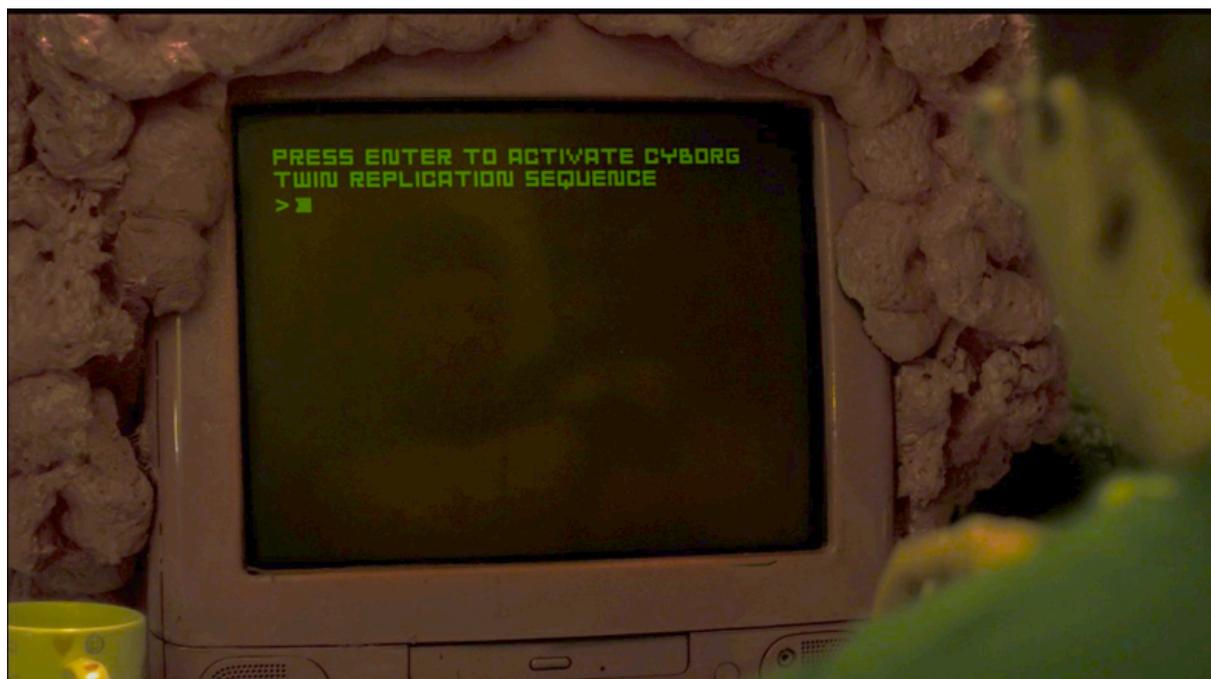


Queer Science: Queering the Cyborg in MyMy

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Synopsis: A lonely young man feels something is missing in life, so he uses a techno-magick cyberfeminist CD-ROM to create himself a cyborg twin. But there is an error, the cloning process is flawed, and his other self isn't quite identical, and has a will of its own. What is at first a gentle platonic romance, an awkward getting-to-know-you of the self, becomes fraught as difference within the selfclone emerges. Will he destroy the parts of himself that shift beyond his control, or embrace the liberatory potential of his constructed, plural identities?

