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E-Journal  
zu Kulturen  
des Heroischen.



## HeldInnen und Katastrophen – Heroes and Catastrophes

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schreibung im Kontext von Flucht-  
und Migrations-, 'Katastrophen'  
Silke Felber

Krisenbewältigung im spätmittel-  
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Counter-Narratives of the Heroic  
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Television Show *Futurama*  
Jochen Antoni

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Band 5.1 (2017)

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# Catastrophic Future(s)

## Counter-Narratives of the Heroic and Catastrophes in the Animated Television Show *Futurama*

### Introduction

Within the context of this special issue, the following paper intends to examine the distinct way in which animated television shows<sup>1</sup> negotiate heroisms in situations of catastrophe. More specifically, I have chosen two examples from the science fiction show *Futurama* (1999–2013), whose very genre is strongly associated with depictions of catastrophes or disasters. This choice seems prudent, because the negotiation of heroism in animated television shows in general is not necessarily tied to one mode or one trope, as will become clear. My claim is, therefore, that *Futurama*, as an example of animated television shows, creates counter-narratives of the heroic, based on an evoked popular culture formula (usually differentiated and diversified along genre demarcations) which is defamiliarised and repurposed to challenge its master narrative status. The respective formula for the science fiction genre includes catastrophe as a major trope, which the show attempts to reveal as artificial and therefore inappropriate for the negotiation of heroism. To achieve this, *Futurama* follows a certain *modus operandi* which I describe as a (meta-)heroic discourse. Within this discourse, it adapts and appropriates genre conventions as well as specific texts which perpetuate (varieties of) the pop culture formula for heroisms in catastrophes, thus essentially forming an ‘adaptation collage’. Examples in my two case studies include franchises such as *Star Trek* (1966–date) and *Star Wars* (1977–date) and films such as *Independence Day* (1996) and *Armageddon* (1998) among many others. The show thus collects and converges narratives from different media within its own (television) adaptation collage.<sup>2</sup> That is, through this overt process of adaptation, it makes offers to activate knowledge of other (hypo-)texts and, hence, to participate in the negotiation of the heroic. In addition, the show’s distinct animation aesthetics, in conjunction with other techniques, serve to defamiliarise the adapted texts and, by extension, the evoked concepts and models of the

heroic. Thus, these concepts and models and the (genre) conventions they represent and reiterate can be repurposed within the new counter-narratives. It is here that catastrophes come into play as one of the most salient and arguably conventionalised elements of the science fiction genre. Consequently, and by the means of this (meta-)heroic discourse, *Futurama* rejects popular culture notions of heroism in favour of its counter-narratives of the heroic as an artificial device.

### 1. Mapping the Theoretical Foundation

To begin with the question of what actually constitutes the heroic as a category of inquiry, this paper is to be guided by the programmatic article of von den Hoff et al. in this very journal. The authors state that heroic figures, beyond their ‘normal’ human traits, are generally defined by their “agonal, exceptional and often times transgressive” features<sup>3</sup> and have “charismatic impact” as well as a community of admirers (von den Hoff et al. 8). Furthermore, these traits are inherently relational and to be understood as ascriptions, which are mediated and subject to change (ibid.). Ulrich Bröckling’s suggestion of a typology of negations of the heroic may help add to this rather broad understanding. He defines four major “dimensions of the heroic” (Bröckling 10) which are important in assessing the heroic quality of a figure or person: “morally regulated deviation, worship, (agonal) agency and a readiness to make sacrifices” (ibid. 11).<sup>4</sup> As much as these dimensions overlap with the aforementioned definition, they add depth and differentiation, especially with respect to the “force field of the heroic” (ibid. 9),<sup>5</sup> within which they become relevant. Understood not unlike a magnetic or a gravitational field, it is generated by a call to heroic action and forces all people or figures within its reach to position themselves and to have their actions interpreted and judged

