

David Hanrahan

Rox Samer

SCRN 288

June 3rd, 2021

An Eroticized Critique on Heterosexual Desire: The Queer Comedy of *Lexx* (CityTV,
1996-2002)

The 1990s was no stranger to the prominence of cis-dominated sitcoms like *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004), *Seinfeld* (TBS, 1989-1998), *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990-1996), *Full House* (ABC, 1987-1995) and many more. However, there was a series that quietly disrupted this patriarchal method of television lurking in the shadows of late night Canadian sci-fi. This series is known as *Lexx* (CityTV, 1996-2002). *Lexx* entails the raunchy adventures of three drastically different co-protagonists who travel the stars in their giant planet killing bug named Lexx. The series is comprised of an asexual assassin named Kai (Michael McManus), a horny middle aged security guard named Stanley (Brian Downey) and a half human half lizard love slave named Xev (Xenia Seeberg). On the surface, *Lexx* appears to be another action packed yet sex driven program geared towards an audience of adult men, but through a dissection of the show's erotic comedy, this assumption is combatted. Therefore, *Lexx* will be proven to derive its critique on heteronormativity through its hyperbolic heterosexual aspects, which results in queer comedy. This will be proven amidst the show's objectification of women/sex, its weaponization of asexuality, and gender eccentricities that all work to position the show's heterosexual characters at the butt of the joke. Two episodes will be used to illustrate this dynamic at play regarding the show's heterosexual leads (Stan and Xev). That will establish the implicit theme of

the series found in the denial of heterosexual pleasure. Thus, in a triangulation of the show's ironic queerness, its sci-fi camp, and exaggerated erotic imagery, *Lexx*'s parody of heteronormativity will be understood.

Before the series can be exposed for its queer comedic lens, the format of television must be contextualized with Miller's theories on camp where *Lexx* will be compared to the sitcoms of the 1950s and 60s. Miller illuminates the campy situational humor of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS, 1961-1966) in a "process of recognizing within archives gender dynamics more complex than expected" (Miller, 26). This is what will be achieved within *Lexx*. The same way pre 1970s sitcoms result in queer camp ahead of their gendered situational humor, *Lexx* will be illuminated for its exaggerated depictions of heterosexual desire that result in queer comedy. In *Lexx*'s case, this queerness is symbiotically attached to the irony of its hyper-sexualized diegesis actively obstructing its heterosexual characters' pursuit of sex. In the case of sitcoms, their queerness is emitted through their humor at the expense of social norms where "many actors and characters (are) assigned to different gender categories to produce a lot of divergent, flamboyant, overlapping styles and eccentricities, which involve connotations of taste, race, ethnicity, appropriation, sexuality, class, and ability. The combination of these signifiers produces queer gender" (Miller, 18). Thus, both shows (*Lexx* and *Dick*) accentuate the gendered binaries of reality in a way that "operate(s) in the manner of camp in helping us "grasp a reality . . . totally separate from what is taught"" (Miller, 18). For *Lexx*, the viewer is permitted to enter a reality where its straight characters are denied pleasure due to the show's strategic usage of queerness within the comedy. In these sexualized situations, *Lexx*'s straight characters exist at the butt of the joke the same way queer subjects are within the situational comedies of the 1950s and 60s. This is due to both shows' attempted "naturalized heterosexuality" (Miller, 2). Although this

naturalization is attempted through the homogeneous cis white representation of said sitcoms, for *Lexx*, it is attempted through its straight characters' pursuit of sexual pleasure in non-consensual situations. Thus, Stan and Xev will be exposed as victims of a queer diegesis while simultaneously understood as aggressive heterosexual subjects. That is what constitutes the show's thematic critique of hetero desire where Stan and Xev are ironically baited by eroticized characters/situations to only be denied. Thus, the exaggeration and manipulation of gender norms within pre 1970s sitcoms is reflective of *Lexx*'s exaggerated depictions of erotic desire which sustain both shows' queer comedy/camp.