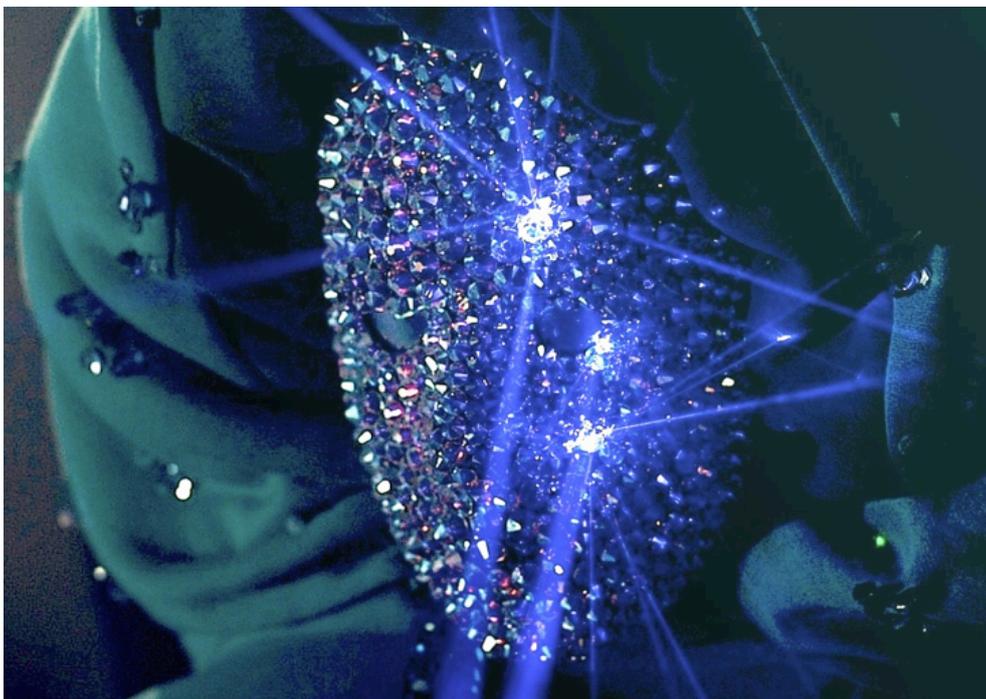
Introduction

MyMy (14mins, 2014) is a hybrid of science fiction narrative, documentary process and video art techniques. The film was a product of my Honours artistic research project at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne that examined identity, role-play and performance from a queer and feminist perspective. My artistic research method was to form a synthesis of my backgrounds in technology and media activism, video art and performance, and narrative and documentary film practice, and then to use this hybrid moving image making practice in combination with queer and feminist theory as a method of investigating themes of identity and affinity. In this paper, I will outline the influence of Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s* (Haraway, 1985) (hereafter *Cyborg Manifesto*) in particular, and how her ironic myth of the cyborg intersects with queer theory, politics and community in both the process of making the film, and in the film which emerged from it.



Still from MyMy: Jackson (right) and his cyborg twin Vincent (left)—Image credit Anna Helme

In the film I draw from both cyberfeminism and queer praxis to explore a cinematic vision of how technology has the potential to liberate queer bodies from essentialist identities, both metaphorically and physiologically, as humans transcend the boundaries of biology. I will reflect on my decisions to extend this metaphor into a de-naturalising of identity in general, beyond sex and gender, and to embody it within two characters in the film – a loveable yet uncontrollable cyborg twin (normalising the Other), and a post-human creature who beckons us into a future beyond earthly flesh and blood (rejecting the normal and embracing what is alien).

