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***I Love Dick*: A Pop-Cultural Investigation of Desire and the Female Gaze**

Abstract: This paper intends to outline an analysis of the Amazon series *I Love Dick*, based on the pseudo-autobiographical theoretical fiction by experimental (self-described ‘failed’) filmmaker Chris Kraus. The series completed its first season in 2017, and it appears it will not be coming back for a second, as its non-cushioned feminist agenda and sophisticated intertextual elements seem to have not resonated with the mass audience. However, the series brings into popular/mass culture not only an erratic contemplation (mind the oxymoron) on intersectional feminism, but a provocative uncensored performance of female desire. Jill Soloway, creator of the series, insists on its being a celebration of the *female gaze*, which begs the question what is the aesthetic and political significance of what we could call the female gaze. The series is not solely an adaptation, it is an artistic reaction to the text, adding characters and changing some of the premises of the text, while remaining true to the general project. This article aims to map out some of the intertextual elements in the series and provide an interpretation based mostly on revisiting Laura Mulvey’s critique of narrative cinema in the framework of psychoanalytic theory, as the fictional Chris passes through the fantasy, slides through the chain of signifiers, challenging Dick/the phallic element, and finds her creative power in the very subversive act of – accepting failure.

Keywords: feminism; popular culture; psychoanalysis; abjection; love

1. Introduction: New ‘women’s’ genres

1.1. Questions of desire

As with anything else in our culture, there is a complex gendered history to television series, the most recognizable *women’s genre* being the soap opera, structured and timed to accommodate ‘the housewife’. The almost ritualistic practice of following one’s show has come to an end with the rise of the Internet, streaming services and torrent sites, which allow for watching any series at one’s own convenience, oftentimes binge-watching the entire season. Hence, the *Mesdames Bovary* obsessively consummating these never-ending narratives are a mythological thing of the past, while much of today’s *women’s* serial genres, TV and online series above all, have distinctly different aesthetics and poetics, having been heavily influenced by feminism. This article aims to outline an analysis of the one-season Amazon series *I Love Dick*

(2016–17), created by Jill Soloway, as representative of this new pop cultural wave, but also as a very specific project that tackles questions of female desire and female (artistic) authorship. Soloway is known as a vocal feminist, whose work aims to “topple the patriarchy” (her production company called *Topple*),¹ both in terms of the explored topics as well as employment and what she deems ‘feminist work ethics’, i.e. a more horizontal approach within the crew during filming.² She talks about her projects as having an agenda, as ‘tracts’, made with and through the ‘female gaze’. Given that the series is concerned primarily with the question of the *female gaze* and *female* desire, the investigation will start with the cult essay by Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, raising questions of what is there to be gained by revisiting Mulvey’s text more than four decades later, both methodologically and in terms of content. Specifically, the article is interested in the following: 1) what is the ontological and political significance of the *female gaze* and how is it aesthetically constructed in the series in question, and 2) what is the relationship of the series to female authorship, avant-garde cinema and the de(con)struction of cinematic pleasure?

1.2. The *I Love Dick* phenomenon

DEVON: It’s about a couple from New York. It’s not about a couple, it’s about a woman. And she’s trying to become somebody, but she hates herself.

Among the many contemporary series informed by feminist idea(l)s, that tackle something old and something new of the feminist agenda, an interesting place is held by *I Love Dick*, released in 2016–17 on Amazon, based on the (post-)modern classic novel of the same name by Chris Kraus. Kraus’ work is a fictionalized autobiography, a pseudo-memoir, infused with ambitious theoretical excursions into various artistic works, but also into socio-political topics, regarded from a strong subject(ive) position of a woman/artist/thinker/person in love with a certain Dick. Two decades later, Jill Soloway created the *I Love Dick* series,³ not so much aiming to translate the book into television format, as to capture its importance as a phenomenon. To quote Soloway: “For us, *I Love Dick* is not just about adapting the book, but about trying to record the feeling of what happens when you read the book. Chris is so comfortable with her desire and her creativity that it shocks everyone who reads it into their own

¹ Gabriella Paiella, “Jill Soloway Ended Her Emmys Speech With a Call to Topple the Patriarchy,” *The Cut*, <https://www.thecut.com/2016/09/jill-soloway-wants-to-topple-the-patriarchy.html>, acc. June 30, 2018.

