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Everybody loves Dick

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Last year, Chris Kraus's 1997 novel *I Love Dick* was adapted for television by Jill Soloway, and was released as an Amazon Prime show in August. Unevenly updated for 2017, it shows traditional patriarchal power under attack by ‹identity politics›, displaced into the field of art, in a bizarrely conservative imagining of the left in contemporary America.



Chris Kraus's cult novel *I Love Dick* scandalized its small audience when it was first published in 1997. Reprinted in 2006 and again in 2015, it was adapted for TV by Jill Soloway in 2016 and the streaming series was released on Amazon in late summer 2017. Kraus's epic, extraordinary genre-defining book described the world of American cultural theory at the close of the twentieth century through the eyes of the ignored wife of Sylvère Lotringer, the maverick Columbia University professor widely credited with bringing French theory to America. Everyone I knew that read it when it came out in 2006 was an enthusiastic fan of its thrillingly irreverent depiction of famous artists and philosophers as pompous sexist twats; of supposedly transgressive male graduate students, the «Bataille boys» who clustered around her husband, taking no notice of her and her failed career in experimental film; and the horrifying snootiness of the professionalized New York art and theory scene to which she was given reluctant, conditional access through her marriage. Kraus's chronicle of a 39-year-old woman whose obsession with a male colleague of her husband leads her to write first a series of letters, then a novel, based on her experience of their affair, changed how major books about women are written and published. Although Kraus had managed and commissioned *Native Agents*, the first-person narrative imprint of *Semiotext(e)* that published a range of experimental writing by women, all throughout her career as an academic wife, in retrospect we can see more clearly the influence her books in particular have had on the «confessional» genre of literature by American women in recent years. The effects of the novel filtered into the culture and much of the last decade's trend towards auto-fiction, or autobiographically inclined novels which tend to be set in and around the American contemporary art world, happened in its wake.



Chris Kraus, I Love Dick. Semiotext(e): New York 1997.

I Love Dick's characterization as confessional or apologetic, however, relies on its appearance at a specific historical juncture. As the years immediately following the Second World War fade out of the general popular memory, so do the reasons why artists and writers of the postwar period so urgently and programmatically suppressed the entire idea of subjecthood and expression in art. The intellectual backdrop of Kraus's first novel, her immediate milieu through her husband, was one steeped in a critique of the centered subject. This distrust of humanism was intended as a critique of power; its tenacity in academic culture was such that when Louis Althusser, the French Marxist theorist of ideology who strangled his wife to death in a fit of disassociation, was discovered posthumously to have written an autobiography, the true betrayal, for certain members of the French left, was not that he murdered his wife but that he wrote a book about it. As the French historian of literature Denis Hollier wrote, «In the 1960s and according to Foucault's sixties-ish concept of an author, an autobiography signed ‹Althusser› could only have been attributed to a namesake; it could not have been part of the

authorial corpus attributed to the same Althusser (i.e., the one who wrote *Reading Capital*, *For Marx* etc.) The fact that the name of Althusser can — or has to — bear responsibility for such a book today (I don't mention its content) might be consonant with the return of the body, the return to expressivity, the return to the biographical, to the subject.»[1] Kraus, as she repeatedly tells us in the book, was never really accepted into this world herself, but her proximity to an intellectual world in which being a subject at all was always something to apologize for is, in part, her theme in the novel.

Kraus's radical re-centering of the authorial subject in *I Love Dick*, for this reason as well as for its deliberately amateurish style and naming of real people, got a very bad initial reception in the art and academic press, which was more or less its entire audience. Artforum described it as «psychic vomit» and «straight spillage»; the person that the Dick character was based on threatened to sue. The novel was seen as an overflow of embarrassing messy personal detail, spilling the beans on an academic art world which had made the suppression of biography an intellectual point of faith. But in the twenty years since the book first appeared, the popular appetite for embarrassing messy personal detail has developed to the extent that it's almost synonymous with culture. Something has changed and the type of female subjectivity described in the novel is now much more acceptable in popular media; the novel is a bestseller, an audiobook, and has recently been translated into German.



