

# INTERSECTIONAL GENDER-QUEER FEMINIST DESIRE (OR, WHAT THE HETERO GAZES MISS WHEN WATCHING “I LOVE DICK”)



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## Abstract

Sarah Gubbins and Joey Soloway’s recent series “I love Dick” – an adaptation of a cult feminist novel by Chris Kraus – demonstrates a rare, visceral grasp of the deep roots of gender oppression. The response to this oppression is intersectional, anti-racist, gender-queer empowerment and feminist desire. It’s inspiring and must be defended from (misunderstanding vis-à-vis) the perspective of the heteronormative gaze, still dominant together with the masculinist and racist gaze in the maturing 21<sup>st</sup> century. In its deviations from the novel, the screen adaptation activates intersectional connections that remain underdeveloped in the original. If the novel mines sexual oppression and gives voice to feminist desire in its raw and terrific power, I read the series as excavating sexual oppression at the intersection of sex, gender, race and class, and giving voice to (gender-)queer desire in all its fantastic force.

## Key words

*intersectionality, gender-queer theory, feminism, desire, anti-racism, series*

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“Is it then necessary to use our organs like the others do? Cannot we transform our eating-tools into purely artistic organs of perception? Cannot we do the same with our sexual system? According to me, the transformation of the organism belongs to the intentions of nature”.

Paul Scheerbart, *I Love You*<sup>1</sup>

The dominant heteronormative gaze, along with the masculinist and racist gaze, is still all but ubiquitous in the maturing 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. The recent Amazon TV series “I love Dick” – adopted by Sarah Gubbins and Joey Soloway from a cult feminist novel

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Elisa Santucci in unpublished dissertation, *B. Anal*.

<sup>2</sup> I thank my students at JHU in our inquiry into “Critical Knowledges: Black, feminist, queer, other”, for highlighting this point. Although no dominant gaze is monolithic and dominant gazes may be more accurately described in the plural, I use the singular to underscore such gazes’ too often successful aim at reification.

by Chris Kraus – demonstrates a rare, visceral grasp of the deep intersectional roots of gender oppression. The response to this oppression is intersectional, gender-queer empowerment and feminist desire. It's inspiring and must be defended from (misunderstanding vis-à-vis) the perspective of the heteronormative gaze<sup>3</sup>.

Kraus's 1997 novel was not appreciated until the 21<sup>st</sup> century, according to Alexandra Schwartz (Schwartz 2017). Similarly, its 2017 on-screen adaptation, led by Soloway, continues to be misunderstood and underestimated by both critics and enthusiasts. This story of desire is not only timely and relevant but points at the heart of oppression *and* its overcoming. In deviations from the novel (lamented by some of its fans), the screen adaptation highlights intersectional connections that alter the narrative structure. If the novel mines sexual oppression of women and gives voice to feminist desire in its raw and terrific power, I *read* the series as excavating sexual oppression at the intersection of sex, gender, race and class and giving voice to intersectional, (gender-)queer desire in all its fantastic force. To miss this passage attests to the enduring epistemic power of dominant gaze/s in the matrix of domination.

A summary can rarely if ever do justice to a work of art. Yet to facilitate understanding, I briefly sketch out the plot of Chris Kraus' book *I Love Dick*, before addressing the ways in which the on-screen adaptation builds on the transformative scope of the story. Kraus's autobiographical and theoretical novel focuses on her apparent sexual desire for a colleague of her husband's, whose name is Dick. The feminist force of the work arises from the ways in which Kraus *shamelessly* expresses her desire, in the process questioning entrenched gender and sexual norms that govern heteronormativity<sup>4</sup>. The names Dick and Chris are felicitous to such an undertaking: the ever-explicit Dick, and the apparently gender-neutral Chris, whose expression of desire moves the story beyond the realms of shame. These names highlight how much the seemingly simple reversal of gendered places between subject and object of desire open the door to subverting dominant narratives.

In analyzing the TV series' deviations from the original, I start with details that lead to its deep anchoring in the concrete crests and limitations of its own visual medium<sup>5</sup>. In the novel, the nominal addressee of the title, and one of the (emphatically *not* three) main characters: Dick, is a cultural theorist and colleague of Sylvère (Kraus 1997). Sylvère is married to Chris Kraus - the author of the novel and main character of both the novel and the series. In the series, rather than being a British theorist, Dick is a Texan artist and director of the interdisciplinary art institute in Marfa, Texas, where Sylvère is a visiting fellow. It is certainly possible to lament any changes in terms of unfaithfulness to the original. Yet, however

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<sup>3</sup> See Fazekaš' critical essay on the so-called "female gaze" in this series.