² Ariel Levy, “Dolls and Feelings: Jill Soloway’s Post-Patriarchal Television,” *New Yorker*, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/14/dolls-and-feelings>, acc. April 1, 2018.

³ Jill Soloway was the driving force of the project, credited for writing all eight episodes and directing two, while the teleplay was written by Sarah Gubbins, four episodes were directed by Andrea Arnold, and one by Jim Frohna and one by Kimberly Pierce.

artistic awakening.”⁴ What Kraus did was make raw desire and love into material for analysis, the analysis into a cultural theory project, the project into her own artistic awakening, in a personal and sincere way that incited (and wanted to incite) other women to create, write, express their desires and longings, their failures and humiliations. In matters of genre and structure, the *novel* is extremely complex, framed initially by a novelistic third person, but consisting mostly of the first/second person form of letters, that start to function almost like a diary.⁵ As Kraus has experienced her own confrontation with a failed carrier in experimental film, as well as a sensual *coming to writing* (Cixous)⁶ in *I Love Dick*, so have many other women been drawn into the exploration of their desire through the non-censored exegesis by Kraus. Soloway somewhat changes the premises of the narrative, and broadens the scope by introducing three more female characters whose relationship to Dick, the macho artist superstar, is also significant, and their lives are altered by Chris’ project of articulating her desire and making it painfully public.

1.3. The histories of desire

CHRIS: Sometimes when I walk down the street, I look into the faces of every woman I pass, and I wonder what she sees. I wonder about the history of her desire. Dear Dick, what if we all started writing you letters?

While the book follows Chris across the country, as she writes her diary-letters, the series is set in a small town in Texas called Marfa (“a place where masculinity had been running rampant” according to Soloway⁷), where Chris follows her husband Sylvère Lotringer to his residency at Dick’s institute and gradually draws him and the whole town into her infatuation. The series introduces three more female characters, but Soloway’s Chris is so encapsulated in her fantasy that she hardly makes contact with other women. However, in one way or another, she does make an impact on all of their lives, provoking them to address and articulate in various ways their own complex relationship to Dick. The fifth episode is constructed of four letters by the four characters to Dick, which also function like manifestos of intersectional feminism.

⁴ Amanda Hess, “Chris Kraus and Jill Soloway Talk About the Show *I Love Dick*,” *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/05/arts/television/i-love-dick-amazon-chris-kraus-and-jill-soloway.html>, acc. April 1, 2018.

⁵ As far as *women’s genres* go, autobiography, as well as diary, as well as letters, have a dynamic and not at all simple relationship to what traditionally could be considered gendered genres. While autobiography is a genre supposing a socially and politically significant life worth recounting (traditionally reserved for men), letters and diaries are personal, intimate genres, not meant for the public eye. The book plays on these genres as well as essayistic and theoretical ones, weaving them into a complex narrative, which the series will attempt to translate with strategies that will be explored further in the text.

⁶ Cf. Helene Cixous, *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (London, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁷ Hess, “Chris Kraus and Jill Soloway Talk About the Show *I Love Dick*.”

TOBY: Dear Dick. Or should I say: Dear Great Man, genius, loner, cowboy...

You've made a career by moving boulders, cutting trenches in the desert, making art that reminds us of how precious mother earth and her sacred resources are, while also reminding us of the size of your massive steel and concrete cock.

Toby (India Menuetz) is a young, 'achingly beautiful' according to Sylvère, art historian, making a career out of 'formalist' investigations of hard core pornography, all the while refusing to discuss its politics or call her work feminist, and thus be transferred to the academic ghetto of gender studies. Toby is ambitious, intelligent and driven to reach and transcend Dick in terms of acknowledgement and social position, but only seriously destabilizes him when staging a naked performance in the 'man camp' (of workers on the oil pipeline), that reached millions via social media streaming, which makes Dick question the signification and purpose of his own work and decide to leave his institute to his assistant Paula.