I Love Dick Poster. Image Courtesy of Amazon Studios

The pilot episode of *I Love Dick* was tested out in spring 2017, and the rest of the series followed in August, streaming on Amazon Prime. Sadly, apparently no one but me wants to see an opulent *fin-de-siècle* costume drama about the haute academic scene of the 1980s and 90s, set in the halls of Columbia University and the European Graduate School, nor one populated by Kraus's core audience: «Asperger's boys, girls who'd been hospitalized for mental illness, assistant professors who would not be receiving their tenure, lap dancers, cutters, and whores.»[2] This impossibly niche context for an Amazon show was instead transferred into the world of contemporary art and given a broader appeal. Set in present-day Marfa, Texas, the show follows Chris and her now-American husband to a residency in a

town filled with art weirdos and creativity, thereby still operating within the realm of ideas but without a single roundtable discussion in the whole show. In fact, although the self-described «corporate wife of the avant-garde» is here turned into «the Holocaust wife», after the first episode the show diverts even more firmly away from the book's academic backdrop. The story is seized back from creepy Francophile New Yorkers, and resituated in Dick's world, a hot, hazy dreamland where sexy cowboy Kevin Bacon turns up to his own art foundation on horseback. Chris, frustrated and bored out of her mind, meets him and falls in love.



Kevin Bacon as Dick. Image Courtesy of Amazon Studios

In Kraus's book, Dick was a pitiful dweeb, a cultural critic who read only as masc and outsidery within the world of academia, and her protagonist was always aware that she was projecting her fantasies of a more sincere, authentic and traditional type of man onto him. In the TV show, however, stressed New Yorkers, always looking for the wifi or feeling awkward, run up against a Donald Judd-esque outdoorsman artist who practically eats beans out of a can. There are more recurring characters in the show than in the book: a sexually and racially diverse group of artists, curators and writers who all form part of the Marfa cultural scene. But in 2017, Soloway's fantasy of a true American artist, even if he exists only to be disassembled, indicates something more inherently conservative, as it transplants Kraus's industry-insider story onto the broader stage of the contemporary culture wars. Each character, apart from Dick, is scripted to occupy a specific minority identity position, all revolving around Dick and only advancing in their self-realization in direct relation to his demise. The young female artist doing a residency, whose work uses images from pornography, is obsessed with Dick and the suppression of sex and biography in his art, whispering «We are not far from your doorstep» in a voice-over. The local playwright, who writes her own version of the *Chris loves Dick* story, tells Dick that she learned how to perform her identity through growing up watching him, and in her final performance replaces him as a model of masculinity. The Black female curator at the art foundation, previously Dick's subordinate, imagines all the artists of color she can finally show when he decides to leave. The problem is that, far from fully employing the «female gaze» to question the centrality of this character, the show narrates the imagined decline in status of the white cis male in American society, as plotted in the grimiest corners of Reddit and hysterically cast by Fox News. The only neutral position is that of the benevolent cowboy, casting every other subject position into the role of so-called ‹identity politics›. Kevin Bacon, as the excessively attractive Dick, is ideology in its most seductive form, completely naturalizing Chris's

attraction to him and depleting whatever ironic distance this relationship had in the book. Just to be nostalgic for a moment, isn't this what used to be called ‹phallogocentrism›?


Image Courtesy of Amazon Studios

I Love Dick, the novel, plays a trick on its readers by making you think it's about one person named Dick, when actually the title is a double-bluff and it's just dick, not Dick, that the writer loves. In the TV show however, all of the characters come to understand him or herself in relation to and in contrast with Dick, giving him significance that the book doesn't. If a second season is made, perhaps narrating the second half of the book, it will be interesting to see how it orients itself, or if it's possible to make, without the central presence of Dick to guarantee an audience. Everyone in the show is in confessional mode, whispering or journaling their most personal thoughts to Dick. The only problem with this characterization is that Chris Kraus's «confessional» mode of writing was never actually that confessional. In *I Love Dick* she gets over Dick and leaves her husband, and moves right along to a discussion of Guatemala and CIA intervention; her novel *Torpor* described the fall of Romania and post-Communist Eastern Europe; *Summer of Hate* is about the American prison complex and in all of these books she writes brilliantly about art. The important thing about *I Love Dick*, and the reason why so many people love the book, is that it describes from a female perspective a love affair that proves to be a catalyst for something more important to happen. Just as *Anna Karenina* carries on, surprisingly, after the demise of its subject, with its long treatise on God and collective farming, it quickly becomes clear in Kraus's book that her love affair with Dick is just a way of starting to write: «Every letter is a love letter.» The novel *I Love Dick* really does destabilize the notion of an authoritative, coherent, essential subject — certainly her own, but in addition, and even more radically, someone else's.

[1] Rosalind Krauss, Denis Hollier, Annette Michelson, Hal Foster, Silvia Kolbowski, Martha Buskirk, and Benjamin Buchloh. «The Reception of the Sixties», *October 69* (1994), p. 20.
[2] Chris Kraus, *Summer of Hate* (New York: Semiotexte, 2012).

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