against the standards it imposes (cf. Bröckling 9). Consequently, the four dimensions form the metaphorical coordinate system for these standards. The catastrophe as an extraordinary event or process, then, is one instance of such a call, or at least a catalyst, establishing a force field which in turn creates correlations with the heroic for all the persons or figures concerned. This broad framework establishes the categories of the heroic with which I want to analyse the shows' characters and their actions. Besides that, a workable definition of catastrophes is needed. The call for papers for this special issue includes "natural disasters, war and terror, economic crises or nuclear melt-downs" and defines them all as "events of an extraordinary nature [which] can bring about change in the established societal order, are perceived as a break from the norm and enter the collective memory as a traumatic experience." In this vein and for the purpose of this paper, I propose to broadly define catastrophe as a large-scale, disruptive event or process which threatens the order and lives of a group of people or a whole society. The focus in my paper is thereby on the way catastrophes are presented in narratives, which includes the different perspectives of characters within the narrative as well as potential reception from an audience. In this sense, the question of whether an event is a catastrophe depends on the perception of the event, which is constructed through narrative.

Having developed a framework of the heroic and catastrophes, it is now necessary to expand on the workings of the (meta-)heroic discourse as I intend to trace it through the two episodes. Firstly, I want to argue that *Futurama* (or at least some of its episodes) is a type of adaptation, using techniques of collage and repurposing to create their counter-narratives. In her seminal work, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon defines adaptations as both product and process, in that they are "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works," as well as "(re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation" (Hutcheon 7-8). Additionally, from the perspective of the audience's reception, they are "a form of intertextuality [which] we experience [...] as palimpsests through our memory of other works" (ibid. 8). Here, Hutcheon also locates the appeal or pleasure of adaptations: the audience may find a "mixture of repetition and difference" (ibid. 114), and therefore a "doubled pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced" (ibid. 116). While texts, understood and received as adaptations, therefore create a framework of meaning which extends beyond themselves, they also focus or channel a range of narrative strands from across different media within one, assimilating them to their

form and mode of representation. What is more, "[k]nown adaptations obviously function similarly to genres: they set up audience expectations [...] through a set of norms that guide our encounter with the adapting work" (ibid. 121). Rendering such expectations visible, as well as frustrating them, may then create a strong defamiliarisation effect which enables meta-fictional negotiations. What determines the precise nature of what I call 'adaptation collages' in animated television shows is, on the one hand, the fact that they always draw on several texts, and, on the other hand, their salient use of fandom language.

Although various theories of adaptation have insisted on the exclusion of so-called 'vernacular' production, i.e. fan texts,<sup>6</sup> it has recently become more accepted to think of fan texts as 'proper' adaptations as well.<sup>7</sup> Thus, distinctions between industry products and fan texts are more and more understood as an issue of critical reception, rather than inherent differences. Consequently, the fact that these animated television shows exist as vernacular yet standardised media products is in itself another transgression of the amateur vs. professional dichotomy of media creativity (Constandinides 145). Thus, these shows blur the boundaries and essentially reveal the arbitrariness of such a binary understanding. Costas Constandinides attests a similar development for new "cinophilic discourse", in which "[t]here is a blurring between fan creativity and creativity since it may be argued that directors like Tarantino, Peter Jackson, Guillermo Del Toro project a fan persona and their filmic *events* often perform moments of paratextual nature, which underline or highlight texts they were inspired from" (ibid. 146). In the case of animated television shows, this kind of discourse is less tied to personalities and conveyed more via characters within the narratives. In *Futurama*, for example, its protagonist, Philip J. Fry, constantly frames events around him in terms of his own science fiction and television fandom; for instance, the pilot episode shows Fry exclaiming that a door moving upward looks "just like in *Star Trek*" ("Space Pilot 3000", 04:00-04:04). Overtly opening up certain texts to participatory meaning-making processes, the animated television shows as adaptations, therefore, locate themselves at the intermediary position of fan texts from within media conglomerates. In using fandom language, however, the shows do not only openly invite participation, but also add an interesting inflection of a hero's community of admirers. The characters, voicing and acting attitudes of fandom, mirror the audience's relation to texts and, by extension, to their heroes. As the shows break the fourth wall in this way, they blur the boundaries of fictional and real fans

and admirers. Therefore, the audience is forced to take note of their role in the process of making a hero, as they themselves form part of the community of admirers.