PAULA: I'm still here, searching for something you'll say *yes* to.

Paula (Lily Mojekwu) is a black feminist curator, whose character addresses issues of internalized racism and misogyny (misogynoir), but also overcomes them, while introducing to the series a palette of artists through her own interests, such as: Mickalene Thomas, Doris Salcedo, Young Jean Lee, Laura Aguilar, Kara Walker, Kerry James Marshall, Eva Hesse, Zoe Buckman. Although the lot is far from an obscure selection of starving artists, they still remain parts of the counter-canon or alternative canon, not The (Phallogocentric) Canon, for they not only emerge from oppressed and marginalized groups, but many of them contain relevant political statements in their art. After years of waiting for a chance to introduce some of these artists, she only gets the chance when Dick leaves the Institute, underlining how closed up and rigid the institutional scene is.

DEVON: I loved watching you play cowboy with all your women. Watching you, I knew I wanted to grow up to be like you. The hand, not the waist.

Devon (Roberta Colindrez) is a queer latinx playwright, whose family has lived in Marfa for generations, working on ranches owned by various Dicks, and who has long thought of Dick as the ultimate (white) masculine ideal they wanted to reproduce. Their character represents a play on the performativity of male (sic) gender and heterosexuality,⁸ even engaging in a sexual encounter with Toby as a simulation of

⁸ Which is especially interesting since female gender is constructed as significantly more performative. For an extremely elaborate investigation of the topics of subversion and performativity of gender/sex see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993).

heterosexual fellatio, while both are referencing Devon's fictional (?) cock as maybe an ambiguous reference to or realized metaphor of Judith Butler's, *lesbian phallus*.⁹ Devon displays typical (pseudo) alpha male behavior, being possessive, aggressive, and self-righteous, which serves as another deconstruction (or at least destabilization) of the performance of masculinity as cultural norm. However, it is also interesting to note that they attempt to come to terms with the toxic binarism and invite men in the community to do the same through a ritualistic performance meant to celebrate the beauty, tenderness and anger of men in ways it is not necessarily culturally acceptable for them to do.

SYLVERE: You cannot love somebody unless you're willing to destroy yourself. Boom! I did it. Now I know I can love.

It would also be crucial to mention that men are not exclusively used as props to the narrative, although that kind of feminist revenge fantasy is an important aspect of the series. The way the insecurities of both Dick and Sylvère are drawn out through the narrative, their attempts to gain control over the situation at hand, their desperate ultimatums and their attempts to reject Chris, the homosocial bond they form (although Sylvère initially welcomes Dick as a fantasy to revive his and Chris' sex life, he reacts with homophobic stress when Chris exits the restraints of their fantasy and sends the letters to Dick) and even the macho drinking scene in which they discuss Chris' mental health (a sore spot in feminist tradition) and arrange an exchange *between men* (Kosofsky Sedgwick)¹⁰ is moving, almost pathetic. The way they are gradually and completely robbed of the initial power they hold in the first episode also represents their own being released from (perhaps 'crushing?') social expectations, the norm of emotional repression and other behavioral exigencies imposed on men in culture; in the end both men are transformed.

2. *The female gaze*

2.1. Woman as (M)Other and the Oedipal conflict

In her theoretical work, Laura Mulvey uses the macho tradition of early psychoanalysis as symptomatic to the patriarchal psychic constitution to uncover the ways it is produced and reproduced through mass media and pop culture. Although much of the traditional representation in mainstream narrative cinema remains as it had been in classical Hollywood productions, more interestingly, there arise more and more productions that self-consciously challenge the established modes of representation, and I would argue, that build on ideas elaborated by Mulvey nearly half a century ago.

⁹ Ibid, 51–93.