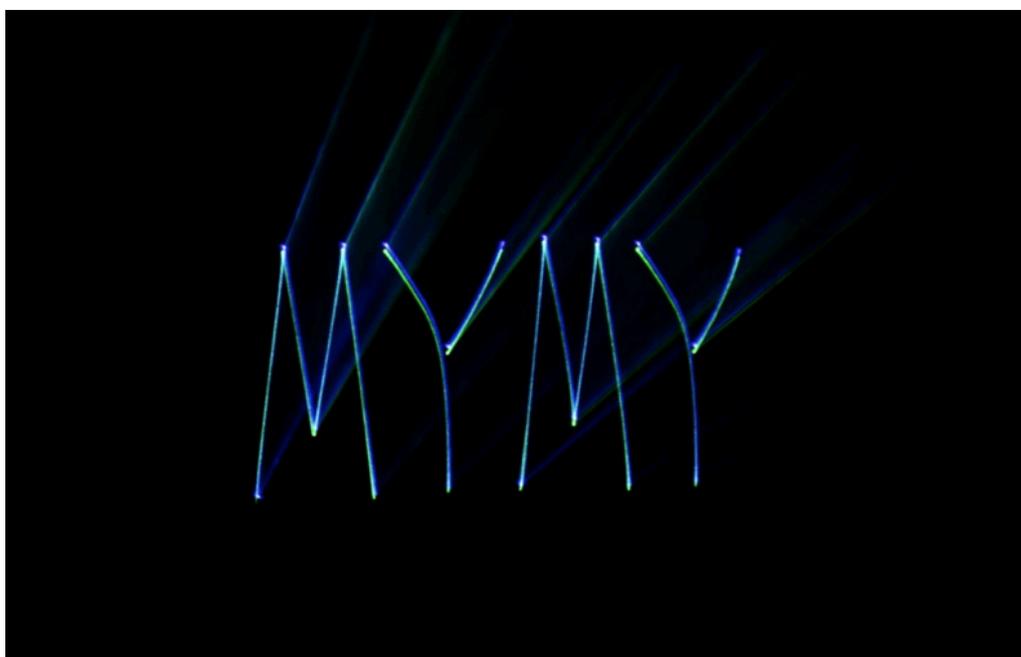


*Still from MyMy: the MyMy, an apparition of monstrous post-human possibility appears as an ambiguous guide figure
—Image credit Anna Helme*

I will extend on my Honours exegesis in exploring how Haraway's essay, along with queer culture and theory, are imbricated within my work, and give insights into this contemporary articulation of the cyborg from an artist researcher's position.

As the writer and director of *MyMy*, I'd like to acknowledge the generosity of Jackson Stacy and Vincent Silk, in presenting otherwise private knowledges and images of their lives, both in the film and in the academic writing surrounding it, within a hybrid of fiction and documentary that can be (intentionally) confusing to audiences in understanding what is real life and what is fantasy. The opinions I share about their queer political, artistic and personal practices come from my own observations, and shouldn't be read as their own points of view. Though my other key cast member, Justin Shoulder, wears a masked costume and is thus less identifiable, I also want to acknowledge the intimate aspects of himself and his work, which he shared with me throughout the filmmaking process¹.

MyMy



Still from MyMy – titles created with laser special effects – Image credit Anna Helme

MyMy is about the radical potential to create ourselves. It is about how we perform ourselves in the everyday, create micro-narratives of the self to construct identity, and how this process relates to identities formed in relation to the rest of society. It is about how queer bodies relate to the heteronormative status quo, and how campness and radical queer sensibilities provide a potential for truth in artifice. How self-consciousness around the constructed nature of identity, when you are deemed an outsider, can lend itself to a playful attitude to creating the self, and the philosophical, political and creative potentials inherent within it. It is inflected with my many years of experience working in free open-source software development projects aiming to radically democratise media production and distribution—both politically as the film hinges on the liberatory potential of technology, and in the aesthetics of computers and code, deployed here as a retro 1990s cyberfeminist look and feel.

It is also a film about cyborg twins 🧑🏻‍🧑🏻

¹ I encourage anybody interested in the film or the research surrounding it to discover each of their individual art and writing practices.

The opening titles of the film feature a strange creature (the *MyMy*) which unfurls itself and faces the audience. The figure shimmers outside of itself, it cannot be contained within the bounds of its own body. Magick symbols swirling around it. The audience is provided no context or explanation.



Still from MyMy: the MyMy creature appears with magick symbols animation illustrated and created by Lachlan Conn—Image credit Anna Helme

As the film proper opens, it is morning in a young (trans)man's trailer caravan, littered with artefacts of obscure artistic rituals, decorated with items that reflect a bent self-conscious take on adolescence, crammed with toys, photos of twins, a matching set of children's clothes. It is clear that this guy constructs himself in a very playful queer manner. We are aware from his demeanour, and these few strange clues, of a sense of longing.



