandonment of a specific conception of history connected with linearity and progress" (Woschech 2012, p. 237). This seems especially true for the new digital cultures, which can hardly be reduced to a single 'digital aesthetic'. The accelerated technological evolution leads rather to an accelerated mash up of 'new' and 'old' aesthetics, like the current retro gaming trend (Taylor & Whalen, 2008; Camper, 2009). Therefore, as bizarre as *Futurama's* hybrid clamshell phone may appear at first glance, it ultimately seems not so different from all the dial plate apps and smartphone retro handsets. Similarly, the recent history of television may appear to be mainly influenced by the new technologies of a convergence culture – and yet, this recent history is also essentially characterized by retro and hybrid aesthetics, which shape television as a new-old digital medium.

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