Season three episode nine embodies this dynamic at play (regarding the character Stan). This episode (titled "Garden") follows the trio of protagonists as they arrive on an isolated island garden run by three women. *Lexx*'s theme of denied pleasure, more specifically heterosexual pleasure, is permitted by several aspects of this episode's female gardeners. However, before this garden is reached, a key scene must be used in the establishment of this episode's sexual relationship to Stan. In the climactic moment of his dream, Stan is denied pleasure even in the most fruitful of situations, through this episode's ironic and queer comedy. Here, Stan tries to convince his dream-girl Lyekka (Louise Wischermann) to give him oral sex. However, this attempted oral pleasure is turned into a cannibalistic nightmare due to Lyekka's existence as a flesh-eating humanoid plant (as established in Season two episode three). First, her growling mouth gapes open to an impossible diameter with the help of low quality cgi that reads as campy. Next, she states in a sensual tone, "I'm very hungry and want to make you feel really good Stan." These details cause this nightmare to conclude in a comedic way for the audience. However, the same cannot be said for Stan, who awakes in a cold sweat. Thus, *Lexx* presents its heterosexual male lead in a dreamworld that appears to reward him with a moment of carnal catharsis, only to

be tricked at the last second. That is how “Garden” initiates its obstruction of Stan’s desire through film form and dialogue within his dream. Now that this episode’s maniacal treatment of erotic situations has been established, the garden and gardeners themselves must be understood. Through this, the episode will be exposed again for its introduction of an eroticized situation that utilizes such erotica to ironically impede Stan.

Two details establish the gardener’s atypical relationship to sexuality. The first is the fact that there are no men on this island, and the second is that these female gardeners are all oblivious to the concept of sex (despite their sexualized costumes and tools proven by their short skirts, body paint, penis shaped water cans, and vagina shaped plants). This is where the gardeners’ gender eccentricities, or lack thereof, can be realized as this episode’s queer source of comedy. To rationalize such queerness, Doty must be credited. These gardener’s atypical relationship to sex and the female gender mimics Doty’s argument that “imitating the outward forms and behaviors of one gender or the other while not fully subscribing to the straight ideological imperatives that define that gender” constitute queerness. Therefore, these gardener’s feminized costumes yet apparent asexuality epitomizes this incomplete imitation of gender, which sustains the episode’s queer themes. Here, these female gardeners embody the comedic manipulation of gender norms found within pre-1970s sitcoms proven by their identities and the *mise-en-scène*.

However, this episode’s critique of heteronormativity does not end there. After Stan realizes his attempts at sex with the gardeners is futile, they agree on an ultimatum to make Stan happy. The gardeners manage to create Stan’s dream girl Lyekka who was credited earlier as the cannibalistic plant. Now we can see precisely where this episode aims its sights on heterosexuality through the gardeners’ unique relationship to Lyekka. Once Lyekka is planted

(created), the gardeners showcase sexual attraction towards her. Here, the gardeners show emotion that was never seen when interacting with Stan, proven by three details. The first is their orgasmic noises emitted during the planting process. These noises are assisted by close-up shots of the gardeners' faces which emit equally orgasmic expressions. The second detail is found when one of the gardeners states, "I'll do anything to make you happy" (towards Lyekka). The third example of the gardeners' attraction toward Lyekka is seen when they all volunteer as tribute for Lyekka's cannibalistic needs. This detail is solidified by the fact that these three gardeners experience pleasure in being eaten, proven through their sensual shaking, and breathing while being consumed. Therefore, the gardeners who were once asexual now possess an almost lesbian attraction toward Lyekka. That is how the queer irony of this episode is solidified through the gardeners' masochistic magnetism toward Lyekka and not Stan. (This aspect is made even more comedic when one realizes that Lyekka eats Stan's potential sexual partners ahead of Stan's failed request for Lyekka to "teach them how to please a man.")

