

“PERIOD SEX”: *CRAZY EX-GIRLFRIEND*
AND FEMINIST POLITICS OF OFFENCE

When cartoon versions of the supporting cast call the main character of The CW’s *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015–) exactly that – a crazy ex-girlfriend – in the opening credits of season one, the offended Rebecca Bunch (played by co-creator Rachel Bloom) vehemently protests: “the situation is a lot more nuanced than that!” TV critics mostly agree, calling the show “witty, well-acted, brazenly inventive, and a pleasure to watch” (Bastián 2017) or simply “The Best Show on TV [...] that demonstrates the near-total creative freedom of TV’s latest evolutionary period better than any other” (Zoller Seitz 2016). A *Slate*-review that proclaims it “one of the most critically acclaimed programs on broadcast television,” however, also notes that *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (CXG) is not “among the lowest [rated], but consistently in the absolute last spot, almost as if it’s trying to make a point” (Wilson 2018). Headlines like “4 reasons why ‘Crazy Ex-Girlfriend’ is the best show you’re not watching (Fitzpatrick 2015) are therefore a staple of the show’s critical reception. The explanation usually given – “Hate the title? Us too [...]” (Pandell 2016) – is that show’s title, “a sexist term,” as the credit sequence acknowledges, is so offensive it repels most potential viewers. The embrace of offensiveness in the “Subversive Show with the Terrible Name” (Lenker 2016), however, does not stop there. It instead extends to narrative as well as aesthetic levels. As such, the title is not so much ‘terrible’ as it is telling: it proclaims the show’s reliance on offence, which is used – this article argues – as a tool of feminist critique of contemporary modes of representation of women, romance, and mental illness.

LEVELS OF OFFENSIVENESS

For those willing to look past the title and who venture to watch the first episode, the show commits its next offence by the sex of its protagonist who is narcissistic, vengeful, mentally unstable – and female in contrast to the male narcissistic, vengeful, and

mentally unstable anti-heroes who became one of the defining characteristics of “Complex Television” (cf. Mittell 2015, 75). The final offence has nothing to do with sex or sexism, but with form and taste: rather than offering a dark drama (in which offensiveness might be considered part of a show’s verisimilitude), *CXG* is a dramedy and a musical – the genre supposedly least suited to television’s serial mode of realistic storytelling.¹ The show’s premiere accordingly features CGI-enhanced fantasy sequences and a full production number, a nervous breakdown, and a mention of an earlier suicide attempt all in the first ten minutes. By the first half-hour mark viewers are additionally confronted with blood splattered on a bath tub during a song interlude called “Sexy Getting Ready Song.”

Such gross-out humour and forms of cringe comedy, in which the central character’s behaviour is sometimes “so cringe-worthy that it’s hard to watch” (Pandell 2016), are as central to the show’s tone as is its reliance on musical interludes. These interludes embrace their own brand of offensiveness by breaking the rules of standard TV narrative. Beyond these structural taboo, the songs also repeatedly serve to transport sexist sentiments (e.g. in “Let’s Generalize about Men,” S03 E01) or enhance the gross-factor (e.g. “Period Sex” which was deemed “too dirty” to be included in the broadcast and made available exclusively online). Other songs, in contrast, satirize the sexualized depiction of female bodies in popular culture. They thus participate in the show taking offence at the cultural milieu. Finally, *CXG* is consistently engaging with issues often deemed to offensive or divisive for broadcast television, ranging from abortion to racism and to, most crucially, mental illness. Following a recent trend towards dramedies with complex female lead characters, *CXG* similarly offers their signature combination of “humorous approaches to dark subject matter and/or tragicomic portrayals of characters” which invites audiences reactions “that alternate between laughter, uneasiness, and frustration” (Havas and Sulimma 2018, 2). The show enhances this frustration by seemingly relying on the tired trope of the hysterical woman yet making light of it through its musical format.

¹ See Plasketes (2004) for an analysis of *Cop Rock* (ABC, 1990), whose spectacular failure is often seen as proof of the incompatibility of televisual verisimilitude and musical phantasma.