¹⁰ Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

Offering a simplified, but on many accounts on-point polemic with early psychoanalysis, Mulvey states that “in psychoanalysis, woman is a twofold function – the Other, establishing the subjectivity of man, representing the (mother’s) threat of castration that holds up the law of the father, and a mother, raising her (male) child into the symbolic.”¹¹ *I Love Dick* plays on the concept of women’s “establishing the subjectivity of man”, and clearly subverts the positions, making the man into Muse and vessel for the establishing of the subjectivity of woman (as artist and creator no less). Interestingly, none of the central female characters of *I Love Dick* are mothers, but motherhood is touched upon in many significant scenes.¹² The Mother is central to psychoanalytic theory, and presumably between mother and daughter there is a potential mirroring and iteration of life course, as the daughter is eventually pushed to identify with the mother, and desire the father. However, before such identification can be established, the daughter is, according to Freudian theory, also caught up in the Oedipal structure, desiring the mother, and wishing to occupy the father’s place. Returning to Mulvey, it is here that she traces the one of the possibilities for the development of women’s pleasure – at the very moment when they are first confronted with a patriarchal structuring of desire – since the potential to the masculinisation of pleasure is supposedly inscribed in the early psychic development, and then further enforced through socialization and popular imagology. The series’ palette of female characters – Chris, Devon, Paula, and Tobey – are all actually engaged in the Oedipal competition with Dick, not so much seeking to occupy a place at his side, but rather to occupy his place. For Chris and Kraus Dick is uber-Dick, Everydick, a cis gender hetero male, accomplished by the dominant culture’s standards, but somehow fragile and lonely, stuck in the performance of masculinity. It is important to understand that Chris is drawn to Dick as just that: the perfect *performance* of masculinity that cannot really hold up, and she is convinced that she sees the cracks in the polished surface and will not rest until she picks at them. But also, Chris is using the Dick affair to revisit other instances in her earlier life, when she felt drawn to men who were disrespectful and cruel, and the recognition of this fact is most subversive, for it serves as overt representation of feminine (meaning socially produced) self-destructive tendencies and auto-misogyny. It seems the narrative suggests a way to fight those oppressive patterns could be to acknowledge them and go through them (as if going through the fantasy in Lacanian terms), consequently exceeding them and leaving them behind.

¹¹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave, 1989), 14.

¹² In the third episode, Chris mentions her miscarriage and abortion, and equates them awkwardly to her failed film career (“Dead films, dead babies”), while the motive returns in the final episode as she has a vision/hallucination of the sons she never had, holding her while she floats in Dick’s pool. She comments that she expected them to be girls, and as they ask whether she got to do everything that she wanted, she stutters and says that she still has time. It is significant that Chris is turning 40, and although the implication that she is somehow haunted by her ‘dead babies’, to whom she has to validate her choices could be seen as problematic, it is mostly a comic scene that signals her meditation on her life hitherto and the moment in which she finds herself as a person and an artist. As a queer young woman, Devon identified with Dick, especially in terms of romantic conquests, among which was Devon’s mother, while Tobey grew up with an abusive father, and absent or uninterested mother figures. On the other hand, Paula had an extremely close loving relationship to her feminist mother, which shifted after her being confronted with her mother’s period, which led to irrational (induced by patriarchy on an unconscious level) feelings of shame and disgust.

CHRIS: You know, I'm beginning to think there's no such thing as a good woman filmmaker. It's like, how *can* you be if you are just raised to be invisible. I mean, visible. I mean, looked at. I mean, it's a wonder any woman can think of herself as an artist.

The revolutionary moment of *I Love Dick*, the phenomenon, is accepting failure, being a loser, embracing that which is considered humiliating so as to free herself from 'crushing expectations' and *Goffmanian* social performances, which is especially significant when it comes to women, since the charming loser is an old male type, while the female one still remains almost shocking.

2.2. Look who's looking now: inversions and subversions of the gaze

In one of her central theses, Mulvey asserts that the "message of fetishism concerns not woman, but the narcissistic wound she represents for man", while women "are constantly confronted with their own image in one form or another, but what they see bears little relation or relevance to their own unconscious fantasies, their own hidden fears and desires". Mainstream iconography is structured in a way that avoids addressing sexuality that is not patriarchal-masculinist-heteronormative. Following Mulvey further:

[Women] are being turned all the time into objects of display, to be looked at and gazed at and stared at by men. Yet, in a real sense, women are not there at all. The parade has nothing to do with woman, everything to do with man. The true exhibit is always the phallus. Women are simply the scenery onto which men project their narcissistic fantasies. The time has come for us to take over the show and exhibit our own fears and desires.¹³