It is as if heterosexual pleasure is the only kind that cannot be satisfied within this diegesis where all other forms of desire are not only achieved but done so with apparent ease. This is proven through the gardeners' queer infatuation with Lyekka and Lyekka's cannibalism which both come to fruition. This is also proven through Kai's desire to decompose where he lays in the garden's dirt as another form of this episode's atypical desires. Therefore, these queer methods of pleasure are strategically used within the series to obstruct the straight protagonists' pursuit of sexual desire (which is often selfish as we've seen with Stan). Thus, the comedic treatment of these gardeners proves Doty's perception that "queer positions are a part of a reception space that stands simultaneously beside and within that created by heterosexual (straight) positions" like *Lexx*. With a series that overlaps this many modes of desire and sexual

imagery, statements like such can be realized through the show's comedy which intertwines queerness and straightness in an ironic way. This irony can be read differently from episode to episode, but its most consistent form is to masquerade queer identity/desire in eroticized ways (like the feminized gardeners). Thus, for the "Garden" episode, *Lexx*'s queer comedy is owed to its diegesis' advocacy of non-heterosexual pleasure at the expense of its hetero protagonist (Stan).

Another episode that sustains this dynamic can be found in season three episode four titled "Boomtown." In this episode, the trio of protagonists arrive on a floating city dedicated to sex where this population of polyamorous citizens seduce the trio. Here, Xev will be the primary focus of this denied pleasure where her attempts to have sex result in the epitome of a tease between her and Brock (Geoff Herod). In their candle lit and silk sheeted bedroom, Xev eagerly states "I can't hold out much longer," to which Brock replies "oh yes you can." Then, after nearly ten minutes of the screen time elapses (regarding the other protagonists' mission) the audience is returned to Xev and Brock. This time, Xev grabs Brock and begs with a breathy tone, "I want it now," to which Brock nonchalantly replies, "and we'll get there." In these instances, the restless Xev's horniness is mocked through Brock's never-ending foreplay, which is made more severe due to Xev mentioning her identity as a love slave to Brock (twice). As if this temptation could not be prolonged any further, the audience is retuned back to this couple after another three minutes of deviated screen time where Xev angrily states "lets get on with it" as she slaps the bed. At this moment, the audience is aware of the comedic dynamic between the two and is ready for Brock's response where he states, "but the journey?" That is why Xev's prolonged lack of sex is humorous due to Brock's exaggerated denial of such. What puts this temptation to rest is when this diegesis's version of the devil enters the room disguised as Xev's

crush (the assassin kai). That is what expands this episode's multivalent irony as Xev is transmitted from one fruitless sexual endeavor to another (because this is not Kai and is in fact the main antagonist). In this episode, *Lexx*'s denial of pleasure is rooted strictly within masculinity proven through Brock's overtly manly features (large muscles and jawline) and Kai (who is a killer that possesses Xev's attraction). Therefore, whether it be the feminized gardeners, or this masculinized Brock, heterosexual iconography is weaponized against these hetero protagonists' pursuit of sex.

Now that the series has been recognized for specific examples of this critique on heterosexual desire, the creators themselves must be turned to. In an interview after the completion of season one (which is comprised of four films), *Lexx* co-creator Paul Donovan stated that "what we really wanted to do was make something that had a little bit of (...) Beavis and Butt-Head meets Alien." His combination of a horror sci-fi film by Ridley Scott and an animated comedy by Mike Judge as inspiration for the series constitute the majority of *Lexx*'s absurd yet dramatic nature. This outlook on *Lexx* is echoed within a *Business Wire* article regarding the show's second season premiere on the American SCI FI channel. In this article, it is stated that *Lexx* is "moody and stylized yet full of wry humor, the show disregards orthodox science fiction storytelling methods and creates its own hapless world. Continually breaking new ground with bold characters, extensive use of Computer-Generated Imagery, and unwillingness to conform to convention, *Lexx* is a true original in the sci-fi genre." It is made clear that *Lexx* was recognized for its unique relationship to genre, found in its comedic take on a wretched diegesis. This unconventional nature of the series, mentioned within the article, rationalizes the ways in which *Lexx*'s ironic humor can be argued within the realm of queerness. Returning to the interview, co-creators Jeffrey Hirschfield and Lex Gigeroff commented on the show's erotic

representation. Lex states that “there’s a lot more sex in it, basically” to which Jeffrey responds, “there’s never enough” as they both giggle. This interview allows the queer irony of the series to transcend the episodes and enter the real world. That is because when *Lexx*’s straight male creators giggle at the show’s sex, they are really giggling at what allows *Lexx* to comedically critique such heterosexuality. In what can be considered the epitome of Doty’s theories on queer representation existing simultaneous to hetero representation, this interview cements the fact that *Lexx*’s erotic content can be read as both objectifying and queer.