Refuting such a reading, this article in contrast will untangle *CXG*'s several strands of crudity and overall offensiveness to make the case for the show's complex commentary on postfeminism and contemporary media culture. Rather than looking at the musical interludes or comic elements as clashing with the show's exploration of feminist issues, the following reading will position these as essential to the biting critique that has made this portmanteau-hyphen television outlier – a female-lead dramedy-cringe-musical series – a critical, if not commercial success. This article makes this argument by outlining the show's critique of 'abject postfeminism,' before tracing its rejection of the romanticizing of 'crazy women' in US American popular culture. Exemplary readings of select scenes detail, how the series employs different levels of offence to push the limits of female representation in contemporary television.

BAD FEMINISTS

As Das and Graefer summarize, they are myriad ways for media to elicit offence – many of which, *CXG* gleefully employs, such as its reliance on offensive language or its 'raunchy' depiction of sex (2017, 7). Primarily through these aspects, the series positions itself firmly within a postfeminist discourse, characterized among others the mobilization of offensive images which are sold as edgy and feminist with a 'knowing wink' to audiences who are in on the joke (McRobbie 2009, 17). Humour in these instances becomes "a way of 'having it both ways,' of expressing sexist or homophobic or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually 'meant'" (Gill 2007, 159). This "double address" of postfeminist media serves to undermine contemporary feminist politics at the same time as it claims the success of past efforts (Tasker and Negra 2005, 108).

In many ways, Rebecca Bunch is the quintessential postfeminist woman. As a successful real-estate lawyer with degrees from Harvard and Yale (who lists "Mandarin" under special skills in her CV), she has reaped the benefits of feminist efforts for equality in the workplace and in education. Yet she starts to doubt her life choices, after she is repeatedly confronted with a butter-advertisement which asks her "When was the last time you were truly happy?" – reflecting the central role of consumerism in postfeminist discourse (cf. Tasker and Negra 2005; Gill 2007). She

subsequently suffers from a panic attack after the offer to become a partner in her elite New York-law firm, during which she runs into her ex from summer camp, Josh Chan (Vincent Rodriguez III). This chance encounter prompts her to eagerly leave her professional success behind to follow her crush to a Californian suburb (S01 E01). There, she takes up a job at a subpar law firm to keep up appearances and relies on her social and financial capital to get closer to her ex (who, it turns out, has been with his current girlfriend since high school), while continuously insisting that the radical break was just for herself. Rebecca thus follows the cultural script of “downsizing,” in which women’s withdrawal from the workforce in favour of the pursuit of romantic fulfilment is perceived as empowering (Tasker and Negra 2005, 108).

The series refuses to further this dismantling of feminism in at least two ways. First, Rebecca is often shown as taking offence at sexist sentiments, however neatly packaged, and thus refutes the ‘ironic’ reliance on sexist tropes (e.g. by calling out the use of “sexist term[s]” S01 E01). Despite her many alliances with the above-mentioned postfeminist tropes, Rebecca thus commits the cardinal sin of the contemporary women: she presents herself as an angry feminist. Fittingly, Rebecca repeatedly recommends Roxane Gay, author of *Bad Feminist*, to her female friends (S02 E05). In her essay collection, Gay contemplates her own failings in living up to a feminist ideal:

I am failing as a woman, I am failing as a feminist. To freely accept the feminist label would not be fair to good feminists. If I am, indeed, a feminist, I am rather a bad one. I am a mess of contradictions. (314)

Gay lists among her contradictions her joy in being independent, which clashes with her need to feel taken care of, and her awareness of unrealistic beauty standards and pop culture’s role in perpetuating stereotypes – and her inability to reject either. *CXG* builds on similar contradictions that define Rebecca and the obvious gap – obvious at least to audiences and characters like her friend Heather (Vella Lovell) or her therapist Dr. Akopian (Charlene “Michael” Hyatt) – between her feminist ambitions and actual behaviour. More often than not Rebecca’s dismissal of what another character refers to as “patriarchal bullshit” (S01 E01) is only lip service and a de-politicised version of neoliberal empowerment through individual self-betterment. When