The question arises how 'we' can show that which the culture makes unapproachable throughout the entire socialization, not only to women, but also to men. If we are talking about unconscious fears and desires (and the underlying fears and desires are always unconscious), it is not possible that 'we' are not already exhibiting them, however they are processed to fit into the dominant socio-political system. Thus, the imperative sounds feminist and empowering but does not hold up in the broader context of what Mulvey is saying, since what can be seen of conscious fears and desires is only a removed socially acceptable manifestation of the unconscious structures and drives, and while early psychoanalysis attempted to reconstruct some of the ways unconscious is modified and resurfaces, it mostly explained these underwater currents in connection to patriarchy. While Mulvey criticizes the patriarchal

¹³ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 13.

gendered approach of psychoanalysis, she does little to challenge the binary structure and essentialism underlying these investigations. The *male gaze* can only be established as a socio-political category (the same way gender and sex are), and it would be safe to assume that the *male* fears and desires on display are also products of the culture, and severely reductive in relation to that which human sex, gender and sexuality, presumably, could be. As patriarchy is a system imposed on both women and men, and mainstream media is, among other things, meant to uphold it, it produces the asymmetry of power, and inflicts its consequences on every aspect of human life. In more of the same, Mulvey states, “the sexualised image of woman says little or nothing about women’s reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected on to the female image”,¹⁴ and in fact the conventional representation of that which is supposedly erotic (sexually stimulating) generally says little of various possibilities of human sexuality, but is symptomatic of the heteronormative performance of sexuality and power. The series *I Love Dick* switches the gendered positions, but does not, in fact, change the structure itself, which provokes two arguments: 1) firstly, therein lies an ontological questioning of the fixed positions, implying that they are unstable and can shift at any point, and 2) secondly, it provides no alternative to the asymmetrical power relation between the ‘sexes’ in an erotic relationship (as well as in culture). In other words, by focusing on the devouring sexual(ized) desire of Chris and other characters, and the inversion of the gaze, the series functions as a provocative parody constructed to underline the “deep seated discomfort with women’s active looking”¹⁵, at the heart of patriarchal culture.

Also significantly, Mulvey emphasizes scopophilia, with its narcissistic (sic) basis, as crucial to mainstream film, in which there are two distinct modes: male/active and female/passive.¹⁶ In *I Love Dick*, it is the image of Dick (Kevin Bacon) that is fragmented and sexualized through Chris’ gaze, incorporated in parodic stereotypical cowboy scenarios (he first appears on a horse), which render him strong and mysterious, but gentle and beautiful, with a permanent threat of homoeroticism underlying the type he inhabits. The series actually develops a rather elaborate scopophilic web, in which almost everyone watches everyone, the emphasis being on the *female gaze*. While making the gaze *female* makes it visible, as the *male gaze* is naturalized in cultural perception, the point is also that, if the constituted *female gaze* is only the *male gaze* with changed direction, there is not much *toppling the patriarchy* at play, only a role change in the same choreography. Turning to one of Mulvey’s later texts:

Apart from inversion, shifts in position are hard to envisage. And should the system be challenged by ‘a new symbolism, a new law’, it is equally hard to envisage where that new ‘symbolic’ would come from. [...] As I argued in relation to the strategies of the avant-garde, a negation or

¹⁴ Ibid, xiii.

¹⁵ Rita Felski, *Literature After Feminism* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 33.

¹⁶ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19.

inversion of dominant codes and conventions can fossilize into a dualistic opposition or it can provide a spring-board, a means of testing out the terms of a dialect, an unformed language that can then develop in its own signifying space.¹⁷

3. Women, avant-garde, and the de(con)struction of cinematic pleasure

3.1. Female desire beyond the cinematic pleasure principle

DEVON, reading CHRIS's letter: I was born into a world that presumes here is something grotesque unspeakable about female desire. But now all I want is to be undignified. To trash myself. I wanna be a female monster.

TOBY: There are 500 times as many female nudes in art history textbooks, Dick, as there are female artists.

