"Shut up and take my money!": Exposing the Realities of Hyper-Consumerism and Consumption Through Parody in the World of *Futurama*

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Introduction:

In recent years, animated comedies like *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *Futurama* have gained a reputation for bringing to adult audiences cartoons with darker absurdist comedy and sharply-critical parody that points up, mocks, and comments on popular culture and current events. After twenty-five seasons on television and cultivating an enormous fan following, *The Simpsons* has become the subject of academic study in articles, books, and entire college courses. Yet the academic community has largely ignored *Futurama*[1], despite the fact that it is by the same creator, Matt Groening, ran for seven seasons, and, like The Simpsons, uses a mix of absurdist, referential, and parodic comedy to comment on society. One might speculate that this lack of academic interest stems from *Futurama*'s status as a science fiction show that often relies heavily on knowledge of science fiction tropes and history in order to understand and appreciate its humor.

However, the science fiction settings and trappings ultimately do not erase the more recognizable and current popular culture references that make the show such an effective parody of consumerism and consumption in contemporary America. *Futurama* has become a fan favorite, and an iconic fixture in popular culture, popular for its humor, and for its ability to both participate in and critique the consumerist trends it parodies. This dual position is perhaps best illustrated by the episode "Attack of the Killer App." While the episode powerfully critiques the counterintuitive and nonsensical obsession with the Apple iPhone, it has also ironically become the anthem of a whole generation of consumers. These consumers seem to take uncritical pleasure in echoing the words of main character Philip J. Fry without fully appreciating that his call to "shut up and take my money!" is intended to critique the very attitude of willful excess these consumers enact. This is, however, only one instance of the show's ability to address issues of consumerism/consumption through humor and parody. In this chapter, I attempt to delineate a few of these instances in which *Futurama* employs parody to critique different kinds of consumption and their effects on American society[2]. By beginning with a discussion of the role of parody, I hope to clarify the value of Futurama's parodic role. I

[1] The few serious exceptions to this seem to be the articles by Lincoln Geraghty and Lorna Piatti-Farnell referenced in this chapter, and an article by Steve Bailey, "Virtuality and the Television Audience: The Case of *Futurama*" (*The Communication Review*, 2002).

[2] While some aspects of *Futurama* can be applied globally, the writers of the show have generally (and rightly) focused on American culture as the show is set primarily in New New York and the show's target audience is American.

then move on outline the way consumers' relationships with food in Futurama typifies the connection between consumption and consumer fantasies. From there I draw out a satirical comparison of cannibalism and the capitalist drive to commodify. Finally, I end by discussing the complex processes of identity construction through the consumption of goods, and particularly through attitudes of brand loyalty, which is exemplified in the episode "Attack of the Killer App."

Futurama, Science Fiction, and the Role of Parody:

In his article "'Welcome to the World of Tomorrow!': Animating Science Fictions of the Past and Present in *Futurama*," Lincoln Geraghty argues that *Futurama* uses science fiction settings and motifs in order to "provide a fresh perspective on the here and now" (150). In order to appreciate this fresh perspective, some knowledge of science fiction motifs is therefore necessary. Some of the most common and recognizable motifs appear in the first episode and basic premise of the show, which follows the misadventures of Philip J. Fry, an inept New York City pizza delivery boy from the late twentieth-century who unwittingly becomes cryogenically frozen and awakens in the thirty-first century. Cryogenics and time travel/displacement are enormously popular motifs in science fiction, and allow for a certain amount of familiarity in the first episode as the show sets up its premise and principle characters. *Futurama* also employs recognizable images and motifs common in the more optimistic science fictions of the 1960s[3] (as well as the scientific utopianism of the 1930s-1960s international expositions).

Having found himself in this retro-futuristic setting, Fry joins a group of misfits who work for an interplanetary delivery company: Planet Express. This company is owned by Professor Farnsworth (who is, in fact, Fry's great-great-ad-infinitum nephew), and also includes the Cyclops (and main love interest) Leela, the sharp-tongued robot Bender, humans Amy Wong and Hermes Conrad, and the lobster-like alien Dr. Zoidberg. Fry, Bender, and Leela form the core of the show, and throughout the series they have numerous adventures, find themselves constantly in trouble, and live through experiences that mimic and parody some of the most iconic images and concepts within the science fiction megatext[4].

Geraghty focuses on *Futurama's* use of this megatext and its place within science fiction as a whole. He demonstrates the ways the show "creates and contributes the lineage and development" (151) of the genre, through the strategy of "parodic reversion, where familiar elements are redrawn and reinvented for a contemporary audience predisposed to

[3] Perhaps two of the best examples of the optimistic science fiction of the 1960s are *The Jetsons* and *Star Trek: The Original Series*.

[4] The enormous collection of backgrounds, tropes, motifs, images, conventions etc that inform and enrich the science fiction genre as a whole.

multichannel, multitext television" (150). In arguing that parody is an important element for both reinvigorating and reaffirming a genre, Geraghty echoes theorist Boris Eichenbaum who states: "in the evolution of each genre, there are times when its use for entirely serious or elevated objectives degenerates and produces a comic or parodic form… And thus is produced the regeneration of the genre: it finds new possibilities and new forms" (qtd in Bradbury 53).