Rebecca decries the “very misogynist myth that women can’t get along” (S01 E02), as Paula (Donna Lynne Champlin) questions her sudden interest in befriending Josh’s girlfriend Valencia (Gabrielle Ruiz), the set-up is easily recognizable as a ruse to get closer to Josh. Over the course of the series, however, Valencia and Rebecca develop a friendship that survives both of their respective break-up with Josh. Similarly, Heather, who initially dates Josh’s friend Greg (Santino Fontana) while he pines after Rebecca, remains a constant source of support in Rebecca’s life, even after Greg has ended his relationship with both women. Together with Paula, the paralegal at Rebecca’s new firm who quickly becomes Rebecca’s motherly (and enabling) best friend, this group of women gradually becomes the emotional centre of *CXG*. While skewering faux-empowering tropes of girl power through musical interludes (as in the Spice-Girls-meet-1984-spoof “Friendtopia” in S02 E06 or Valencia’s ‘bitchy’ *Lilith Fair*-inspired anthem “Women Gotta Stick Together” in S01 E09), the show’s narrative dispels the myth of female incompatibility. Similarly, the only tangible action that follows Rebecca’s insistence that she and Valencia should cast-off the “cisgender patriarchal hegemonic hold on our imaginations and our hearts” (S02 E04), is that they pee on their ex-boyfriend Josh’s audio equipment. Yet the series’ overall focus on the detrimental effect that this ‘hegemonic hold’ of the obsession with romance has, gives weight to Rebecca’s statement in a way that Rebecca as a character does not.

Rather, her failings as ‘bad feminist’ give the series ample opportunity to employ its second strategy to skewer postfeminist complacency: the exaggeration of tropes to the point of alienation which, to borrow from Middleton’s discussion of *Inside Amy Schumer*, depicts “the condition of postfeminism [as] one of abjection” (2017, 124). Among the most explicitly abject depictions of postfeminism in *CXG* are its gross examples of the “makeover paradigm” and subjectification, i.e. the internalization of the male gaze (Gill 2007, 156–58, 147). The pilot’s “Sexy Getting Ready Song” sets the scene for multiple variations of these theme throughout the series, when Rebecca goes through a gruesome process of perfecting her appearance which is interspersed with scenes reminiscent of a stylized music video. Contrasting the harshly lit bathroom in which Rebecca is getting ready with the dance sequences on a lush stage bathed in the

soft light of numerous candles, the interlude is choreographed to fit the song's R&B-melody. In between takes of the music-video-sequence with Rebecca and four dancers with perfect hair and make-up, Rebecca within the series diegesis plugs her eyebrows and nose-hair. While the dance sequence shows the women writhing on the floor seductively, Rebecca in her bathroom routine is visibly in pain. To the almost hushed "so soft" of the lyrics, Rebecca is shown on a toilet seat vigorously scrubbing her heels ("bye bye skin," the background singers croon). And while 'music-video-Rebecca' fantasizes about "a night you'll never forget," 'bathroom-Rebecca' yanks a wax strip off her behind and screams in pain, as blood is splattered on her bath tub ("ass blood," the background singers provide in perfect harmony, yet visibly disgusted). The two parallel scenes overlap, when Rebecca relies on one of the dancers to violently pull up her spanks. After this overlap of the two 'realities,' the dancers are shown with face masks, hair-removal strips, and rolls in their hair – still sexily swaying to the R&B song – only to be interspersed with images of 'bathroom-Rebecca' burning her neck with a curling iron. Nipsey Huddle then enters the bathroom to rap about sexy women, but leaves horrified after observing Rebecca's arsenal of beautifying tools, which prompts his realization that he has some "bitches to apologize to." The episode's tag uses this as an excuse to repeatedly call women derogatory terms, even in this moment of a feminist awakening – an incongruous combination through which it challenges the normalization of such language. It also details the offensive requests made of women in the entertainment industry (e.g.: "It was wrong of me to tell you what to do with that big fat butt. You can wiggle it, or you can keep it in school [...]"). Regardless of this intervention, the scene returns to the music-video-scenario, where the song ends on the lyrics "I'm gonna whisper your dick hard." Abject postfeminism might scare rappers and make viewers cringe, but it will not deter Rebecca.