In *I Love Dick*, we can trace the desire of women, not so much to *have* Dick, but to *be* Dick, and his very tangible, and valid fear of them, i.e. castration. In Lacanian terms, the phallus being a symbolic term for a signifier without a signified, linking the castration complex to the first push into the desiring mechanism, the sliding through the chain of signifiers, in pursuit of ever elusive and interchangeable objects of desire, Dick represents the holder of the Law, he is perceived as not an individual man, but as function. According to Lauren Berlant's concise essay on love and desire in the psychoanalytic context:

Neither the male nor the female ever 'possesses' the phallus: it can only represent loss and desire. In Lacanian terms, however, only the woman represents the *objet a*, the unattainable Other who always exceeds the phallic value she is supposed to represent. Men live wholly in the Symbolic, insofar as they live the privilege and burden of identifying with/as the Law.¹⁸

Paradoxically, in *I Love Dick*, it is the man/the Dick, who represents the unattainable Other, but also lives wholly in the Symbolic, while the women seek to inhabit his status, gaining the 'privilege and burden.' Dick's hypnotism lays greatly in his freedom and confidence, his being easily affirmed by the culture, his nonchalance with invading and penetrating nature with his work. Notably, Dick's art in the series is portrayed as 'typical' megalomaniacal minimalist art (meaning minimalist aesthetic

¹⁷ Ibid, 168–69.

¹⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Love/Desire* (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), 57.

in huge formats), the style that has been considered macho and in many ways counter to feminist art; apolitical, sterile, mathematical, unorganic. Also interestingly, Dick's sculptures have an industrial aesthetic, and are set in deserts, where they colonize an empty natural space, as another metaphor of the strong erect loner with rough edges.¹⁹ Throughout the series his outlook is challenged and he is impelled to change, soften, open up to the irrational and chaotic, although the latter being representative of a feminine force is, once again, almost disappointingly in the binary vein of traditional essentialist prejudices of what is considered feminine/masculine. However, it is exactly the element of subverting that which is comfortable and easy, that which opens up the space to a 'new language of desire':

It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. [...] The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favour of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, nor of intellectualised unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film.²⁰

In the novel, Kraus definitely analyses pleasure, beauty, desire, and love, and the series somewhat engages in a similar effort, but whether Chris of the series does so remains uncertain, as everything we hear from the letters is more expression than analysis. Although the much discussed fifth episode gives space for each of the four characters to articulate their *herstory* and the *herstory* of their desire, again, the recounting does not take the form of analysis. But the very fact of their naming their desire, one which is not systemically supported, is subversive, and resonates strongly because of the gender shift.²¹ Furthermore, the way Chris is portrayed resists conventional sexualisation of the female character, resists the *male gaze* – she is loud, often vulgar, messy, and easily distraught; her irrationality is not framed as cute and playful in the vein of manic pixie dream girl, she is obsessive, and pushy, and embarrassing. When Mulvey calls for “total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film” as an alternative that is “the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire”, one could

¹⁹ In a significant comical moment, Toby accidentally breaks one of Dick's sculptures while dancing to *Bailaná* by Brazilian group Barbatuques (a sensual, almost shamanistic dance), a sculpture that represents a perfect brick (“Dick's brick”), referencing and parodying fragile masculinity. Also memorably, after being confronted with Chris' letters and having a day-drinking marathon, Dick encounters the broken brick, embraces it, rearranges the pieces and calls it a new work, thus showing an interest in re-evaluating his rigidity.

²⁰ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 16.

²¹ As Paula experiences that the moment that she was confronted with the name and function of masturbation via a schoolbook, the practice itself became shameful, one could argue that the fact of naming always somehow changes meaning, but the context is crucial – in this case, the naming came from a sterile institutional conservative framework which made the intimate exciting practice into something universal, yet somehow embarrassing (especially when it comes to girls and women).

argue that *I Love Dick* at least attempts something of the sort. The series adopts some of the aesthetics of documentary features (although the distinction today is hardly functional) such as hand-held camera and neutral-greyish 'realistic' colours, but also contains highly stylized sequences (of visions and fantasies), intertexts (bright red with white letters) and narration, that add to the framing of the main narrative into an individual female-run story. Furthermore, by use of quotations from other (in great part, but not exclusively feminist) works, coherence is destroyed, and the entire fifth episode uses talking to the camera, as well as temporal jumps and simultaneity that juxtapose two versions of the focalizer (past and future) in the same frame.