Genre construction and revitalization is not, however, the sole role of parody. While some definitions claim that parody is mimicry for humorous affect without necessarily being critical, some would argue that critique is an inherent element of the parody. Simon Dentith, for instance, defines parody as "any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice" (9). Likewise, Mary Louise Pratt equates parody not only with humor but also with resistance - a critical or contestatory act (pg #?). In the case of *Futurama*, at least, this holds true. Not only does the show parody an enormous variety of science fiction motifs, but it also pointedly critiques many elements of society. According to Lorna Piatti-Farnell, Futurama's creator Matt Greoning gives "a keen critical eye to discussions of mass commodification, consumerism, and the impact of television, advertising, and technology of globalized societies" (329). As one example, throughout *Futurama* there are a number of fictionalized television shows such as All My Circuits and Hypno-Toad, as well as advertisements for such products as Molten Boron, Arachno Spores, Thompson's Teeth, Glagnor Human Rinds, and Torgo's Executive Powder. Where Geraghty views these moments primarily as acknowledgements of the "format and processes of television broadcasting" and contemporary media's "hyper-intertextuality" (Geraghy 152), Piatti-Farnell is far more interested in the way these instances parody/critique the concepts of consumerism and media consumption.

<u>Food and the Consumer Fantasy:</u>

Consumption appears throughout *Futurama* in all its forms, from food consumption and consumption (or use) of commodities, to the consumption (or absorption) of cultural attitudes/concepts through goods and media. These many forms all eventually become the target of parody and critique, but food consumption is a useful place to begin, as demonstrated by Piatti-Farnell. In "Slurm, Popplers, and Human Rinds: Food, Consumerism, and Popular Trends in Matt Groening's *Futurama*," Piatti-Farnell analyzes instances of literal food consumption ad media trends related to food, arguing that Futurama

> constructs a satirical connection with systems of food production and distributions [and] also gestures towards offering a critique of the current state of consumer politics in Western societies, which promote normality for common eating habits (331).

While Piatti-Farnell focuses specifically on the representations of food, with a particularly effective look at the popularity of celebrity chefs (parodied in Futurama by Chef Elzar who owns a fine dining restaurant and also runs a cooking television show), I wish to look at issues of problematic food consumption and the consumer fantasies that reinforce and even necessitate this consumption.

Examples of problematic food consumption abound in *Futurama*, but the two most salient examples occur in two episodes: "Fry and the Slurm Factory," and "The Problem with Popplers." In "Fry and the Slurm Factory," Fry, and Bender win a trip to visit the famous factory, where their favorite beverage, Slurm, is made. The drink Slurm is a stand-in for highly addictive soft drinks such as Coca Cola or Mountain Dew and also, as Piatti-Farnell demonstrates, Bud Light beer. The connection to beer is made apparent through the mascot of Slurm: Slurms McKenzie who is a clear reference to Spuds McKenzie, the dog mascot of Bud Light in the 1980s-90s (Piatti-Farnell 334). Several layers of referential humor, parody, and critique occur in this episode. The Slurm Factory and Fry and Bender's experience of touring the factory are lifted straight out of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*[5]. Simultaneously, Slurms McKenzie, who is called "The Original Party Worm," and who must party every single night or be fired, is most likely a parody of the partying lifestyle emphasized and promised by the Bud Light Beer advertisements (Piatti-Farnell 334).

Both of these layers function to highlight the inherent fantasy fulfillment of consumerism and consumption. In *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Colin Campbell argues, "many of the products offered for sale in modern societies are in fact consumed because they serve as aids to the construction of day-dreams" (92). Grant McCracken expands on this idea in *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*[6]. He states that in many cases cultural meaning is displaced, "removed from the daily life of a community and relocated in a distant cultural domain" (104). These displaced meanings cultivate the hopes and ideals of a society, which are protected from corruption and justified or proven by the fact of their displacement: e.g., contemporary ideals of family are protected and justified by gesturing to an imagined (but presumed real) past in which these ideals were exemplified or originated (McCracken *Culture* xv). But if a cultural meaning is displaced, it becomes more difficult for the contemporary society to access it. This, then, is the purpose of many (perhaps all) consumer goods. According to McCracken:

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[5] I have said *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, rather than *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, because the episode more accurately parodies the visuals and musical numbers of the 1971 film starring Gene Wilder, rather than the original novel by Roald Dahl.

[6] While Grant McCracken's book may be somewhere dated, having been originally published in 1988, and republished in 1991, it still remains an extremely useful and thorough examination of the theories, affective systems, and symbolic value around the consumption of commodities.

> Consumer goods are bridges to these hopes and ideals. We use them to recover this displaced cultural meaning, to cultivate what is otherwise beyond our grasp. In this capacity, consumer goods are also a way of perpetually renewing our consumer expectations. The dark side of this aspect of consumption is that it helps to enlarge our consumer appetites so that we can never reach a 'sufficiency' of goods and declare 'I have enough'. (104)

This approach to consumerism makes it increasingly apparent that such consumer goods (and their consumption) function as Derridean traces. The trace can be called the presence of absence, such that it is "not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace" (Derrida *Writing and Difference* 403). In some ways the trace is the fact of effacement, of disappearance. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida states

> the trace is not only the disappearance of origin – within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin. (61)

Thus, the trace points toward an origin that does not actually exist except as it is referred to by the trace itself, and which makes itself present by its absence.