Rebecca is less oblivious in another, more explicit take on the internalization of the male gaze packaged as female empowerment. In the first season's tenth episode, Rebecca follows Josh to summer camp for at-risk teenagers and ends up devastated after their romantic trip to 'blowie point' and down memory lane ends with Josh laughing at an old love letter. Rebecca nonetheless proceeds to give the scheduled

female empowerment presentation, where she – still visibly recovering from an allergic reaction to bug bites – is mocked by the attending teenage girls. When she bursts into tears, however, they offer to ‘empower’ her in return. In her second-wave feminism frame of mind, Rebecca assumes this to mean she should read more Gloria Steinem and “grow [her] pit hair out.” Her teenaged companions (abhorred by Rebecca’s suggestions) mean a makeover. Emulating Fifth Harmony’s video for “Bo\$\$” and its stylized runway-strutting, the song “Put Yourself First” teaches Rebecca that she should “Push them boobs up [...] Wear six-inch heels / Just for yourself” – a sentiment that is rendered absurd by the presence of a Terry Richardson-look-alike in a T-shirt with “male gaze” printed on it. When Rebecca interjects, “If it’s just for myself, shouldn’t I be comfortable?” they answer emphatically, “No! Put yourself first in a sexy way.” The girls proceed to enumerate various version of sexy empowerment, such as “Wear fake eyelids” (a bizarre exaggeration of fake eyelashes) and “Put a hole in your earlobe,” to which Rebecca reacts first with growing irritation and then with a pained scream, when they pierce her ear with a hot needle. Summarizing the contradictory entanglement of female agency and desirability, the song poignantly ends on the line “put yourself first for him.” While Rebecca has rejected this logic throughout the song, in the end she enthusiastically exclaims that the makeover makes her “feel so much better” – despite the bleeding wound on her ear.

Rebecca’s susceptibility to perverted forms of empowerment is at this point in the series well-established. Just one episode prior, she had bragged about her feminist pole-dancing classes, because “Oh my God, who pole-dances for male attention?” [...] true pole is about reappropriating the male gaze!” (S01 E09) – right after she pole-dances for Josh’s attention (and makes everyone present uncomfortable in the process). The show continues this strategy of emphasizing the self-defeating logic of such tropes through Rebecca’s uncomfortable lack of self-awareness and gross exaggeration of their imagery in the second season’s makeover. After a recording of an embarrassing 911-call has gone viral (Rebecca is seen emerging from her fire-damaged house complaining “I’ve got poo on my shoe”), Rebecca decides to follow the example of a product re-branding which has been pitched to her by a client (S02 E04). The

scenario not only spoofs female empowerment by making decidedly un-sexy douches the product of choice to bring about women's liberation, but also stresses the overlap of neoliberal consumerism and idealized postfeminist behaviour by aligning Rebecca herself with a consumer product. To re-invent herself as "Miss Douche" (i.e. win an Instagram-competition), Rebecca undergoes yet another makeover. The accompanying song "Makey Makeover" (based sonically and visually on Toni Basil's 1982 hit video "Mickey") points to the formulaic nature of TV makeovers as the lyrics "process / process / reveal! / reveal!" are synchronized with the respective scenes from Rebecca's own transformation. The song furthermore stresses the destructive rationale behind such procedures, when the song's lyrics "Old you in the garbage [...] old you was a diaper" clash with the upbeat accompaniment. Reflecting her internalization of these values, Rebecca is appalled by Paula's suggestion to simply be herself for a change: in a typical makeover, the (both physically and emotionally) abject "before" is to be "dispelled through the disciplinary mechanisms of transformation" (Middleton 2017, 129). Accordingly, Rebecca blurts out: "My authentic self? That's disgusting!" Yet her "after" is as emotionally distressed as the "before": to the public humiliation of the 911-call Rebecca's adds a cringeworthy performance at the "Miss Douche"-contest. Her outer transformation is discarded by the end of the episode, after Josh misreads her "new look" as a "funny costume." Even more strikingly, when a strand of Rebecca's newly glued blonde hair falls into Paula's lap, Rebecca corrects her friend's assumption that it was horse hair to state that what fell off her head was, in fact, "dead people hair." This prompts an unnerved Paula to mumble "disgusting." Rebecca has come full-circle and the futility of her endeavour, for once, becomes apparent even to herself.

In its attack on postfeminism, *CXG* thus employs both the gross-out – which until the success of *Bridesmaids* (2011) was mostly reserved for male comedians – as well as the cringe of dramedies like *Girls* (HBO, 2012–2017). While gross-out humour relies on bodily functions and filth to "offer a radical challenge to taste and value" (Paul 1994, 20), cringe results from "the painful laughs derived from the awkwardness of social interaction and around people's lack of self-awareness" (Susman 2013). Together they

create moments of uncomfortable laughter, in which pleasure and disgust are productively negotiated to denaturalize postfeminism's potency.