3.2. An intertextual artistic *herstory*

DICK: "It's just a question of desire – not timing, or talent, or circumstance, it's pure *want*." [...]

CHRIS: "If all it took was desire, Dick, there would be a trove of amazing films by women filmmakers, but..."

DICK: "Well, unfortunately, most films made by women aren't. that good. See I think it's pretty rare for a woman to make a good film because they have to work from behind their oppression, which makes for some bummer movies."

CHRIS: "Sally Potter! Jane Campion! Chantal Akerman!"²²

It can be read as indicative that Chris is a failed filmmaker, unable to articulate the 'society's crushing expectations' from women, so if we take Mulvey quite literally, it would be impossible for a woman to engage in a medium, driven by the male gaze and plagued with the patriarchal unconscious, at least in order to make a mainstream, comfortable feature, since hers is a position of chaos and threat. When confronted with the impossibility to make 'good' films, according to Dick (the arbiter), she names, as her arguments, Sally Potter, Jane Campion, and Chantal Akerman, all belonging to the feminist canon, also approved by the mainstream canon. That is the first instance in which the narrative is interrupted with clips from work by other remarkable authors, which will be employed as a strategy throughout the series. The first visual

²² Later on, Chris confesses to Devon that she doesn't like films made by women, and prefers Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola, which is a counterintuitive display of auto-misogyny that underlines her own insecurities, but critic Helen Holmes sees the "meltdown-manifesto" as a crucial moment, in a disappointing way: "What could've been a balletic, nuanced exploration of how women exchange art and ideas devolves into a paint-by-numbers romantic comedy where the joke is, unequivocally, on Chris Kraus – the objective for the dishevelled woman to win the unflinching approval of the desired guy by any means necessary. Considering the show's singular source material, this well-intentioned near miss is a particular disappointment; as witty and skilled as she is as a visual interpreter and poetic voice, director Jill Soloway has missed the point here." Helen Holmes, "You Should Really Read 'I Love Dick' Before Watching It," *Vice*, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gynb4/you-should-really-read-i-love-dick-before-watching-it, acc. April 1, 2018. One could also ask herself what are the implications of the fact that this scene of admitting to like macho mainstream cinema is a feminist deal breaker, and perhaps read the scene as a provocation in that vein.

quotes are of *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1994), *Orlando* (Sally Potter, 1992) and *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975), all of which are films dealing with the position of women in various socio-political contexts, and repression of both women's sexuality and aggression. Significantly, we see the recognizable scene from the end of *The Piano*, when the main character intentionally gets her leg caught in the rope holding the piano that they are throwing overboard the boat they are in, and sinks with her beloved instrument, only to resurface as 'born again,' having let go of the oppressive history that has been holding her back. Then a short frame of Tilda Swinton as Virginia Woolf's androgynous hero/in *Orlando*, a man turned woman that lives through the centuries, followed by one of the final scenes from *Jeanne Dielman...*, when the repressed widowed housewife, silently getting by as a bourgeois prostitute to support herself and her son, snaps and murders one of her clients. The series continues to be haunted by some of the most relevant experimental filmmakers, performance and video artists, that provide commentary, atmosphere, and history lessons to the main narrative. The artists either use their own body as subject and instrument (Carolee Schneemann, Maya Deren, Chantal Akerman, Cheryl Donegan, Marina Abramović, Annie Sprinkle), reference the objectification of women's bodies (Naomi Uman, Petra Cortright), provide space for representation of marginalized groups (Uman, Cauleen Smith) and affirmation of queer aesthetics/poetics/politics (Liz Lerman, Dimitris Papaioannou). Each of the works pin points various moments in the series, mostly serving to once more underline central ideas, and to push these artists and works into mainstream pop culture, by (re)constructing the audio-visual art history *I Love Dick* seeks to inherit in some ways.