Both the Willa Wonka-esque quality of the Slurm Factory, and the neverending-party lifestyle that Slurms McKenzie is forced to inhabit highlight the non-existent fantasy inherent in such displacement. The bright colors, singing workers, and carnivalesque theme park image of the factory are created to call up childhood innocence, joy, and wish fulfillment. And Slurms McKenzie, in true Bud Light Beer fashion, demonstrates the promise that consuming Slurm will lead to a wild life filled with music, dancing, and beautiful, willing women. These fantasies are tied intrinsically to the identity construction of individuals who consume both the image and product of Slurm, becoming an integral part of their desires and perceptions of self[7]. Rather than desire and demand leading to the creation and distribution of a product, the product itself creates the desire for the product. The product creates its own demand, just as a Derridean trace creates its own imagined origin. And because the displaced meaning, like the trace, is never truly accessible and, as McCracken states, the desire is never fulfilled, the only thing the consumer can do is continue to drink Slurm, mindlessly and desperately as Fry does.

And yet, as easily as it constructs the consumer fantasy, "Fry and the Slurm Factory" tears it down. Fry, Leela, and Bender discover to their horror that the beautiful Slurm Factory where happy Oompa Loompa-like workers make the beverage from berries and spring water is

[7] As Jodi Dean states, "Communicative capitalism's circuits of entertainment and consumption supply the ever new experiences and accessoring we use to perform this self-fashioning. […] Neoliberal subjects are expected to, enjoined to, have a good time, have it all, be happy, fit, and fulfilled" (67).

in fact an illusion, hiding the real factory: a giant queen worm whose digestive waste is the only real ingredient of Slurm. This ruined fantasy is followed by the destruction of the fun-loving partying ideal embodied by Slurms McKenzie. Slurms, who has been partying nonstop for forty years, is exhausted and desperate to be free, kills himself at the end of the episode, by partying so hard in a tunnel that it caves in and crushes him. Piatti-Farnell calls Slurms' death the "result of his inability to cope with the weight of consumerist expectations" (335) – an apt pun for the fact that Slurms is literally crushed to death by the consequences of his partying – and claims that it "could signal a possible displacement of material reality by the consumerist chimera of marketed needs. As 'the party worm' dies so does the consumer philosophy that he embodied" (335). Yet this is complicated, as many consumerist critiques are in *Futurama*, by Fry and Bender. Having seen Slurms McKenzie literally die from partying, and discovering that the Slurm drink is made of alien waste, Fry and Bender do the exact opposite of what might be expected: they lie to cover up the truth about Slurm so that will not be banned and they can continue to drink it, and then they have an enormous wild party in honor of Slurms, who would probably not have appreciated the gesture. Furthermore, throughout the series, despite the excessive, reckless, and frankly crazy things Fry and Bender do in pursuit of their consumerist fantasies, they never suffer an long term consequences. This episode, while exposing the problematic reality of the consumerist fantasy and its dangers, also demonstrates the willful blindness of the average consumer who continues in their consumption patterns even in the face of those dangers. Fry and Bender, and by extension contemporary Western society as a whole, is so wholly defined by their need to consume, by their consumerist desires, that they are quite literally incapable of stopping.

<u>Capitalism as Cannibalism:</u>

While the "conceptual connection between the world of food and the capitalist enterprise" (Piatti-Farnell 332), portrayed in "Fry and the Slurm Factory" is an important element of *Futurama*'s overall critique of consumption, single throw-away gag in the episode begins to expose another aspect: the commodification and consumption of people – which implies that capitalistic structures have cannibalistic tendencies. This gag occurs during a pause in the main conflict of "Fry and the Slurm Factory" when Fry, Leela, and Bender try to guess what the "secret ingredient" of Slurm might be. They have the following brief exchange, made possible by Fry's position as an outsider (having come from the past) and the lens through with the television audience views the show:

> Fry: "My God, what if the secret ingredient is people!"
> Leela: "No, there's already a soda like that. Soylent Cola."
> Fry: "Oh. How is it?"
> Leela: "It varies from person to person."

This is a fairly straightforward joke in some respects. It references the well-known science fiction film *Soylent Green*, released in 1973 and starring Charlton Heston, in which the people of a dystopian society discover that the processed food the poor have been fed is made from euthanized human corpses[8]. It also makes a joke of the concept of cannibalism, which Piatti-Farnell mentions in passing, stating that *Futurama* "displaces the traditional threat of cannibalism in westernized narratives, as it appears in texts such Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* [and] Thomas Harris' *The Silence of the Lambs*" (332). Instead, the show shifts the concept of cannibalism from a "fear-inducing icon of the unknown to an everyday, accepted form of social and culinary integration" (Piatti-Farnell 332). The show further transforms the joke of cannibalism in the episode that follows "Fry and the Slurm Factory" by opening with a fictionalized advertisement for Glagnar's Human Rinds (instead of pork rinds), a supposed sponsor of the show[9]. However, to focus only on the way this joke flip issues of cannibalism and food consumption on their head means that we run the risk of taking the joke too literally and missing the prevalent concern that underlies it. And that is the current hyper-capitalistic systems have completely dehumanized certain groups of people so as to make them commodities to be consumed by corporations, media, and the general population.

One of the defining characteristics of neoliberalism and hyper-capitalism is the commodification of human labor, in which the globalized labor market, the weakening of unions, the depression of wages, and the interchangeability of workers has led to the dehumanization of the work force. Rather than being seen as people with lives and identities and agency, workers are viewed as interchangeable pieces in the enormous system of the world market, with no value outside their use as labor. They are consumables to be used and then discarded. Or, as Gilles Deleuze posits in "Postscript on the Societies of Control," people have become *dividuals*, codes that have meaning and value only within the context of the system or the market (5). This process is part of what Foucault calls bio-power: a system of power based not on the right to "*take* life or *let* live" (Foucault 136, emphasis in original) but rather on the literal control of bodies. According to Foucault, the individual is no longer the unit of control or power; instead power is exercised "at the level of life […] and the large-scale phenomena of the population" (137), and is achieved through numerous techniques and institutions such as the

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[8] The film *Soylent Green*, based upon the novel *Make Room! Make Room!* by Harry Harrison, gives science fiction one of its most recognizable and oft-parodied quotes: "Soylent Green is people!"