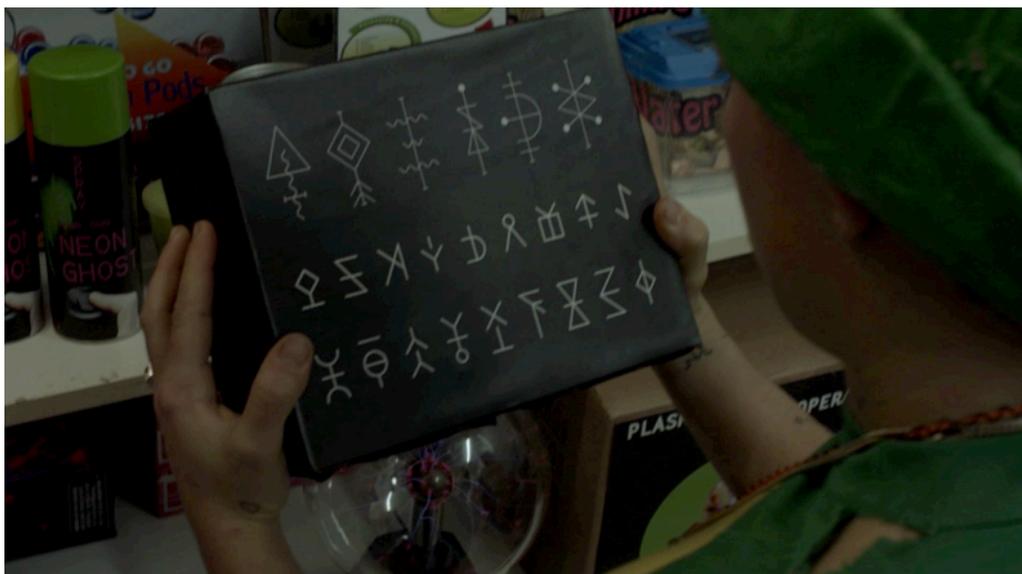
Still from MyMy: Jackson wakes as the film begins—Image credit Anna Helme

Something, or someone, is missing. He expresses (without dialog) a general feeling of loneliness, alienation and frustration. Dressing in his favourite teenage mutant ninja turtles outfit seems to allay this feeling for a moment, though his next attempt to relieve his frustration (by jerking off) proves futile. He heads to the corner store to buy some peanut butter cups.



Still from MyMy: Jackson in TMNT costume, going to the shops—Image credit Anna Helme

There, browsing a shelf of products that enhance the body or seem to uncannily transgress the boundaries between the supernatural and the technological (including a neon ghost in a spray can) he is intrigued enough to buy a kit, inscribed with magick sigils by its makers, the CYBERFEMINIST IDENTIKIT DISASSOCIATION, that appears to offer him the ability to MAKE YOUR OWN CYBORG TWIN.



Still from MyMy: a kit to make your own cyborg twin—Image credit Anna Helme

Inserting the CD-ROM disc into the personal computer in his trailer, he follows the instructions to make a life-size doll of himself, and then run a computer program on the command line.

The story that follows is of the making of his cyborg twin and the touchingly awkward relationship that forms between them, told in a disjunctive, impressionistic narrative that blends documentary and fiction modes. Jackson (the protagonist) and Vincent (his cyborg twin) slip in between playing a character version of themselves in a lo-fi sci-fi parallel universe, and their own queer selves.

Jackson and Vincent are not actors. The matching trailer caravans they occupy in the film, were their real homes at the time of production, in the backyard of a big queer sharehouse in an old nunnery in Sydney called The Dirty Habit. Many of their rituals are taken from daily life—buying some peanut butter cups, swimming at Bronte beach, playing with the chickens in the yard. My choice as a director was to shoot without rehearsal, just a simple walk-through of blocking for camera. Most of the actions performed by the two of them are behaviours I observed in them in their everyday performances of self, but de-contextualised, and placed into a fictional sci-fi narrative.