Lastly, animated television shows as adaptations employ a mode of representation which might best be described as hyper-realism, in that they 'copy' (via animation techniques of drawing or computer generated imagery) other texts (such as films, television shows, etc.) which are themselves copies of reality. In this sense, the shows are simulacra which, due to their self-conscious nature, point to the absence of any original (Wells 24-25). Therefore, by extension, the heroic as well as catastrophes are similarly presented as copies of copies without an original.

## 2. *Futurama* – “When Aliens Attack”<sup>8</sup>

*Futurama* is based on the premise of the character Philip J. Fry having been cryogenically frozen in the year 1999 to awaken in the year 3000. A loser nobody, he finds work at Planet Express, an intergalactic delivery company, through which he experiences adventures with his zany colleagues.

The episode being studied begins with the backstory leading up to the catastrophe at the centre of the plot. Fry accidentally interrupts the broadcast of a show called “Single Female Lawyer” (an obvious spoof of *Ally McBeal*) in 1999. This angers the aliens on “Omicron Persei 8”, who seem to be fans and had been watching the show from afar until the blackout. In the year 3000, Fry takes a trip with his colleagues to “Monument Beach”, literally a collection of the world's most famous monuments. Out of nowhere, huge flying saucers with cat ear-like spikes appear in the sky and destroy the monuments with energy beams. After barely escaping the alien onslaught, the Planet Express crew (consisting of Fry, Leela and Bender the robot) are drafted to fight the alien spaceships and, in an appropriation of a *Star Wars*'s battle scene, manage to destroy what is taken to be the mothership, only to find out that it was actually the Hubble Space Telescope. Following this first battle, Zapp Brannigan kidnaps and hands over the president, which prompts the aliens to specify their demand to see the end of the interrupted “Single Female Lawyer” episode. Consequently, Fry and the crew film a new episode, with Fry writing the script and directing. In the end, the aliens are appeased and leave earth devastated and in ruins. While this short summary indeed covers the whole plot of the show, it does not do justice to the intricacies of its construction.

As can be seen, the plot follows ‘classical’ disaster film narratives such as that of *Independence Day*, up until the moment at which the aliens' reason for invasion is uncovered by the characters. While this turning point marks the most salient deconstruction of the ‘mainstream’ plot, there are many more instances of defamiliarisation effects, which all facilitate the re-purposing process. In the following, I want to show how the episode turns its adapted framework into a counter-narrative of the heroic.

Already with the exposition, the aliens are humanised as a bickering couple. This effectively subverts what Susan Sontag, in her essay “The Imagination of Disaster”, calls “the undeniable pleasure we derive from looking at freaks, at beings excluded from the category of the human” (Sontag 45). Science fiction disaster films (similar in this way to horror films), she argues, offer us moral simplification and wishful thinking, exactly because “[i]n the figure of the monster from outer space, the freakish, the ugly, and the predatory all converge - and provide a fantasy target for righteous bellicosity to discharge itself, and for the aesthetic enjoyment of suffering and disaster” (ibid.). The hero within such a frame of reference is morally superior, simply for being human. But not only that, the hero is also immune to the threat of dehumanisation which the aliens pose (cf. Sontag 47-48), and is thus diametrically opposed. In *Futurama*, we see the opposite: the aliens are strongly humanised and in some ways kindred to the supposed hero, Fry. They are united in their television fandom and the way their life centres around TV; a fact that is emphasised not only in the beginning, but also in the end of the episode, when the aliens retreat “to catch the end of a thousand-year-old Leno monologue” (20:21) while Fry sits back on the couch to watch TV (21:31). The motif of (television) fandom as well as a lack of interest in a ‘real’ world outside of television runs through the episode and arguably the whole show. Therefore, the television news anchor Linda also shows no signs of distress as she announces the threat of an alien invasion just as casually as the lottery results (07:20-07:32).