[9] Another useful instance of this is Torgo's Executive Powder, which was introduced in the format of product placement in the middle of the *Futurama* movie *Bender's Big Score*. Torgo's Executive Powder is made from the fired executives of Box Network (a not-so-subtle reference to Fox Network, who had canceled *Futurama* in 2003, which led to the show being picked up in 2008 by Comedy Central) who were beaten, killed, and ground into a fine pink powder. This powder has a myriad of uses, included but not limited to: food seasoning, surgery, delousing, cosmetics, and bomb disposal. The constant insertion of product placement ads for the powder in *Bender's Big Score*, and the endless list of possible uses, is reminiscent of the product Ubik in Philip K. Dick's novel of the same name, which demonstrated the pervasiveness and ubiquity of commercialism and advertising.

schools, police, military, and administrative bodies. This ability to control, regulate, measure, and hierarchize bodies and all aspects of life[10] is paramount to the development of capitalism. For, as Foucault states, capitalism is not possible without "the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" (141).

The reality of bio-power is evident throughout *Futurama*, exposed by moments that remain recognizable and compelling despite exaggeration to the point of absurdity. In "Fry and the Slurm Factory," Hermes Conrad (the resident bureaucrat of Planet Express) is impressed by the hard work of the Grunka Lunkas (the Oompa-Loompa-like workers of the Slurm Factory). The manager of the Slurm Factory proudly explains that the Grunka Lunkas are made to work long hours for a fraction of what they are worth, all while believing that they have a good union despite all the evidence to the contrary. This clearly demonstrates the ability of corporate and administrative powers to manage and manipulate the bodies and lives of large populations, which is made necessary by profit-obsessed capitalist desires of the factory owners.

In other episodes, we see children put to work in extracting salvageable metal from toxic junk on a planet called "Third World,"[11] and Robot Santa treating his Neptunian elves like slaves[12]. In both instances, the comment on exploitative labor practices is blatant. Furthermore, each instance highlights a different aspect of bio-power. The children of "Third World" are taught to play amongst the toxic waste and make a game of "finding the shiny," unaware that they are poisoning themselves, thus demonstrating the way the machinery of production relies upon populations that are both abundant and docile, "optimizing forces, attitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern" (Foucault 141). Not only are the children used as labor because they are an abundant, ever-growing, population, but because they can be made docile and ignorant of the conditions of their own lives, making them exceptionally easy to govern. On the other hand, the elves of Neptune who work for Robot Santa are perfectly aware of the horrible conditions they live with: work without pay, tenement housing, starvation, alcoholism, etc. Yet the Neptunians do nothing about these conditions, partially out of fear of Robot Santa who wields the kind of "right to kill" that Foucault associates with an older system of power, but also because they have been convinced that there are no other options. Their lives have been so regulated by what they believe to be the norm, that even when they are temporarily freed they can conceive of no other existence,

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[10] "The law cannot help but be armed, and its arm, par excellence, is death; to those who transgress it, it replies, at least as a last resort, with that absolute menace. The law always refers to the sword. But a power whose task is to take charge of life needs continuous regulatory and corrective mechanisms. It is no longer a matter of bringing death into play in the field of sovereignty, but of distributing the living in the domain of value and utility. Such a power to quality, measure, appraise, and hierarchize rather than display itself in its murderous splendor…" (Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol 1*., 144).

[11] From episode: "Attack of the Killer App"

[12] From episode: "A Tale of Two Santas"

and happily endure the exact same conditions to work for their liberators: Bender, Leela, and Fry.

While these examples serve to expose issues of bio-power and critique the commodification of labor, *Futurama* is capable of taking the parody much farther, and does so with wit and no small amount of glee. In an animated comedy with a penchant for dark (and occasionally gross-out) humor, it makes sense that the consumption of human labor would be transformed into the literal consumption of people. Having seen the horrors enacted on children and alien natives, it is not difficult to take the next step into literal cannibalism. Thus we are brought back to the jokes about Soylent Cola and Glagnar's Human Rinds. However, these two throw-away lines are only the beginning. The concept of consuming people can also be seen in the episode "Spanish Fry," when an alien species believes that the human nose (called "human horn") is an aphrodisiac, and the alien Lrrr of Omicron Persei 8 captures Fry and intends to harvest his human horn[13]. This episode expands the concept of turning human beings into consumables by opening it up to interests outside the corporate at the state; instead this commodification takes place on a smaller scale through poaching.

Perhaps the best example, however, of the conflation between food consumption and the commodifcation of people takes place in the episode "The Problem with Popplers" – an episode, interestingly enough, that like "Spanish Fry" is complicated by a commentary on animal rights[14]. In this episode, Leela, Fry, and Bender land on a seemingly uninhabited planet and find small a small edible non-sentient lifeform. Not only are they edible; in fact, they are shockingly delicious. As Fry states as he eats one: "They're like sex, except I'm having it!" The three decide to gather them, market them as the newest fast food craze (think chicken nuggets, or popcorn chicken), and call them Popplers. Popplers are not only delicious but highly addictive, and the Planet Express crew quickly build an enormous fast food market with them. As the business grows, a group called M.E.A.T. (Mankind for Ethical Animal Treatment) begins to protest, arguing, "you shouldn't eat things that feel pain." However, Fry, Leela, and Bender are unconcerned by this argument (after all, they eat all kinds of other animals), until Leela discovers, much to her horror, that the Popplers are in fact the larval state of the Omicronians. If they are not eaten quickly enough, the Popplers eventually grow, become sentient, and even speak. Lrrr of Omicron Persei 8 arrives and demands that they be allowed to eat a number of humans equal to the number of their young that had been eaten.