<sup>4</sup> In "Queer Performativity," a key text of queer theory, Sedgwick defines queerness as a playful (rather than a shameful) relation to shame.

<sup>5</sup> For a specific analysis of feminist pedagogy through video in the series, see Sinwell.

perfect Dick's role as a theorist may be in a written text (underscoring the shared medium of language in theoretical and textual work), his erection of enormous and rather phallic art pieces in the desert is a perfect on-screen adaptation that visually represents the pomp of phallic power. Just as the name Dick exposes the nominalism of Lacanian collusion of symbolic and phallic power through the-Name-of-the-Father, so Dick's in-your-face sculptures that are little more than bricks and rocks whose power comes from interpretation and requires technology to erect, highlight the vulnerability and fallibility of the gendered symbolic<sup>6</sup>. Dick's position as Sylvère's superior in the series also succinctly underscores the professional power that he is attributed by Kraus in the novel. Most of the changes Soloway implements are those of a careful translator who adapts images from the page onto the screen, if not in the most subtle way, then nevertheless in both a situated and an effective manner.

These translations make for a stunning visual experience, one in which beauty is deeply anti-normative, and thus also transformative. In this vein, the obsessive love letters Chris pens to Dick are transformed from self-analysis into what Schwartz calls "pathetic sound bites," more akin to manifestos on bumper stickers than critique (Schwartz, *Ibid.*). In addition to accommodating the short form of a screened series, these changes correspond to the alteration in Chris's character between her original journey of direct empowerment in the novel to the more fallible, funny and yes, often pathetic, progression of fumbles she enacts on screen.

This shift can be read as responding to the changing gendered demands on women. Whereas in late 20<sup>th</sup> century women struggled to overcome limitations set for them by others, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the primary issue in many parts of the world has arguably become to reject the constant demands on women to do *everything*. Thus, the struggle is as much how to say "no" to goads for perfectibility and overwork as it is to demand more opportunities. This shift is paralleled by the issues Chris's character experiences in her life as a director.

The Chris of the series is more of a Donna Quixote than a feminist sine qua non or tragic hero of the novel. Her journey in the series is not one of personal self-empowerment qua woman, exactly. Although the series addresses the lingering and ongoing need for this, Chris's trajectory tacitly deviates from any straightforward accomplishment in one direction. This is hilariously and poignantly symbolized by her criticism of Dick's obsession with perfection in "straight lines" ("I love Dick" 2017). Once more, Dick's on-screen representation as a conceptual artist in the desert could not be better suited to represent the clinamen, or veering off the straight course, performed by the series<sup>7</sup>. When Chris brings her work to show Dick to gain admission to his sough-after art seminar, he dismisses her film having seen less than 10 seconds

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<sup>6</sup> Lacan, *Book III. Psychoses*. See also Rubin.

<sup>7</sup> On the significance of clinamen for critical thought, see Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*.

of it by saying it is not “his thing”. Outraged by his predetermined dismissal (he had already told her on their first outing with her husband that he is not interested in “women’s films”), Chris attacks one of his sculptures perched in the middle of the exhibition room: a brick. Dick defends “his thing” by pointing to the perfection of straight lines, which become unraveled, or to be more precise, broken, by the *other* characters in the series.

Women/queers of color are repeatedly positioned as both marginalized *and* central for the unfolding of the series. Although the apparently heterosexual white triad (Chris, Dick, Sylvère) appears at the center of the story, the series introduces and features other characters who condition the undoing of the straight trajectory and the exchange (of women) between men<sup>8</sup>. In the first episode, the observant Devon, played dazzlingly by Roberta Colindrez, appears next door to Sylvère and Chris’s new abode in Marfa, Texas. The way the camera presents them – it is not clear in the series which pronoun Devon might prefer (not for lack of attention but, perhaps, because this may not be clear to Devon themselves): hence I will use “they/them”<sup>9</sup> – continuously focusing on the head, facial expressions, and eyes, situates Devon as arguably *the* main addressee and agent of the work rather than a passive observer. The first time we meet Devon in the pilot episode, they are watching Chris’s meltdown from their trailer after Chris gets the news that her film will not be screened at the Venice film festival. Devon invites Chris in and gives her tips about navigating Marfa. Devon’s family has been living in Marfa for generations, and Devon is the one who “takes care of everything” as the handyperson for the Marfa art institute headed by Dick. Devon lends Chris a pair of cowboy boots to protect her from the abundant rattlers. This gift is not a simple gesture of initiation. Rather, it functions as a totem that sets off the gendered identity exchanges that lie at the heart of the series, progressively decentering the white, class-privileged heteronormativity that ostensible dominates the story. This decentering movement exceeds any simple exchange<sup>10</sup>.