One scene was filmed as a 45-minute improvisation on camera, where I asked Jackson and Vincent to ask questions (which they posed themselves) of each other either in character, or out of it, which related to the film and its themes. This scene was then edited into the film as the first-ever verbal conversation between my protagonist and his twin.



Still from MyMy: Vincent and Jackson's immediate intimacy—Image credit Anna Helme

The only sequence performed by Jackson and Vincent that had any rehearsal process was the dance scene, where the two meet for the first time, after the cyborg twin appears. We rehearsed this on the day, and shot it immediately, choreographing the scene simply by linking dance moves that had evolved between the two of them over the course of their friendship while at the club, or from ritualistic movements they had developed in their everyday lives, usually in this very backyard the two of them shared as a living space.



Still from MyMy: the first conversation, conducted in movement—Image credit Anna Helme

The sci-fi plot is very simple, but the film’s themes are also explored in abstract, allegorical performance art sequences in an otherworldly cinematic space which presents a techno-mythological visual context for a re-imagining of queer subjectivity as an embodied presence (the MyMy) which has the power to (re)generate itself. The MyMy, performed by Justin Shoulder, is a fantastic creature who fits into the queer bestiary of Justin’s compelling and visually stunning costume/performance art practice. The creature wears a mask of Zwarovski crystals, and a costume modelled as another kind of twisted doppelganger identity based on both Jackson and Vincent. The body is made of the same teal tracksuit material as worn by my protagonist and his twin (also everyday outfits worn by Vincent and Jackson at the time). The head is an exaggerated tracksuit hood, out from which extends a long rats tail hair extension, modelled on the rats tail worn by both young men, made of the same crystals and colourful string/rope which Vincent used to make his own jewellery at the time (also worn by both Vincent and Jackson in the film).

The gender of the MyMy is deliberately indistinct; the costume was deliberately constructed to obscure physical sex markers. The MyMy appears to exist in a space technologically and temporally beyond our current conceptions of gender, but this is not presented as the pot of gold at the end of the LGBTQI+ rainbow, or a natural place to end up at the end of a logical argument about the problematics of gender². At one point this space appears as the familiar cinematic trope of the “dream sequence” though without clear definition of itself as dream or nightmare, and thus utopian or dystopian, but as a space for generative possibility, as it is during this screen time occupied by the MyMy that the cyborg is created.

The MyMy’s sequences explore in mythological visual metaphor, references to divine twins and digital avatars, blending mysticism with techno-utopian visions of creating a physical self outside of a “natural” biological paradigm. It mirrors itself, it fractures, it multiplies. The MyMy seems to have a generally benevolent role as a guide, yet its presence is still dark and unsettling. My protagonist and his twin directly replicate some of the MyMy’s movements and gestures in an echo of the twin dance (though these movements are drawn biographically from Jackson and Vincent, so in fact, the MyMy’s dance is an echo of themselves, a fact which the audience would not be aware of).

² As Haraway has reflected on the genderedness of her cyborg “I have trouble with the way people go for a utopian post-gender world—‘Ah, that means it doesn’t matter whether you’re a man or a woman any more.’ That’s not true. But in some places of fantasy and worlding, it actually is true, both for good and bad reasons” (Gane, 2006, p. 137).



Still from MyMy – the MyMy and its mirror – Image credit Anna Helme

The MyMy and its reflection move between perfect and imperfect sync with one another, foreshadowing the psychic break the cyborg will make from Jackson, later in the film.