Following the interlude of the Planet Express crew spending their day frolicking at the seaside, the catastrophe erupts with the appearance of the Omicronian spaceships at Monument Beach. The sheer arbitrariness of such a place and the visual displacement of the famous scene of the destruction of the White House in *Independence Day* create a forceful defamiliarisation effect. Juxtaposed with other images of deceit, such as the “professional beach bully”, who offers to let himself be beaten up to make his ‘customer’ look good in front of a woman (05:16-05:25),<sup>9</sup>



the whole scene is presented as entirely artificial and ludicrous. Not only do the aliens conveniently descend upon the collective site of all the world's monuments, they do so using a special "anti-monument laser", as is revealed later on (08:00). To drive the point home, a tiny spaceship destroys Fry's sandcastle, prompting him to scream out in despair (06:56), mimicking the final scene of *Planet of the Apes* (1968). Here, *Futurama* presents the catastrophe of an alien invasion as a convenient, artificial trope in the (abstract) master narrative of an exterior threat to society and the corresponding heroisms.

Consequently, potential heroes are presented next, beginning with military man Zapp Brannigan, who is introduced by President McNeal on television: "And now, the man who will lead us in our proud struggle for freedom, fresh from his bloody triumph over the pacifists of the Gandhi Nebula: 25-star general Zapp Brannigan!" (08:17-08:28). Posing in front of a section of the American flag, Brannigan delivers a pompous speech, calling all spaceships to arms and advising everybody else to "secure a weapon and fire wildly into the air" (08:50-08:54). Even for viewers who have not seen earlier episodes with the inept and cowardly Zapp Brannigan, this inconsistent and contradictory entrance distinctly marks Brannigan as a fraud. In Bröckling's typology, he lacks agency and any readiness to make sacrifices. Accordingly, the worship he enjoys is revealed as having been obtained dishonestly and by deceit, which will become clearer following the next section. It is important to note here that the episode again uses heroic imagery from the catastrophe master narrative and estranges and repurposes them. The patriotic speech in front of the American flag is turned into a narcissistic, self-adulating farce, thus emphasising its artificiality and trope-like character, which the audience can recognise immediately. Patriotism as a heroic value is further voided as Brannigan uses a remote control to activate all robots' "patriotism circuits" (09:09), essentially reducing it to a commodity, to be controlled by the powerful and dominant.<sup>10</sup>

Following the initial call to arms, the episode delivers a string of disaster and war film motifs, which reiterate the artificiality of such plot devices. Firstly, Zapp Brannigan attempts to teach the new recruits discipline by having them make their beds over and over again. Next, he explains his battle plan which is, in his own words "so simple, an idiot could have devised it" (10:34-10:36). Showing him pacing up and down in front of a holographic board, the scene is a visual quote from *Star Wars* but also a widely recognisable and often used motif of disaster and war films. Again, this is defamiliarised through the way Brannigan delivers his plan:

The alien mothership is in orbit here. If we can hit that bullseye, the rest of the dominoes will fall like a house of cards. Check-mate. [...] On my command, all ships will line up and file directly into the alien death cannons, clogging them with wreckage. (10:22-10:43)

His moronic logic thereby points to the oversimplification of strategies in disaster films, and his bumbling use of idioms highlights the trite and formulaic language of similar scenes, revealing such motifs to be mere devices.