4. Pseudo-conclusion: the elusive feminist 'I'

CHRIS: Is this the Dumb Cunt exegesis you were expecting?

It is interesting to remember that Mulvey's writing was connected to and encouraged by the Women's Movement, and emerged as one of many feminist collaborative pieces that sought to erase the authorial/authoritative/authoritarian 'I' of patriarchal academism.²³ Radical feminism employed the motto "The personal is political", but it is important to note that the personal was not meant as individual, but as collective (and therefore political), while today's personal political is mostly meant as immersed into the prevalent individualism, and consequent narcissism, of contemporary culture. Autobiography was a huge part of the radical feminist wave, as its very basis lay in incessant sharing of experiences in safe spaces, and insisting that these experiences be considered important political issues. Women artists in the wake of radical feminism, many of which have been quoted in the series, found refuge in performance art and

²³ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, viii.

video art, in great part because those were new media, and have not yet developed a (patriarchal) tradition, and also partially because they used these media to somehow incorporate their gendered experiences, make themselves both subjects and objects of their own work, in a way that Kraus has also done in her own literary hybrid genre.

Today, the series *I Love Dick* represents part of a relatively broad phenomenon of feminist popular culture, especially feminist TV shows, that affirm non-idealized representations of women, and directly tackle various issues of contemporary feminism. While it has been criticized as a simplified version of the book by some Kraus fans,²⁴ the agenda it promotes, as well as the direct way in which it promotes it, is absolutely significant, as is telling the fact that it was cancelled after the first season, proving that the mass audience finds little amusement in this self-ironic feminist ‘propaganda’. It is extremely difficult to write about this series in the form of anything but questions, the ones it raises and sketches out, and each question would deserve an exhaustive investigation in itself. Kraus’s Chris may be just one woman, but her story became a universal artistic call to arms, while Soloway’s characters are multiple but disconnected, and somewhat monomaniacal. There is no solidarity or friendship between them, and their central desire seems to be one for expression, power and status; it is portrayed as almost devouring and oftentimes aggressive, which lands it in the scope of the very stereotype of dangerous female sexuality, ‘the succubus’, one that is not only after the man’s body and soul, but also his job and position. Can the affirmative way in which this desire is framed in the series make its representation subversive, or does it unwittingly perpetuate the patriarchal value system and perception of possible *femininities*? That, too, would be an unfair over-simplification since the series gives much space to women’s creativeness and authorship, to the hard-earned freedom of expression, and not only freedom to express one’s sexuality and sexual desire, but to be funny, and silly, and embarrassing. It is one thing to analyze the characters and another to focus on the series as a whole, and one cannot deny that the series has fulfilled its purpose as an artistic response to the book, as well as a mode of perpetuating the effect encouraging female creativity and expression through an homage to women’s authorship. The series has drawn attention to the book once again, and has proven to be inspirational to many women (case in point: the late website wewillnotbemuzzled.org on which women and men have written to the Dicks in their own life). Can the established *female gaze* do much to incite different perceptions of gender, of the randomness of compulsory heteronormative fixed positions as opposed to the possibilities of rich and beautiful fluidity? There are no monolithic answers to this question; neither does the criticism of the series efface the positive sides it definitely has. Also, in the context of multiple *dunhamesque* ‘fourth wave’ feminist productions, *I Love Dick* stands out as more aware of the intersectional approach as well as less promoting of the popular narcissistic individual feminism that almost completely lacks a political statement. For while we celebrate the advent of more and more popular/

²⁴ “Rather than negotiate and reconcile with Chris’s particular self loathing, Soloway turns *I Love Dick* into an unintentionally sympathetic ode to masculinity and marriage, albeit one peppered with the prerequisite dose of postmodern irony. Read the book instead.” Holmes, “You Should Really Read ‘I Love Dick’ Before Watching It”.

populist feminist content, we must remain wary of the multiple binds of gender representations, as well as the implications and limitations of the dominant neoliberal feminism that reaches mainstream media and mass audiences.

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Article received: March 31, 2018

Article accepted: May 10, 2018

Original scholarly paper