As with the case of Slurm, the non-rational relationship between consumers and addictive foods is highlighted. This is made obvious in the Poppler commercial jingle:

Pop a Poppler in your mouth, when you come to Fishy Joe's
What they're made of is a mystery; where they come from, no one knows

[13] This episode may also be read as a comment on the practice of killing rhinoceros for their horns.
[14] This dual focus on animal rights and commodification of human bodies is worth exploring more thoroughly in the future.

You can pick 'em, you can lick 'em, you can chew 'em, you can stick 'em
If you promise not to sue us, you can shove one up your nose.

The jingle freely admits that they do not know what the Popplers are, or where exactly they come from, but the mysterious nature of the food does nothing to hinder its popularity. And even when the general population discovers that the Popplers are essentially children, many humans do not care until Lrrr comes to retaliate. Just as Fry was so addicted to Slurm he did not care that it was alien waste, so too are the Popplers so addictive that the general population is not overly concerned about what they are. In addition, Piatti-Farnell, in her analysis of this episode, argues that it relates most strongly to the Mad Cow disease scare of the late 1990s, just before the episode was released in 2000. She draws parallels, specifically, with Oprah Winfrey's public announcement that she would "never eat a hamburger again" in the face of the unethical treatment of cattle (Piatti-Farnell 331). This announcement led to a sharp decrease in beef sales, which was countered when, a few months later, Oprah lost interest and the ethical debate was forgotten (Piatti-Farnell 331).

There is no doubt that "The Problem with Popplers" offers a clear parody of animal rights debates, particularly in terms of their fluctuating trendiness, and the consumerist attitudes that are hidden within them. But it is important to note that the eventual argument against Popplers centers on the claim that we should not eat *intelligent* animals, not just *any* animals. Furthermore, when Lrrr attempts to eat Leela in retaliation, one of the young Omicronians, newly saved from being eaten, convinced Lrrr that it is not right to eat any intelligent being, even in revenge. In this way, the larval Omicronians and the humans are equated with each other, and once again we return to the commodification and consumption (both literal and figurative) of human/sentient beings. And because the sentient beings in question here are aliens, it likewise introduces more clearly the kind of othering that is necessary for the commodification to take hold effectively.

In the article "Self and Other in SF: Alien Encounters," Carl D. Malmgren argues that alien encounter narratives rely on three different "degrees of alienity" (17), or othering that can be categorized as: Other-as-Self, Other-as-Enemy, and Other-as-Other. In the case of the Other-as-Self, there is the potential for communication, for recognition and empathy, and a live-and-let-live attitude (Malmgren 19). With the Other-as-Enemy, the Other is unknowable, not human or equal, wholly different, and therefore a danger that must constructed as enemy (21-22). The Other-as-Other, then, is the *truly Other*, the unfathomable, unapproachable, and mysterious entity that cannot be labeled, let alone communicated with (26-27). However, *Futurama* (and other SF narratives[15]) extends the concepts put forth by Foucault's bio-power and Deleuze's dividual, and would posit a fourth category: Other-as-Commodity, in which the

[15] Harry Harrison's *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966) is a good example, as are "The Jigsaw Man" by Larry Niven (1967), and more recently Neill Blomkamp's film *Elysium* (2013).

Other is not recognized as even really alive, let alone viewed as either Self or Enemy, and is merely an object or tool to be used.

This then is the position of the Omicronian young in "The Problem with Popplers," and what Fry briefly becomes in "The Spanish Fry." The position may be recuperated at the end of "The Problem with Popplers" when both the humans and Omicronians agree that it is wrong to eat intelligent beings, thus returning both the humans and the Omicronian young to the Other-as-Self position. However, the last scene of the episode undermines this (perhaps simply for the sake of the joke, but perhaps not), when the Planet Express crew sits down to eat a meal of presumably non-intelligent, and therefore permissible, animals, including veal and suckling pig. Bender pulls out a final tray and asks, "Who wants dolphin?" The rest of the crew gasps in horror and Leela says: "But dolphins are intelligent!" to which Bender replies: "Not this one. He blew all his money on instant lottery tickets." Appeased that the dolphin was not, in fact, an intelligent being, the crew sighs in relief and begins to eat it. It becomes obvious that the Other-as-Self is never completely safe from being commodified, particularly because it is always the one with power who has the privilege of deciding who does and does not fit the requirements to be recognized as the Self. Furthermore, this demonstrates, as did Fry's reaction to the secret of Slurm, that with a valuable (and addictive) commodity at risk, the consumer's perception of a commodity is far more important than the reality.

<u>Commodities and the Construction of Identity:</u>

For most consumers, as with Fry, the distinction between a consumer's perception of a commodity and the reality of that commodity are vital in creating the emotional connections that impel people to participate in hyper-capitalist consumption. McCracken argues that the cultural meanings created by consumer processes and attached to consumer goods are necessary for the structures of present reality, and adds that without these goods and their attached meanings "certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible" (*Culture* xi). For instance, one of the jokes in "Fry and the Slurm Factory" highlights the ways companies manipulate the emotional responses of consumers when the Slurm Queen (whose waste becomes the Slurm beverage) states that she will transform Leela into a Slurm Queen like herself. Her minion exclaims: "But, Your Highness, she's a commoner. Her Slurm will taste foul." The Slurm Queen replies with an evil laugh: "Yes! Which is why we'll market it as New Slurm. Then, when everyone hates it, we'll bring back Slurm Classic and make billions!"