With the ensuing battle scene, Fry as the other potential hero comes to the fore.<sup>11</sup> While the dramatic music and the panning shot of the Planet Express spaceship (surrounded by the whole earth fleet) directly quote the famous Death Star fight scene in *Star Wars*, the old-fashioned and nostalgic style of the spaceships (with portholes and suction cups) already create incongruity. The fact that Fry is shown wearing a helmet similar to the star fleet ones in *Star Wars* enhances this effect of defamiliarisation. By essentially identifying Fry with Luke Skywalker, the famous heroic model is displaced and therefore exposed to scrutiny. Just like in the episode, the rebels in *Star Wars* are also threatened with complete annihilation. Only Luke Skywalker, as the 'chosen one', has the ability to thread the needle and hit the decisive shot which destroys the Death Star. In contrast, Fry is not even aware of the gravity of their situation, opting instead for playing out his adolescent fantasies: "I'm gonna be a science fiction hero, just like Uhura, or Captain Janeway, or Xena!" (11:22-11:26). With blurring the distinction between television and reality, *Futurama* reinforces a meta-fictional perspective which has Fry mirroring the audience's reaction to what they see. Thus, Fry takes the position of a 'bistable figure', oscillating between agent and audience, hero and fan. By these means, the show emphasises the appeal of such adolescent wish fulfilment through heroic models, while making the audience aware of their complicity in the process of making a hero. The overt replacement of the actual character in the role of the hero (Fry instead of Skywalker) points to the artificial construction of heroisations and heroisms, which relies on the audience's knowledge and acceptance of narrative conventions. Since Fry takes the role of Luke Skywalker in this adaptation sequence of *Star Wars*, the heroic model of the chosen one is superimposed onto him. The audience's expectations that come with this identification, however, are utterly frustrated. Although Fry does hit and destroy a spacecraft, it turns out to be the Hubble Space Telescope and the aliens' mothership remains intact.

Here, then, is the turning point of the whole episode, as the people of earth find out that the aliens actually want to watch a television show. The entire battle, the lost lives and the heroic pathos of Zapp Brannigan were all unnecessary. Instead, it is actually Fry's not-so-special 'gift' which enables him to end the catastrophe: his knowledge of twentieth-century television and its conventions. In this scene, then, the counter-narrative is boiled down to its essence. As Leela is forced to improvise during the live broadcast, the plan almost fails because she breaks character with a clever twist in that she declares her desire to stop being a "single female lawyer". Fry therefore has to explain to her the crux: "[T]hat's *not* why people watch TV. Clever things make people feel stupid, and unexpected things make them feel scared. [...] TV audiences don't want anything original. They wanna see the same thing they've seen a thousand times before" (18:44-19:08). Confronted with this insulting statement, the audience is forced to become aware of their own position. As unquestioning spectators, we are presented with artificial narratives which only perpetuate their own existence with no merit or innovation. Thus, there is no original of the heroic, but only a series of copies of copies within popular culture. With this meta-fictional climax, *Futurama* realises its repurposing of the catastrophe narrative. The heroic in catastrophes has been reinterpreted as just another narrative device, a strategy of storytelling. In fact, the whole force field of the heroic is deflated, since it comes down to the simple continuation of a cultural product, in this case a television show. Thus, the counter-narrative portrays the heroic as a cultural myth, perpetuated through the texts it adopts and repurposes. By extension, catastrophes as catalysts of the heroic are accordingly taken to be tropes. In the case of *Futurama*, the counter-narrative offers no replacement and the catharsis amounts to a liberation from the master narrative of the hero as saviour. In fact, Fry's act of saving earth from destruction has lost all connection to the heroic, since it is neither transgressive nor does it sacrifice anything; it is neither noble nor recognised as a heroic act and therefore also has no reason to be worthy of worship. Even the fact that he was actually the cause of the alien invasion is entirely without consequence. In the very end, slipping back into obscurity, Fry sits back on the couch in front of his television to explain that "[i]t was just a matter of knowing the secret of all TV shows: At the end of the episode, everything's always right back to normal" (20:44-20:51). While the camera zooms out it discovers the city of New New York entirely destroyed and in flames. Thus, in a last twist, the episode underscores the

simplification of heroic narratives as they pertain to catastrophes. It points out that such dominant narratives gloss over actual dangers in favour of a reiteration of societal myths of heroism.