CRAZY IN LOVE

Rebecca's new-found conviction that she should change her "inside" instead of her "outside" and move on from both Greg and Josh, is expectedly short-lived. The very next episode, she stalks Valencia to have someone to talk to about Josh. With this focus on the obsessive nature of Rebecca's behaviour, *CXG* goes beyond the postfeminism's focus on romantic fulfilment to additionally invoke the history of romantic comedies. These thrive on the assumption of ultimate compatibility, even in the face of momentary discordance (McDonald 2007, 12–13). "Embarrassing gesture[s]" are as central to this standardized depiction of love as is the resulting monogamous, heterosexual union (13). The genre, furthermore, makes "everything irrelevant besides the search for love" (White and Mundy 2012, 77) and, especially in the screwball sub-genre, celebrates characters who "act in unpredictable and unconventional ways, as if crazy or drunk" (McDonald 2007, 23). The romantic comedy thus offers the frame in which much of Rebecca's behaviour seems appropriate – and in which she, herself, makes sense of it. This is explored, among others, in the lyrics of "I'm the Villain of My Own Story" (S01 E13), where she acknowledges that she's "the villain in [her] own story / The bad guy in [her] TV show" and, more importantly, that she is "the bitch in the corner of the poster," whereas Valencia in this fantasy sequence sees herself as Kate Hudson, perpetual protagonist of romantic comedies. An even more overt acknowledgment of Rebecca's attempt to follow a script and the series' insistence on the unbridgeable discrepancy between fantasy and reality comes courtesy of "The End of the Movie" (S03 E04). Rebecca realizes she has hit rock-bottom, after Josh has left her at the altar to go to priest school, and she has slept with Greg's father. On her walk home from this drunk one-night-stand, she is serenaded by Josh Groban, who clarifies that life is "not some carefully crafted story / It's a mess and we're all gonna die." Beyond such rather general, if sobering, wisdom, the lyrics offer very specific commentary on Rebecca's life: "People Aren't Characters [...] Their Choices Don't Always Make Sense / That Being Said / It's Really Messed Up / That You Banged Your

Ex- Boyfriend's Dad." The scene therefore initiates a turning point by shattering the connection between Rebecca's unhealthy coping mechanisms (through the externalized explanation of her regret) and genre scripts.

Up until this point, *CXG* has continuously employed tropes from the romantic comedy – such as a feigned interest in the love interest's favourite pastimes (e.g. ping pong, S02 E02) or rash decisions to commit (e.g. Rebecca's acceptance of Josh's proposal, S02 S11) –, which traditionally deliver the protagonist into the blissful future towards which the romantic comedy, by definition, develops. Yet through their repetitive enactment over the course of series (rather than as a singular occurrence in a movie), the very same actions tie Rebecca instead to an ongoing, painful (uncomfortable to watch) present. The show thus offers a biting critique of the behaviour otherwise condoned as 'romantic' and counters the concomitant trivialization of mental illness.²

The development of this critique is indicated in the season's different theme songs. While in season one she simply insists that "the situation is a lot more nuanced" than what can be explained by the moniker "crazy ex-girlfriend," in season two Rebecca embraces the accusation of madness – "I'm just a girl in love / I can't be held responsible for my actions."³ In season three, the theme song comprises a medley of four different musical genres and their different, yet intersecting, clichéd uses of 'crazy' as it pertains to women in love. The theme songs thus alert audiences to the different thematic cores of each respective season. Furthermore, they underline how the show's status as a musical, which helped its spoofing of pop cultural expressions of postfeminism, becomes even more relevant in the series' two-fold endeavour to

² The abusive patterns celebrated in romantic comedies made headlines, when a study proofed they normalize stalking (Beck 2016).