This scene is a direct reference to the 1985 marketing controversy of New Coke, or Coca-Cola II. The new formula for Coca-Cola was hated by the general public, leading to a large dip in sales, until the company returned to the original formula, now called Coca-Cola Classic, and sales increased significantly. Though Coca-Cola Company has always denied it, many

believed that the entire event was a carefully planned marketing ploy; to this day, some Coca-Cola consumers get angry when New Coke is discussed. The emotional manipulation of such a marketing ploy had powerful and immediate effect on both Coca-Cola brand and the actual sales of the product. The emotional and cultural meanings of the words "New" and "Classic" linked to the products became a central element of the brand as well: "New" was risky, inferior, cheap; "Classic" was trustworthy, superior, valuable. The word "Classic" invokes nostalgia, displacing the meaning and value into the past, blurring the line between past and present in order to return to something beyond the consumer's reach[16].

Similarly, such emotional and cultural meanings blur the line between product and target audience. *Futurama* asks the difficult question: Are products created to respond to the demands of a target audience, or are target audiences created in order to consume products? In "The Route of All Evil," Professor Farnsworth creates a machine that allows people to change their voices to sound exactly like him. When another character, Dwight, asks: "What's this device's marketability? Who's the target audience?" Farnsworth responses: "There is no target consumer! Only targets. Targets that will tremble in fear as their new master hands down edicts in my glorious, booming voice!" This comment is, of course, partially a joke about the cliché mad scientist motif that Farnsworth routinely occupies throughout the series; however, it also says something interesting about the relationship between product and consumer, between supply and demand. As has already been stated, the general belief is that products are supplied to fulfill a demand, yet many products demonstrate the ways demand can be created after the fact, in order to justify a product's existence. This further connects to one of the claims Jodi Dean makes in *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. She states:

> Consider the circularity of claims regarding popularity. McDonald's, Wal-Mart, and reality television are depicted as popular because they seem to offer what people want. How do we know they offer what people want? People choose them – *they must be popular*. (22)

In other words, certain products or brands become popular because so many consumers purchase them, and consumers purchase them because they are already perceived as being popular. It is not always clear where the demand begins.

The emotional manipulation and wish-fulfilling aspects of consumerism are further mocked in the episode "A Fishful of Dollars," when Fry comes into a large sum of money and announces: "I finally found what I need to be happy and it's not friends, it's things." According to Jodi Dean, subjects are not interpellated into identities based upon "conventions of gender,

[16] Displaced meaning into the past and tapping into American nostalgia is also the impetus behind the claims like Mexican Coca Cola is made with "real sugar" rather than the high fructose corn syrup now used in American bottling plants, and the return to glass bottles which hold less liquid but cost more than the plastic bottles.

race, work, and national citizenship" (66). Instead, neoliberal ideology encourages (or perhaps requires) people to construct their own subjectivities and "cultivate [their] individuality" through "circuits of entertainment and consumption" (Dean 66). Brands, in particular, become powerful "sites of identification that mobilize consumers" (Dean 73). Individuals perform their "self-fashioning" through the commodities they consume, and the methods by which that consumption takes place; or, as Jodi Dean describes it:

> Commodities are no longer marketed to broad types – housewives, teenagers – but are individualized such that consumers can specify the features they desire in a product: *I'll take a grande half-caf skinny latter with extra foam; I'll design and order my own sports shoes; I'll save television shows, edit out the commercials, and watch them when it's convenient for me*. (4)

However, Grant McCracken would argue that in most cases the anticipation of purchasing a commodity, rather than the actual consumption, has at least as much (if not more) of an influence on an individual's self-fashioning. Returning to the concept of displaced meaning, and the function of consumer goods as bridges to that meaning, McCracken argues that "for both groups and individuals quite astonishingly unhappy situations can be made tolerable through the judicious displacement of certain hopes and ideals" (*Culture* 109) onto often unattainable objects. When displacement into the past proves ineffective in certain circumstances, individuals instead displace their hopes and ideals into the future such as when they say things like: "things will be easier when I have my degree…" or "once I buy a house, I'll…" (McCracken *Culture* 108). In this way, the anticipation of purchasing a consumer good allows the individual to imagine the possession of a particular "emotional condition, a social circumstance, even an entire style of life, by somehow concretizing these things in themselves" (McCracken *Culture* 110).

<u>The Power of Brand Loyalty - and the Case of the eyePhone:</u>

A consumer's relationship with the goods they buy potentially contains a wide range of attitudes, processes, including the construction of identity through purchase, the desire for personalization, displacement into the future, and creating "an entire style of life" through brand loyalty. Throughout the series, *Futurama* showcases many of these attitudes and processes, but no one episode demonstrates them quite as effectively as "Attack of the Killer App." The episode opens with the Planet Express crew transporting a shipment of discarded electronics and other devices to be recycled on The Third World (of the Antares System)[17],

[17] This is, of course, a pointed comment on the ways hyper-consumerism in Western societies has harmful, even deadly, effects on so-called "Third World" countries, particularly (but not only) in terms of waste and exploitative labor. This is further heightened by the fact that the aliens who live on the Third World of the Antares System speak with exaggerated Indian accents.