Devon is more than the supporting catalyst of transformation: throughout its trajectory the series circumscribes the odyssey of privileged white feminist desire, making space for Devon’s creative, collaborative, critical, intersectional performance. As the story unfolds, Devon will take the responsibility and the blame for shattering Dick’s would-be perfect artwork of straight lines. Although it is Devon’s white lover who knocks over Dick’s brick, she does so in the context of a rehearsal for

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<sup>8</sup> For a succinct, in-depth critique of the exchange of women as the grounds of culture, see Rubin. See also Sedgwick’s *Between Men*.

<sup>9</sup> “Colindrez refers to the character as ‘she’ sometimes, ‘they’ at other times. ‘If I tried to say ‘Devon is this kind of person’ or even if I said *she* is this kind of person, I think Devon would step in and be like, ‘Nah. I haven’t done it. Why would you?’”.

<sup>10</sup> For more on the separation of the phallus from men, see Butler’s “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary”.

Devon's play, organized by the latter. Thus, it is Devon who gets fired from their job for this out-of-control performance, which they inspire and instigate, if not author.

The series thus proliferates characters and tacitly alters the original relationships of the story. Another change in the on-screen adaptation concerns the letters Chris writes, explicitly addressed to Dick, which are central to the narrative structure of both the novel and the series, yet in critically different ways. In the novel, the missives arise from a playful exchange between Chris and Sylvère (the married couple); whereas in the series Chris pens the first letter while Sylvère is trying to fall asleep. Once her husband finds out about the letters, he is mortified. Although this writing does temporarily become a sexually charged object of exchange sustaining the couple, as soon as Chris turns them into more than a private plaything, that is, a public work of art, it creates a rift between the couple. In her review, Schwartz laments these changes. Schwartz is right in noting that these alterations introduce critical difference into the structure of the narrative. Their accomplishment is to decenter the heterosexual couple, and, ultimately, by becoming objects of connection – rather than exchange – among the othered others in the story, the letters set off a series of signifiers that alter the subterranean substructure for the story<sup>11</sup>. This subterfugal movement permeates the series, increasingly displacing the terms of exchange at its core. To grasp these alterations better, a brief theoretical detour is useful.

The penultimate, seventh episode, “The Barter Economy,” begins with Chris finally poised to satisfy her apparent sexual desire for Dick. In the previous, sixth episode, Dick and Sylvère come to a reluctant understanding as rational men, the result of which is that Dick agrees to “fuck” Chris so that she can get her desire for him out of her system. This, the men agree eventually, over drinks, is the only way to placate her<sup>12</sup>. When Dick comes to Chris's motel room, the atmosphere is strangely flat yet charged, at the same time. Chris senses the rat and vehemently rejects the terms of the exchange.

“The Barter Economy” echoes Gayle Rubin's groundbreaking essay, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex”, which examines the anthropological and psychoanalytic intersection of the theories explaining and *de facto* rationalizing (although not thereby *causing*, as Rubin underscores) the oppression of women (Rubin 1975, 201-203). The connection between the series and the critique of the exchange of women as grounding culture and society is vital for grasping the reach of “I love Dick,” and the ways in which Soloway brings it to a contemporary pitch.

Rubin weaves together Lacan's critical and speculative psychoanalytic work on language together with a critique of Levi-Strauss's theories of cultural anthropology to offer a theory of her own on the contingent nature of the subjugation of women

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<sup>11</sup> Thus, the letters, like the cowboy boots, function as proliferating totems qua wandering phalluses, displacing by proliferation, detachment and wandering, the heteronormative matrix of domination.

<sup>12</sup> See Fazekaš reading of this exchange in terms of the homosocial bond analyzed by Sedgwick in *Between Men* (Fazekaš 2018, 93).