### 3. *Futurama* – "A Big Piece of Garbage"<sup>12</sup>

A second, early episode of *Futurama*, "A Big Piece of Garbage", centres on another staple of science fiction disasters, namely the threat of an asteroid destroying earth (or parts of it). The episode begins with Professor Farnsworth inviting his whole crew to a scientific symposium to present his latest inventions. At the symposium he is ridiculed and shamed for being senile and for inventing useless machines. He soon discovers that he had already built one of his ad-hoc ideas from the symposium, the 'smell-o-scope' at an earlier time. Fry uses the device to smell distant smells in space and accidentally detects a fast moving object with a horrible stench headed right for New New York. After the crew finds a video on the internet which reveals the object to be a giant ball of garbage, sent into space by the city of New York a thousand years earlier, they inform the mayor of the imminent threat. A plan is formed to have the Planet Express crew try and destroy the garbage ball with a bomb the Professor builds. The bomb's timer, however, is installed backwards, forcing the crew to abort the mission to save their own lives. Back on earth, Professor Farnsworth and Fry propose to shoot a second ball of garbage into space, knocking the first one out of its trajectory and into the sun. For this to work, Fry teaches the inhabitants of New New York to produce garbage, instead of recycling everything. Eventually, the plan works and New New York is saved from destruction, leaving only Leela to wonder what will happen with the second garbage ball, while everybody else celebrates Fry and the Professor as heroes. With this summary it may already be apparent in how far the episode deviates from the plot of its main source for adaptation, the 1998 blockbuster *Armageddon*.<sup>13</sup> In comparison to the episode above, however, the counter-narrative of the heroic is developed more subtly.

As is typical for *Futurama*, the episode begins with a long exposition which seems to have little to do with the central events of the story. We are presented with a focus on Professor Farnsworth and his seemingly petty squabble with another scientist. Farnsworth is portrayed as senile, forgetful and thin-skinned, yet clinging to the notion of a more glorious past as a successful inventor and teacher. Thus, from the very beginning he



is marked as a non-heroic character, especially because he also shows a severe disregard for other people throughout the episode. At the very beginning, for example, he tells his crew that he does not send them on a dangerous mission that day, “[b]ecause tonight’s a special night and I want all of you to be alive” (00:10-00:14). Such ruthless exploitation of the relationship of dependency between him and his employees is a running gag throughout the series. In fact, often times Professor Farnsworth is cast as a Faustian character and as such he is characterised by a categorical difference to the morally regulated deviance of a hero, i.e. he is an opportunist. What is most important, however, is that all his possible heroic agency is constantly deferred. While Farnsworth supplies the opportunities for heroism with his inventions and his scientific research, it is always other characters who answer the call to heroic action or are drawn into the force field of the heroic. His depiction is, therefore, in stark contrast to what Susan Sontag calls the “scientist-hero” of science fiction disaster films (Sontag 43). In *Independence Day*, for example, the scientist portrayed by Jeff Goldblum is the one to discover the alien countdown and has to fight to be heard by the president, before heroically volunteering to disable the mothership in a suicide-mission. Returning to the specific episode, it is not him but Fry who smells the approaching garbage asteroid, and it is Leela who realises that it is in fact moving. Later on, the professor sends his crew on the “suicidally dangerous” (12:41) mission to place a bomb on the garbage ball instead of going himself, and, in the end, it is Fry who launches the rocket with the second garbage ball, when Farnsworth gets confused with the countdown. The fact that he builds a defective bomb and thus ruins their apparently only chance of survival further disqualifies him as a hero. His glorification and heroisation in the end is therefore saliently incongruous.

Since the plot focussing on Professor Farnsworth is entirely without connection to the original plot of *Armageddon*, it can be seen as a frame which adds more generic elements, widening the scope of criticism while enhancing the effect of the counter-narrative. The most faithful part of the adaptation centres around some of the more visually compelling scenes of the original film, which are re-ordered and pieced together to capture the sensationalism and to reveal the workings of the master narrative of heroism. Most notably, these scenes include the approach of the asteroid with its cloud of dust (15:13), the rocky descent of the shuttle on the asteroid (13:28-13:29) and asteroid debris raining down upon the city, destroying cars and buildings (17:15-17:21). Just like in the first