where children sift through the toxic junk for salvageable parts (as mentioned previously). Horrified by the conditions, Leela decides that rather than recycling they should all instead keep using their devices for as long as possible. However, when MomCorp (an enormous corporation with many subsidiaries and a monopoly on manufacturing robots) announces a brand new "eyePhone" (an unabashed reference to the Apple iPhone), the crew abandon their current phones immediately, and sustainability is just as quickly forgotten. The new eyePhone is installed directly in the customer's eye like an extreme version of the Google Glass (thus the name), and comes with the app "Twitcher." Twitcher (the stand in for Twitter) lets users record brief video messages and send them directly to their Twitcher followers. Bender and Fry agree to a contest to see who can collect a million Twitcher followers first. When Fry realizes he is losing, he betrays Leela's trust by posting a video of a self-aware, talking, singing boil on Leela's butt, called Susan (in reference to *Britain's Got Talent* singer Susan Boyle[18]). At the same time, Mom (the founder of MomCorp) watches the contest between Fry and Bender with plans to use them to send a virus called the Twit Worm to all their followers, turning them into zombies who will follow Mom's every command.

Nothing in this episode escapes the parody hot seat. The episode makes a comment on the hypocritical and inconsistent attitudes of those who champion recycling and responsible consumerism, but are constantly dazzled by new, shiny, excessive commodities. This once again demonstrates the disconnect between the consumer fantasy and the reality of hyperconsumerism. Furthermore, the Susan Boyle joke that runs through the episode satirizes both the celebrity status of performance reality shows, and also exposes the cruelty and fickleness of internet fame, such as that experienced by YouTube celebrities. But it is, once again, Fry's relationship with consumption that is most worth analyzing. It is here that we find the now famous quote mentioned at the very beginning of this essay. When Fry finally reaches the Mom Store, after a day-long wait in a line that stretches across the city, the salesclerk explains, "Okay, it's $500, you have no choice of carrier, the battery can't hold the charge, and the reception is very…." Fry waves a fistful of money in the clerk's face and shouts, "Shut up and take my money!" exemplifying the attitude of most brand-loyal consumers, who do not even stop to consider the flaws in a product before they buy it and congratulate themselves on their good fortune.

While this kind of excessive consumption is evident in all kinds of consumer goods, it is particularly powerful in commodities that include expectations of brand loyalty, which "Attack of the Killer App" makes evident. Brands, according to Adam Arvidsson, obtain their value through consumer attention, with is partially produced through advertising and design, but which is also reliant upon a communication process that is external to the brand and outside its control. This principle – "the reliance on autonomously produced externalities as a source of

[18] Several critics have argued that this joke was, while absurd enough to be amusing, a bit mean-spirited, and distracted from the more pointed and clever parodies of Apple and Twitter.

surplus value and profits" (Arvidsson 7) – is one of the key components of what Arvidsson calls "informational capitalism," which is similar in many ways to Jodi Dean's concept of "communicative capitalism." Arvidsson argues that brands are valuable because they can "subsume and appropriate what consumers do with the brand in mind," thus programming everyday life (7). "What brand owners own," Arvidsson claims, "is a particular predetermined frame of action, a particular relation […] between what consumers do and what their actions mean to them" (8). Jennifer Wingard adds that branding is both a rhetorical and affective strategy that "serve[s] to create emotions through identification with images and symbols" (ix). It is not merely consumer attention but the emotional investments that consumers place in brands that make them more or less valuable (Wingard x).

Brands are, as Dean states, the site through which consumers construct their identities, but consumers are likewise at least partially responsible for creating the meanings and values that are attached to brands. The relationship between consumer and brand therefore creates a feedback loop that interminably sustains itself. MomCorp's monopoly on consumer electronic devices in the *Futurama* universe creates the uncontrollable desire that characters feel for a constant stream of better, shinier devices, leading to Fry's mindless, excessive, and self-harming demand to "shut up and take my money." As Dean points out, even some savvy activists who praise advancements in technology for its ability to promote the free movement of knowledge and ideas often "fetishize the latest communication gadgets, unaware that their massage is indistinguishable from Apple's" (9). This is the power of the brand, which is assisted, in "Attack of the Killer App," by the eyePhone commercial. The commercial (like many of the advertisements in *Futurama*[19]) offers a much more honest depiction of the ways consumers use the product: "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. All with the new eyePhone." In the Mom Store, video screens show the black silhouettes of Mom and her sons dancing to non-descript alternative music in a direct parody of the iPod and iPhone commercials, to which Amy Wong comments: "It's that obscure underground song that's constantly playing everywhere" – gesturing to the need of certain consumers (and, by extension, certain brands) to be obscure, outside-the-mainstream, and therefore *cool*, while also still being recognizable by society at large. As the customers move through the store, the voice of Mom plays overhead, announcing that the eyePhones are in short supply and people should therefore purchases theirs quickly. All of this helps to construct the values of the brand: fun and colorful, underground and rebellious, but also popular and recognizable, rare and in-demand; therefore those who get their hands on one are lucky and special. However, without the consumer base that is willing to continually return to buy new devices, MomCorp's brand would whither and die. This explains her need to create and release the Twit Worm, which she

[19] For instance, the slogan of Slurm is "Slurm! It's highly addictive!" and the slogan for Arachno Spores is "The fatal spore with the funny name!"

uses at the end of the episode not to create an army of zombies capable of taking over the world (as a viewer might suspect), but instead merely to force all her victims to purchase the EyePhone 2.0 only weeks after the first one was released. Mom's Twit Worm is a literal embodiment of bio-power, a technological and cultural apparatus capable of regulating large populations and normalizing their behavior. One of the important distinctions between older and current deployment of bio-power is made apparent here: where bio-power was once in the service of the state, of the population, of the species, it is now often (perhaps exclusively) in the service of private corporate interests, the capitalists, the profit-making cannibals. *Futurama* thus accuses brand-loyal consumers of being mindless zombies under the thrall of their corporate lords, who willingly make themselves the victims for the sake of a desire they will never fulfill.