³ In a flashback at the end of season two, this expression is revealed to be a quote from Rebecca's mother, Naomi (Tovah Feldshuh), and originally used in court, when Rebecca was tried for arson – which retrospectively puts a much darker spin on the Busby-Berkeley-evoking opening credits (S02 E13).

distance itself from mediated clichés of romance and to provide a more nuanced approach to mental illness.⁴

HYSTERICAL WOMEN

In recent years, TV has increasingly embraced central characters with depression, addiction, anxiety, and a range of undiagnosed ‘quirks.’ Repeatedly, mental illness has been used as a trope to propel the story one week only to be dropped the next (e.g. PTSD on *Scandal*, ABC, 2012–2018). Sometimes, the mental health of television characters provides ground for running jokes (*The Big Bang Theory*, CBS, 2007–). Other times – in line with a broader cultural script of the “mad as genius” (Rohr 2015, 234) – , mental illness is taken as a kind of super-power that makes people better at their job (especially in criminal procedurals, e.g. *Bones*, Fox, 2005–2017 or *Elementary*, CBS, 2012–). Neither of these apply to *CXG*, in which the protagonist’s mental health issues are a continuous presence that neither reflects upon their professional performance nor is played for laughs. The series also distances itself from a western feminist tradition of reading ‘madness’ as a metaphor for female resistance (cf. Gilbert and Gubar 2000). The show instead casts a wider net to address the historical connection of women’s association with madness, especially the hysteric which “still packs a punch as a way to silence and discredit women” (Mizejewski and Sturtevant 2017, 1). “[C]razy or ‘high maintenance’ girlfriends” remain a staple among ‘hysterical women’ (1) whose medical diagnosis as been reincarnated in catchily dismissive phrases: “no need to ask or try to understand why a woman might be upset. Bitches be crazy” (2). Illuminating this observation, several characters, including Rebecca herself, use ‘crazy’ dismissively to describe her in almost every episode of the first two seasons. Such comments range from Valencia’s reaction to Rebecca’s drunk attempt kiss her – “Are you crazy?! What is wrong with you?! (S01 E02), to Greg’s dismissal of Rebecca’s passionate legal plea – “She’s crazy. Who goes into a courtroom and says all of that? (S01 E13), and finally

⁴ One of the seminal postfeminist texts, *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997–2002), not only prefigures *CXG*’s basic premise – a young, bright lawyer pining after an unavailable former boyfriend – , but also anticipates the lead character’s withdrawal “into her inner world delusions,” which are usually accompanied by music, yet – in contrast to *CXG* – “ultimately romanticized” (Altman 1989, 203–204).

Rebecca's father in the season two finale, in which Rebecca tells him to leave for good (S02 E13). "You're crazy," he darkly replies. "A little bit," she concedes after Paula barely talks her out of jumping off a cliff. The same Rebecca who is quick to be outspokenly offended by sexism and racism has up until this point almost never engaged with these kinds of comments. The one time that she points out that "[c]razy is a pejorative term and it's an over-generalization of a number of disorders," her explanation is directed at a child, and thus someone even more "certifiably cute"⁵ – and therefore more "subordinate and unthreatening" (Ngai 2010, 949) – than the image she has created for herself (S01 E05).

In contrast to this "over-generalization" common among its characters, the series makes Rebecca's diagnosis – Borderline Personality Disorder – the focal point of season three, grounds her symptoms in flashbacks to scenes from former seasons, and thus counters the vagueness which often surrounds depictions of mental illness on television and in film. It also forces audiences to reconsider their own prior readings of these scenes and thus to confront their own susceptibility to the trivialization of mental illness. At the same time, the series thereby studiously avoids one of the main causes of offence in contemporary media, namely that of racist, homophobic, sexist, or – in this particular case – ableist depictions which "contribute to stereotyping" (Das and Graefer 2017, 7). The series instead relies on its musical elements to offer insights into Rebecca's mind, which hint at her repressed pain and suffering despite the show's raunchy and comedic tone. The musical interludes, usually derided for their incompatibility with serial verisimilitude, thus add to one of the main reasons given for why the show is perceived as "unwatchable" (Rhee 2018) – which is neither its supposed sexism nor its grossness, but rather, its uncomfortable realism.⁶

⁵ This self-description is taken from opening credits of season two.

⁶ In this regard, the series most akin to *CXG* is *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, which "resembles a Nickelodeon tween show—which is just how its heroine might imagine her own life. Yet, without any contradiction, it's also a sitcom about a rape survivor" (Nussbaum 2015). Not incidentally, *Unbreakable*, offers a similar combination of low humour and complex television (cf. Havas 2016).