(Rubin Ibid.). By reading the implication at the crossroads of Levi-Strauss and Lacan—far from feminist yet at the same time insightful – canonical thinkers, Rubin argues that the unconscious structures of the sex/gender system that subordinates women are historical and changeable. Judith Butler cites Rubin in her revolutionary work on queer theory that understands gender not so much as a gay masquerade but rather as the work of mourning and melancholia (Butler 1990, 92-95). In light of this exchange, gender *and* sex (this is one of Butler’s troubling contributions) are not constructed as if sculpted from nothing, rather the heteronormative matrix of domination re-produces both sex and gender as vectors of intersecting modes of oppression. Mourning the foreclosure of homosexual desire, the sex/gender system is produced to enforce obligatory heterosexuality. And if one cannot so much as admit the loss of homosexual desire, then melancholia defines gender and the sex assignment used to enforce it in the heteronormative matrix (Butler 1990, 77-95).

The melancholy constitution of the sex/gender system in the heteronormative matrix is embodied by the sullen and mesmerizing title character: Dick. In Lacan’s theory, “the name of the father” is defined by the phallus in the symbolic order around which gendered positions are organized. Butler’s essay “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary” shows how the phallus is biologically detached from the penis and yet is symbolically attached to...well, the wandering Dick. In Soloway’s version of the story, Dick’s sultry character, played tantalizingly by Kevin Bacon, embodies and gives silence precisely to the gendered mourning that governs the unconscious assignment of positions in the symbolic. But something surprising and radical happens in and through this characterization, which muddies, troubles or queers these positions, if you like, in the best possible way<sup>13</sup>.

The subversive power of the story lies in part in the numerous ways in which Chris refuses to accept Dick’s sexist disinterest in her qua her work. The apparent conflation of Chris and her artistic production parodies the reduction of minoritized feminist work to its gendered and racialized author/s. What is more significant, however, is the way in which Dick’s cool, emotionless clichéd persona serves the very dénouement that strikes at the core of gendered, sexed positions in the matrix of domination.

But before I tell you this story, I need to tell you another story, for which I wager that this quasi-heterosexual whitish drama, however feminist, in fact appears to constitute the foil. The understated (though not for that reason underdeveloped) part of the series constitutes the deep intersectional, gender-queer heartbeat of “I love Dick”. At least, that is my performative *and* critical thesis.

At the climax of the story, when Chris finally leaves her husband and takes her desire into her own hands, she and her two non-competing white cis-male partners are displaced by an episode largely about other *ed* and feminized characters. While it

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<sup>13</sup> See also Fazekaš astute analysis of Dick as totem of masculine privilege – qua failure (94-5).

is possible to dismiss this episode and the role of queers and women of color throughout the episodes as too small a part of the series to fully decenter the quasi-hetero drama that takes up most of the story, it is structurally central to the plot and propels the narrative into its dénouement. This agency exhibits Soloway's overtly stated intention of "toppling" patriarchy with their work<sup>14</sup>. Following this desire, rather than sticking to the original story, lodges an alternate and more compelling – in turn also radically more captivating - narrative of gendered and racialized rhythm that alters the fabric of social life.

The fifth episode, co-written by Soloway, Heidi Schreck and Annie Baker, features the narratives of three characters, two of whom work for the Marfa institute directed by Dick: Paula and Devon, and one who is a visiting fellow there (like Sylvère): Toby. Each of them speaks in her own voice, narrating her experiences, which relate to Dick as a singular position of social power: privileged, entitled, exclusionary<sup>15</sup>. Paula Morrison, played by Lily Mojeku, is a black feminist curator, who loves Dick's abstract work but is driven beyond frustration by his refusal to allow her to curate the work of other women of color artists, such as Doris Salcedo and Kara Walker. Toby, played by Bobbi Salvör Menuez, demands to be taken seriously, as Dick is, precisely in her chosen field of art, rather than being forced into "the ghetto of gender studies" (Fazekaš 2018, 92). Devon appears to imitate Dick's masculinity in their genderqueer way. Yet, the final episode picks up on the threads cast throughout the series, where the imitation turns out to be a subversion<sup>16</sup>.

The othered others of the story interrupt, decenter and therefore also undermine the white, heteronormative narrative again, in the final episode. As Chris seems poised to finally take Dick by storm (be it an apparently rather pathetic one), another performance interrupts this *uncoupled* narrative. I resist following the events scene by scene to retain an element of surprise for those that have yet to see the series. Thus, the following account preserves luscious lacunas of the story. As Chris makes a splash by seemingly abandoning her hope of seducing Dick as an equal, which resembles the abandonment of pride and dangerously flirts with feminized need and desperation, Devon organizes a performance in Marfa beyond the walls of Dick's art institute. In fact, Dick has already given up his ownership of the institute to Paula; while Devon had already created their own space in an abandoned building, naming it "the Skid". It is outside this reclaimed space that Devon stages and leads a performance of queer masculinity in which numerous men, prominently including local working-class brown and white men, follow Devon in what the latter calls a beauty dance, which is neither a sham nor an ironic ruse.