The concept of brand loyalty does not, however, entirely explain the popularity and power of Twitter, or in this case "Twitcher." If the main motivation behind a large purchase is anticipatory in nature, in which the hoping and yearning for an object fuels the displaced meaning for the individual, then often the actual possession of that hoped-for object can endanger the displaced meaning (McCracken *Culture* 111-2). When this happens, he states, the good that is actually purchased becomes anticipatory for the "eventual purchase of a much large package of goods, attitudes, and circumstances of which it is a piece […] Individuals buy them in order to take possession of a small concrete part of the style of life to which they aspire" (McCracken *Culture* 111). For Fry the purchase of the eyePhone, though valuable and meaningful for him in its own right, only fuels a further desire, and becomes merely the means by which to approach his next anticipated possession: one million Twitcher followers. Gaining one million Twitcher followers comes to stand in for shared communication, popularity, and influence – and, for Mom, power.

More importantly, perhaps, Twitter and other online social media sites (and, by extension, Twitcher), have become an integral part of the communicative capitalism and consumption of the neoliberal state Jodi Dean describes. She states that the "rise of the consumer as producer hyped as Web 2.0 and signaled by Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube designates a shift in media such that increasing numbers of people present their own artistic work […], express their own views, and star in their own shows" (4). This larger desire that Fry (and Bender) have succumbed to is the need to recreate and mold reality to their own specifications. Grant McCracken makes this argument in his work, *Transformations: Identity Construction in Contemporary Culture*, stating that consumers have "gone 'behind the curtain' (to use a metaphor from *The Wizard of Oz*) and returned with impressive production skills. Indeed, in new marketing circles, it is customary to think of the consumer as a 'cocreator' of goods and communications" (xv). Popular culture and entertainment, such as we used to know them, are dead, according to McCracken. Now it is just *culture*, "something we understand, produce, participate in, and manufacture, and only then consume" (McCracken

Transformations xvi). Although McCracken views these transformations in a largely positive light, Dean examines the dangers of this development. With this ability to share everything with everyone over the internet, Dean sees what she calls the "fantasy of abundance": the way facts and opinions, images and reactions circulate in a massive stream of content, losing their specificity and merging with and into the larger flow of data. […] This morphing of message into contribution is a constitutive feature of communicative capitalism" (26). When this happens, the meaning and value of the message are overshadowing by the importance of their circulation. "This promise of participation," Dean argues, is a "fantasy wherein technology covers over our impotence and supports a vision of ourselves as active political participants" (36). Just like the consumer fantasy of Slurm, Twitcher allows Fry to believe he is an active participant with power and importance in a system of communication that is, in the end, merely an illusion. When Fry actually achieves his goal of one million Twitcher followers by betraying and humiliating Leela, it does little besides show him how isolated and alone he actually is without the small Planet Express crew. At that point, though, it no longer matters, as he has already spent $500 on the eyePhone, expended enormous energy on his Twitcher followers, and given Mom exactly what she needed to send out her Twit Worm and force over a million people to buy the eyePhone 2.0.

Conclusion:

In the wake of this critique of consumption as portrayed in *Futurama*, a couple more things are worth noting. Ironically but not surprisingly, *Futurama*, as a television show and a marketing brand, will always benefit from the same practices it critiques as it attempts to gain viewers (and thus advertising sponsorship) through humorous commercials and goofy online marketing ploys, sells season dvd box-sets and a variety of merchandising including plush toys of all the characters (and even Hypno-Toad[20]), and increases its social media presence online in the wake of its 2013 cancellation (perhaps in hopes of a new episode pick-up by Cartoon Network or Netflix). Moreover, despite the fact that many episodes of *Futurama* demonstrate the problematic reality of consumerism and consumption in Western society, in the end Fry never cares and rarely even suffers the consequences of his rampant consumption. Few of the characters, in fact, ever suffer the consequences of their consuming choices more than once or twice throughout the series. But Fry, most of all, never lets the reality of his consuming practices stop him from investing in the next big commodity. The dangers of consumption may be readily apparent throughout the show, but so too is Fry's never-ending, sometimes-senseless but always-relatable passion for consumption in all its guises.

[20] Hypno-Toad is, itself, an amusing comment on media consumption. It is a television show that features nothing except the Hypno-Toad staring into the camera with swirling eyes, literally hypnotizing its viewers for hours at a time.

Furthermore, while we may all identify with Fry to some extent or another, the sheer absurdity of the show and his actions reassures the viewers that we will never be as foolish, as reckless, or as easily duped as Fry. Parody relies on exaggeration and hyperbole in ways that can potentially distance the audience from the critique. Some viewers may take comfort in this, but some of us realize the truth: Fry is us and we are Fry. The cult of Apple continues, millions of users share their every thought and feeling on Twitter and Facebook, and on Tumblr one of the most commonly used reaction gifs is a picture of Philip J. Fry waving dollar bills and shouting: "Shut up and take my money!" Consumers become more and more aware every day. We learn to analyze advertisements, we self-parody our own consuming habits, we champion sustainability and ethical consumption. And yet there is no escaping our realities built upon the emotional and cultural meaning we give to consumer goods, regulated labor, and excessive consumption.

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