SERENADING TRAUMA

CXG follows the example set by musical episodes from earlier TV shows (most prominently *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, The WB/UPN, 1997–2003, *Scrubs*, NBC/ABC, 2001–2010, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, 1995–2001) and presents most of its interludes as parodies of films, musicals, and music videos (cf. Kassabian 2013, 54). Nonetheless, the show also strives for the effect of classical film musicals, “in which a heightened sense of reality is enacted through the brazenly artificial” (Knapp 2010, 8). The musical might, in fact, be singularly suited to illuminate Rebecca’s state of mind, as it shares her obsession with romantic love: “Pairing-off is the natural impulse of the musical,” Rick Altman argues and contends that the genre “seems to suggest that the natural state of the adult human being is in the arms of an adult of the opposite sex” (1989, 32). Furthermore, musical interludes in both film and television have traditionally served to reveal characters’ innermost feelings and secrets (Lodge 2007, 301). In *CXG* this ‘lack of filter’ emboldens the musical interludes to be particularly raunchy – e.g. “Pound away my morals / [...] Let me choke on your cocksuredness” in “Strip Away My Conscience” (S03 E02) and “Help clear the table / like I drained your scrotum” in “I Give Good Parent” (S01 E06) – or gross (e.g. “I Gave You a UTI,” S01 E17). Yet it also opens unique insights into the characters’ (overwhelming or denied) emotions. The latter effect is intensified through reprises, in which songs are used as a shorthand to character’s emotional state in scenes that might otherwise necessitate a flashback.

The musical interludes’ emotional boundary breaching extends to the formal level, as the distinction between songs that are fantasy or dreams sequences and those that take place within the story world is consistently blurred. Some numbers are sung by several, seemingly aware characters or introduced by intradiegetic dialogue (“this is gonna be disgusting,” an onlooker comments before the song “My Sperm is Healthy,” S03 E08), while other numbers go unnoticed by non-singing characters. Many songs which focus Rebecca’s emotions are clearly demarked as fantasy by either dialogue (e.g. Dr. Akopian’s explanation for “Dream Ghost”) or stylistic deviations (e.g. the use of black and white in “Maybe She’s Not Such a Heinous Bitch After All,” S03 E05), yet

even these seemingly clear demarcations seem unreliable after a flash back in season three reveals that one of Rebecca's symptoms in rehab was singing to herself (S02 E13). This continuous breaching of boundaries and stylistic messiness adds to the show's cringe and gross factors, as it opens the possibility that some of the issues addressed and expressions used in the songs are not actually relegated to pure fantasy.

Often the effects of emotional intensity and lyrical crassness interact, as in Paula's reaction to her chance to attend law school in form of the Disney-inspired song "Maybe This Dream" (S02 E02):

Maybe this dream / Won't be like / When I go running / And I
have to take a dump / So I have to rush home / Plus I also have
my period / So I have menstrual cramps plus dump cramps /
And as I run frantically / I pee just a little / Because I've had two
babies / So by the time I get home / My undies smell like a sewer
rat

The lyrics appear even more offensive in the context of the performance, which is modelled on Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959). Frolicking through the office, which is made up to look like a forest (including a deer carcass), Paula wears an outfit evocative of Aurora, whose vocal style she also mimics. This stylistic contrast between fairytale setting and filthy imagery enhances the song's comedic effect. It does so, however, without diminishing the emotional impact of Paul's heartfelt wish to finally fulfill her professional goals.⁷

Rebecca's "You Stupid Bitch" follows a similar rationale, insofar as its theme of pathological self-loathing clashes with the form of a crowd-pleasing power ballad (S01 E11). Rebecca even imagines fans that frenetically applaud and sing the chorus – "You ruined everything, you stupid bitch" – back to her. The song is only one in a series of musical treatments of Rebecca's symptoms which mimic musical formats associated with love over the course of the series. These songs usually also contain comedic elements that elicit laughter, such as this power ballad's expression "poopy little slut."

⁷ Paula's delivery of sugary sweet songs to package "too real for comfort"-descriptions of bodily functions is repeated in "Miracle of Birth" ("explosive diarrhea / Means that labor's drawing nearer"), which nonetheless takes seriously both Paula's joy in motherhood and Heather's apprehensiveness before her first birth (S03 E13).