Processor Interrupts

During the screenwriting process, I was interrupted, rather like a computer program which might be interrupted as it chugs through lines of code when “triggered by some sort of sensor, or input like a button, or even internally triggered” (Dee, 2012). I had been pondering role-play in the digital age, and the social avatar creation of my film’s subjects, when I remembered an artwork by cyberfeminist Francesca da Rimini. This work, situated within a text-based online Multi-User Dimension (MUD), was an online role-playing game, collaboratively produced by its users in the 1990s and beyond. Francesca, also known by her other *nicks* (Internet Relay Chat nicknames) GashGirl and Doll Yoko, is a member of seminal cyberfeminist group VNS Matrix. This online space, where users can invent their own identities and attributes and collaboratively construct the world around them, was the impetus for cyberfeminism, and Haraway’s cyborg, to become a major influence on the film.

By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs... (Haraway, 2013, p. 150)

On re-reading Haraway’s *Cyborg Manifesto*, the queer cultural practice evident in my community, of destroying, creating, and subverting identities, seemed so analogous to Haraway’s metaphor for a future beyond fixed notions of gender, and humanity in general, grounded in myths of the natural (Haraway, 1985). The ironic and humorous ways that my queer friends play with roles, the very serious ways that my transgender friends enact and defend gender identities seemingly counter to biology from a heteronormative or essentialist perspective, the outsider ethos of the radical queer community, how integral online identificatory practices were becoming to these parallel processes, all found relevancies in her essay pointing out our cyborgness and advocating the confusing of identities, in order to avoid the inevitable marginalisation of non-conforming Other identities that arises through defining a feminism based on very narrow and fixed notions of the female at its centre. Finding strong feminist currents to run against the still flowing tide of Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminism is a matter of survival for transgender lovers and friends, and imperative for our whole community in supporting transgender inclusion and in

justifying a continuing incorporation of feminism into our politics. I am sure there are diverse trans perspectives on Haraway's work, and it was not my intention to use her essay in relation to transgender experience directly (as I'll explain in detail later) but more as a generalised queer disarticulation of identity. Her essay represents a key break from second-wave feminism towards the third-wave, which itself became so embedded in the queer, and to me her cyborg myth was so useful in challenging the dualistic construction of identity politics at its core, the breakdown of this offering so much inclusive potential for humanity.

So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work. (Haraway, 2013, p. 155)

The literary nature of the text was another seductive pull for me to use it to form a key basis of my own subversive myth-creation in my film, informed by the politics and poetics of Haraway's essay.

Our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum, and these machines are eminently portable, mobile... People are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque. Cyborgs are ether, quintessence. (Haraway, 2013, p. 153)

The essay held within it a call to action, which cyberfeminists before me, such as da Rimini, had heeded³.

Who cyborgs will be is a radical question; the answers are a matter of survival. (Haraway, 2013, p. 155, italics added)

Into my creative process, I absorbed the Cyborg Manifesto along with other materials including first-person interviews about identity and roleplay that I conducted with members of my community and potential subjects/performers in my film, observation of my subjects in my daily life and via their Instagram feeds and public performance works, general reading around performance studies, and myriad other more obscure influences. However, Haraway's text became deeply embedded in my consciousness, and then this absorption became some of the genetic material that in an unconscious way I re-engineered in the story of the film, and can now unpack more precisely in this paper.

Queer bodies and the cyborg

Donna Haraway reflects on the legacy of her manifesto for cyborgs in an interview published in 2006, that (rather than her essay being the final word on creative approaches to political identities) "other people are doing a better job on a whole lot of this work than I am, and it's a collective project" (Gane, 2006, p. 144). She herself has since moved on from the cyborg into exploring human-animal relationalities in her *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003). Feminists have obviously continued to develop ways to interrogate political identities in various directions, and so have queers.