episode studied, in “A Big Piece of Garbage” these scenes are all repurposed to diminish or even belittle the actual threat and to challenge their heroic potential. First and foremost, the asteroid from *Armageddon* becomes a giant ball of garbage, which not only transforms the almost sublime, celestial menace into a prophane, man-made misdeed come back to haunt them,<sup>14</sup> but also subverts the threat of extinction. Its discovery with the ‘smell-o-scope’ already ridicules the scientific earnestness of *Armageddon*, marking it as self-importance. Furthermore, the garbage ball only threatens the city of New New York, which is blatantly emphasised several times. The news anchors Morbo and Linda make fun of this fact, calling the pending disaster “lighter news” and saying that they are “glad [they] live [...] in Los Angeles” (12:05-12:07). In addition, a holographic simulation of the impact, in an appropriation of a similar scene from the film, represents the garbage ball hitting the city like a smudge on the globe, even adding a “splat” sound (08:24). In this way, the episode rejects the hubris of having a major recognizable city as the setting of global disasters and simultaneously undercuts the effect of universal significance and gravity which such narratives purport. New New York is no longer the symbol of the free world, but simply an unfortunate city with no particular significance, just like its saviours lose their lustre. Similarly, pieces of garbage raining down on the city like asteroid debris highlights the gimmickry and cheap sensationalism of disaster films, as, for example, a discarded burger tears a massive hole in a skyscraper (17:17). In the same vein, the scope of the force field of the heroic is drastically limited, as the city is essentially threatened by its own hubris and carelessness, with no ramifications for the rest of the world. The mission for the Planet Express crew, i.e. Fry, Leela and Bender, is therefore also far from “suicidally dangerous”. While they are dressed in very similar spacesuits and filmed in the same frontal slow motion shot as the crew in *Armageddon* (13:13), likening them to the heroes who selflessly save earth from the asteroid, they do not undertake the mission for reasons of heroic patriotism, but simply because their boss, Professor Farnsworth, sends them. Additionally, their journey to the garbage ball is nothing more than an everyday space delivery. While their flight gets rocky on approaching the garbage ball, it is apparently because of the stench, which increases in seemingly measurable “magnitude” and can be countered with an “anti-smell device” (13:28-13:29) of which we only hear a sound like that of someone applying deodorant. With this, the episode once again effectively undercuts the danger for the potential heroes, who go on to

stroll around on the surface of the garbage ball. When it comes to deploying the bomb, the three realise that the timer is set to a few seconds and throw the bomb to each other in an attempt to get rid of it. In contrast to what the audience would expect from the evoked heroic concept, neither offers to sacrifice themselves, so that Bender eventually throws the bomb up in the air where it detonates without effect. Upon their return, the people in the streets of New New York readily hold up banners, reading “Welcome Home Heroes” with the word “Losers” replacing the crossed-out “Heroes” (15:46). In this act they are used to mirror the audience and its frustrated expectations, self-consciously highlighting the artificiality of the ‘standard’ heroic concept. The counter-narrative finds its culmination in the eventual solution to send a second ball of garbage at the first one. Firstly, it renders the earlier mission entirely pointless, voiding the whole heroic potential of the master narrative of disaster. Secondly, Fry and the Professor deliver salvation, but, in doing so, show a lack of foresight and caution, thus betraying the same flaws that initially caused the disaster. More specifically, Fry is lauded for his “twentieth-century garbage-making skills” while the Professor receives the inventor symposium’s “Academy prize, which [they] confiscated from Dr. Wernstrom [his nemesis, author’s note] after it became apparent that he was a jackass” (20:24-20:28). This seemingly arbitrary act of heroisation once again highlights the artificiality of the evoked heroic narrative, since the meaning of the prize is deferred twofold, both for its inappropriate allocation and the questionable feat. Hence, this heroisation points to its own meaninglessness and consequently challenges the meaning of the heroic master narrative. In this way, the episode lastly undercuts the genre-typical catharsis, as the heroes merely delayed the next catastrophe and brought littering as the ‘boon’ to society. Instead, the ending resumes the plot from the exposition, rendering the threat of catastrophe and its prevention meaningless and without consequences.