Yet it is an uncomfortable laughter at best. “Comedy has issues,” Berlant and Ngai argue, as it is just as likely to “dispel anxiety” as it is to produce anxiety: “risking transgressions, flirting with displeasure, or just confusing things in a way that both intensifies and impedes the pleasure” (2017, 233). Precisely this intertwined intensification and impeding of pleasure is achieved by *CXG*’s framing of uncomfortable or emotionally complex issues through a mix of comedy and musical. This makes the often-disturbing themes seemingly more palatable, while the contrast to the presentation simultaneously makes the content more deeply unsettling. Putting the character’s innermost (often negative) feelings explicitly into words and music, *CXG* offends and alienates audiences not because of its artificiality, but because the character become “too relatable” (Dionne 2017).

This effect is never more apparent than in season three’s pivotal narrative and musical moment: Rebecca’s euphoric anticipation of her “diagnosis [...] a new path for her life” after her suicide attempt, which prompts her to burst the Disney-esque “I want”-song, “A Diagnosis” (S03 E06). Bathed in warm sunlight (even though she is walking down the hallway of an outpatient care center) and accompanied by a full orchestra, Rebecca fantasizes about her new sense of belonging, as she asks her psychiatrist to “prescribe [her her] tribe.” Her heartfelt rendition makes tangible the elation she feels at the prospect. Yet the series still incorporates comedic elements which serve to lighten the mood, even as they remind audiences of her underlying issues. As Rebecca weighs her different options – “Schizophrenic or bipolar lite / I’ve never heard voices / but maybe it’s time to start” –, she promptly starts hearing voices which comment on her “confusing” choice of words (“Time to blow this joint / and by joint I mean my inner sense of confusion”) and thus serve yet again as an externalization of her inner critic. The musical style and visual parallels (such as Rebecca’s walk towards the camera, a man in the background catching something she throws, people dancing in circles around her) furthermore connect “A Diagnosis” to the series’ very first song, “West Covina,” which introduced the romance plot and whose reprise has repeatedly kept that theme alive. By “confusing things” – to return to Berlant and Ngai’s argument – namely swapping diagnostic certainty for romantic

fulfilment in this ode to Rebecca's new future, "A Diagnosis" might be the series harshest indictment of the "crazy in love"-trope. It also presents an affectively intense moment of identification with a lead character not despite, but because of her mental disorder.

OFFENSIVELY UNCOMFORTABLE

Keith Phips echoes several other critics, when he notes that *CXG* is "so comfortable making viewers uncomfortable that it's hard to watch too much at once" (Phips 2017). From its premise of a 'mad woman at the centre' *CXG* derives the leeway to employ a variety of offences against form and taste. Its heightened sense of reality helps ground the musical format, which in turn allows for extended interior monologues in song format which justify moments of gross-out and cringe humour – if people are basically talking to themselves, why would they censor themselves? The show intensifies the uncomfortable laughter which results from these transgressive forms of humour through often incongruous visual or musical styles, which add, however, their own kind of pleasure through their inter- and metatextual references. Such references, in turn, connect the show to the cultural scripts of postfeminism and romance, whose offensive key characteristics – filtered through music as an expression of deeper truths and vis-à-vis Rebecca's excessive obedience to their demands – are made impossible to ignore. By furthermore treating Rebecca's mental illness as neither a metaphor nor a joke, *CXG* condemns the habitual confluences of love and madness – and the media tropes and formats which support them. At the same time, the cringe-musical-dramedy-series uses its uncomfortable humour to broaden the spectrum of female representation and of feminist comedy as it "break[s] down the barriers that say women must not speak about scatological, gynecological, or sexual matters in public" and rejects the assumption that women are "not funny" because of their "very different attitude towards filth and embarrassment" (Mizejewski and Sturtevant 2017, 3). Basking in the "affective messiness" (Graefer) of humour that is as pleasurable as it is distasteful and musical interludes which are as catchy as they are darkly disturbing, *CXG*, might not be – to return to the aforementioned *Slate*-review – "trying to make a point" by its low ratings, but certainly by the underlying issue: deep discomfort.

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