Another example of this approach toward *Lexx*’s themes can be found in Pugh Tison’s dissection of black sexuality within *The Bill Cosby Show* (NBC, 1969-1971). Tison’s argument presents “the ways in which the inherent conservatism that some see in the program is undercut by its rewriting of parenthood as an androgynous role, as Cliff (Bill Cosby) acts primarily as an authoritative, not authoritarian, father who cooperates with Clair in raising their children” (Tison, 80). Here, Tison utilizes the show’s androgynous treatment of parenthood to combat the show’s conservative reputation. As for *Lexx*, this same dynamic exists within *Lexx*’s queer treatment of sex to combat its eroticized heterosexual imagery. Therefore, when Tison argues that “Cliff ’s androgynous fatherhood—and Cosby’s performance of it—is complicated by his determination to police his children’s sexuality, particularly his daughters’ virginity,” the reader is introduced to an interpretation of the series that dismantles the patriarchal nature of its representation (Tison, 81). That is how *The Bill Cosby Show* and *Lexx* are programs that ironically rebel against their patriarchal tropes through their comedy of such.

Whether it be the objectification of the female body, sexualized mise-en-scène, or cis-gendered representation, *Lexx*’s usage of such imagery to deny its heterosexual protagonists their pleasure constitutes *Lexx*’s subversive queerness. As mentioned, this is achieved in the form

of ironic comedy where Stan and Xev are separated from their desire in the most fruitful of situations. In “Garden,” what stood as Stan's gateway into a sex utopia resulted in death and deceit due to the presence of queer forces disguised in hyper erotic costumes/situations. This was cemented through the female gardeners’ mission to satisfy Lyekka and thereby themselves, not Stan. In that episode, *Lexx*’s prioritization of lesbianism and cannibalism leaves Stan as the bystander to this sexual behavior. As for Xev, this same dynamic is presented through the comedic operation of Brock, who prevents the act of sex through his everlasting foreplay in “Boomtown.” Thus, in what can be considered a hyper-sexualized sci-fi, *Lexx* promotes its non-normative aspects despite such heteronormative representation. That is how we can understand *Lexx*'s critique on heteronormative desire which is ironically proven through its eroticized characters. The show’s eccentric treatment of gender norms combined with its existence as a popular television program (at the time) illuminates a key question asked by Lynne Joyrich. Knowing that television is “determinant of the mainstream” and that queerness is “the subversion of the ordinary,” Joyrich asks if queer television studies is productive “since this combination is itself defined in and as contradiction, thus making it necessarily queer” (Joyrich, 82). Ahead of *Lexx*’s comedy being exposed for both strategically queer and stereotypically straight aspects, the answer can be considered yes, that this form of analysis is in fact productive. This is due to the atypical interpretation of an otherwise typically straight series, like Tison’s analysis of *The Bill Cosby Show* which allows past texts to be retroactively understood through an anti-patriarchal lens.

Word Count: 2,828

Work Cited Page

Doty, Alexander. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Joyrich, Lynne. "Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)Streams." *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (January 1, 2014): 133.

Miller, Quinlan. *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History*. Console-Ing Passions. Duke University Press, 2019.

Paul Donovan, "Lexx Season 1 Behind the scenes," YouTube Video, 15:02, October 4th 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGi_Qf0kot0&t=5s

"Salter Street Films Announces U.S. Premiere of LEXX on The SCI FI Channel." *Business Wire*, September 30, 1999.

Tison, Pugh. *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018.