## Conclusions

In the foregoing paper I have attempted to show how *Futurama*, as an example of animated television shows, repurposes catastrophes as tropes of heroic narratives. Instead of catalysts for a heroic force field, the catastrophes become playgrounds for a deconstruction of heroic models from adapted texts. The counter-narratives in *Futurama* deflate the heroic force field by revealing the artificiality of the disaster trope as it

is portrayed in pop culture. The catastrophe is minimised both in terms of the threat it poses as well as the counter-measures of earth’s population. To achieve this, the episodes appropriate a series of intertexts as an adaptation collage, which are defamiliarised to undermine the central ‘heroic values’ they claim. This is done by using familiar plot structures, visual tropes and iconic scenes of specific popular culture texts, such as *Armageddon* or *Star Wars*, and juxtaposing them with parodies of genre conventions, such as varieties of the scientist character. The show therefore highlights the artificiality and formulaic nature of heroic narratives, especially as they deal with catastrophes. Its usage of fandom language mirrors the audience’s involvement in the making of heroes, and the show forces the audience to be aware of its own complicity. Consequently, it creates counter-narratives that represent the heroic as an artificial device, employed to perpetuate certain value systems, rejecting a heroic saviour in the face of a major catastrophe.

While I have focussed solely on examples from *Futurama*, such counter-narratives of the heroic can be found in many different animated television shows, ranging from *The Simpsons* (1989–date) through *American Dad* (2005–date) to *Rick and Morty* (2013–date), to name just a few. These shows adapt and repurpose narratives of the heroic (mostly from pop culture) in analogous ways, while drawing in and integrating the audience through fandom practices and fandom language.

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1 The shows I investigate are mostly hosted on or produced for Adult Swim, a sub-block of programming on Cartoon Network, which aims primarily at young adults above the usual target age of CN. It is safe to say that the target audience is also assumed to be strongly socialised within what Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture. For an analysis of Adult Swim’s audience and general style, see for example the insightful MA thesis of Grayson T. Nowak.

2 See Elisavet Ioannidou’s article (2013), in which she spells out such a media convergence for the case of film adaptations of superhero comics. Following her example, I intend to use Henry Jenkins’ theory to approach adaptation from the perspective of convergence culture.

3 German original: “eine menschliche Person [...], der heroische Eigenschaften zugeschrieben werden, und zwar insbesondere agonale, außeralltägliche, oftmals transgressive eigene Leistungen.”

4 German original: “Moralisch regulierte Abweichung”, “Ehre, Verehrung”, “Agency”, and “Opferbereitschaft”. Bröckling adds that these dimensions are by no means unchangeable and that in some cases it may well be fruitful to separate them or add others (ibid. 12).

- 5 German original: "Kraftfeld des Heroischen" (ibid. 9) or "heroisches Kraftfeld" (ibid. 10).
- 6 Thus, for example: Hutcheon 9.
- 7 See for example Emig.
- 8 Season 1, Episode 12 of the original production order, first aired on FOX on 7 November 1999.
- 9 This scene itself is another example of how *Futurama* re-purposes common motifs of heroism. Not only is the bully professionalised, thus effectively negating the heroic potential of standing up to him, but Fry also refuses the 'call to heroic action' because the price (50 dollars) is too high. Turning the whole David and Goliath metaphor into a business therefore exposes the commodification of heroism in popular culture.
- 10 The motif is repeated in the very next scene, when Brannigan's rallying speech fails in front of the troops and he has to use the remote control again to bring them into line.
- 11 Although Leela and Bender also participate in the fight and the later making of the television show, they are both excluded from heroic claims from the very beginning. As a robot and a female, one-eyed alien, the two are entirely othered and always kept at the margins of the heroic force field, which also has an effect on their screen time and especially the agency they are granted. Therefore and for reasons of brevity, I choose to focus on Fry and leave out an analysis of the two.
- 12 Season 1, Episode 8 of the original production order, first aired on FOX on 11 May 1999.
- 13 The title itself, "A Big Piece of Garbage", may even be interpreted as an indictment of the film.
- 14 In fact, this alteration of the film's plot is essential to the episode's criticism, as it incorporates environmental issues and points to the potential ideological subtext of *Armageddon*, in which an oil company crew, who at the beginning mock and harass environmentalist protesters, save the earth from destruction. While this aspect may actually be more salient than the counter-narrative of the heroic, it exceeds the scope of this article and will therefore not be developed.

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