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<sup>14</sup> See Paiella's article on Soloway's call to "topple patriarchy" in their Emmy speech.

<sup>15</sup> Fazekaš argues that these narratives function as "manifestos of intersectional feminism" (91).

<sup>16</sup> Fazekaš discusses Devon's character in terms of the critique of gender masquerade offered by Butler's analysis of "the lesbian phallus"; yet Fazekaš remains ambivalent about the critical subversion Devon's character offers (92-3).

Devon succeeds in activating the rhythm of masculinity transformed in concert from an expression of domination to one of vulnerability. Scenes of this “ritual” as Devon describes it, are, in fact, masculine, feminine, queer, intersectional and beautiful. They are neither brief nor enduring, but transitory, interruptive and temporally / qualitatively (if not quantitatively) central.

Meanwhile, having gained admittance to Dick’s home, shivering, freezing and appearing to have given up all demands, Chris takes a bath in Dick’s tub and uses his deodorant. She then puts on his clothes. When she emerges from the bathroom, Dick seems to have become the shy and vulnerable person that Chris has been up to now. For the first time since the start of the show, Chris looks like she’s wearing clothes that fit. Throughout the previous seven episodes she wears mostly sweet, body hugging and sexy dresses that manage to look out of place. Now, in Dick’s loose-fitting flannel shirt and cowboy jeans (complemented by the necessary cowboy boots Devon had given her in the first episode), Chris points out that his clothes fit her “too well”. The comment only seems to deepen that vulnerability that suddenly animates Dick’s face, replacing his characteristic cool aloofness for the first time. And yet, throughout the episode, and despite every effort to the contrary, the seemingly genuine passion between Dick and Chris remains... choked. The exchange of gendered markers, highlighted by external signs but reaching all the way down to both of the characters’ very personas, may light a fire, but this fire falls short of the collective rhythm that the performance organized by Devon unleashes.

If Kathryn Hahn’s Chris is a bumbling, winning klutz, as Schwartz alleges, it is because she embodies a ‘Donna Quixota,’ who sheds her gendered, hetero limitations without rejecting femininity qua differential humanity. More importantly, perhaps, Chris’ fumbling fallibility situates her as Devon and Paula’s foil. The viewer follows Chris, played bewitchingly by Hahn, as she eats 12 tacos at a taco stand, refusing to accept local customs, and walks out having conquered the object of her desire, menstrual blood streaming from her reappropriated boxer shorts into the borrowed cowboy boots. This *abject* visuality transports intrepid beauty, refusing to be reified into *objects of exchange*.

Although astute interpreters, such as Fazekaš, grasp the significance of the work carried out on the show by Soloway’s adaptation of Kraus’s story, they generally fail to grasp its success in toppling patriarchal imagery precisely because they underestimate the decentering of the privileged heteronormativity it accomplishes (Fazekaš Ibid., 96). Noting the intersectional connections and reversal of gendered positions, Fazekaš remains within a psychoanalytical framework in reading Chris, Devon and the other *feminine* characters (as she underscores) as isolated individuals akin to “the succubus”: desirous of Dick’s privilege (Ibid., 101). This heteronormative, liberal perspective misses the difference between individuality qua freedom in connection, and individualism qua capitalist appropriation.



Perhaps what is at stake is more than missing the point of queer intersectional feminist desire by remaining within the multiple guises of dominant gaze/s. Inspired by Kathy Aker's language for the real Kraus and Chantal Akerman's cinematography for Soloway, the aesthetics of "I love Dick" touch the reclaimed intersectional ethics of the fraught 21<sup>st</sup> century. This connection: severed, contested, problematic and maligned (long before and since Kant's critiques), is embodied by the performance Devon stages. Through the lens of intersectional aesthetics, beauty can be understood precisely as that quality which belies lookism and connects being/s through a shared – though not thereby universal but rather partial – quality of awe. From this partial, situated, performative perspective, embodied by "the beauty dance" Devon initiates: inviting the workers to join, aesthetics engages ethics as response-ability through connection.

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