Being queer means leading a different sort of life. It's not about the mainstream, profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated. It's not about executive directors, privilege and elitism. It's about being on the margins, defining ourselves; it's about gender-fuck and secrets, what's beneath the belt and deep inside the heart; it's about the night. (Queer-Nation, 1990, p. 1)

This is the kind of conception of queer that informs MyMy—identity as method of revolt, not just against sexual norms, but as a radical politics of resistance to systems of domination including capitalism and the state, which has been partly formed by a personal experience of survival in a state of oppression. You can

³ As indicated by Haraway's prime place on the list of the VNX Matrix's homage to inspirational women including Ursula Le Guin, Shulamith Firestone and others in their recent keynote for Disruption Network Lab's CYBORG: Hactivists, Freaks and Hybrid Uprisings held in May 2015 in Berlin (Barrett and da Rimini, 2015, p. 3).

see a very literal, explicit statement of this survival in the last line of text in *MyMy*, a line of text typed by a queer cyborg on a cyberfeminist computer terminal: “I am a beautiful miracle.” This is meant as bitter-sweet humour, a form of ironic hyperbole that can also be read absolutely at face value, and came from an early interview I conducted with Vincent as research before writing the film. It was a mantra of survival he had the practice of repeating to himself over and over at this point in his life.

Adding to Haraway’s conception of the cyborg, queer breaks down stable notions of not just gender identity, but the self as a whole. Judith Butler gives a queer perspective on self:

[W]e must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human. To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance—to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient “I” as a kind of possession. If we speak and try to give an account from this place, we will not be irresponsible, or, if we are, we will surely be forgiven. (Butler, 2005, p. 136)

I take Butler’s words to mean that it is not just gender, not even merely identity, but also the self that is up for grabs when we take a queer approach to ourselves. Her metaphor of being “undone by another” touchingly refers to the practices of intimacy and communality, how desire for another and the bruising and tender rubbing up against each other can change the self and broaden the self’s desires to include another’s, and thus she is imbuing queer identity with a sense of community at its core. But she is enticing us to displace ourselves, which is perhaps one method of radical empathy. Can it be possible to walk in another’s shoes, if we cannot vacate our own?

In *MyMy* I am playing with these porous boundaries of self that open up mechanisms for intimacy and community to leach in, through the metaphor of the self/Other of the cyborg twin. And in a way, I am suggesting that a queer sense of identity, albeit in some messy and forever contested way, incorporates others with whom you find affinity. In the film, this plays out in a way that is akin to the values a traditional love story, but without the hetero/homonormative insistence on sexual union. In this case, the relationship is platonic, though still somewhat romantic.

Haraway’s cyborg myth is “about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work.” (Haraway, 2013, p. 154) This subversive potential finds strong parallels in radical queer culture and politics. Adjunctive to Haraway’s insubordinate identity of the cyborg, Butler says this about the queer tendency towards trouble-making in the preface to her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*:

[A] phenomenon gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.
(Butler, 1990, p. vii)

One of the most important ways the cyborg is queered, is in how important queer communities of resistance are to the very existence of the film. What very few audience members realise is that the film contains substantial elements of documentary in its hybrid form. The locations, costumes and set dressings are nearly all simply the real places and things inhabited by the characters, and the characters are just a slight sci-fi twist on the real people in the film. None of the performers in the film are actors, and the single person who is performing a “creature” is just as likely to embody this creature (or its sibling) on the dance floor of the club, as on a stage.



Still from MyMy: the dance conversation—Image credit Anna Helme

The self-conscious nature of physical performance within parts of my film, such as the dance conversation between Jackson and his newly created cyborg, also rehearse, in a very knowing way, Butler’s concept of performativity. In this scene, the cyborg and his maker (my protagonist and the extension of his self) are together producing the new cyborg’s identity, indeed both of their identities (suggesting my protagonist is coextensively in a constant state of becoming) and also the materiality and performed ritual of their affinity. Butler describes gender as a conformity that conceals the inherently unstable and contradictory nature of gender (Butler, 1990). In performativity, qualities of masculinity & femininity are learned and performed along regulated lines prescribed by society, the performance of which itself continuously produces these notions of gender. She clarifies that “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual” (Butler, 1999, p. xv) (in masculinity these acts may include getting a cut-throat razor shave, polishing boots, putting on a tie—all repeated actions that reinforce his role, in a normative binary gender scheme, as a man). The concept becomes interesting in terms of the potential for gesture in cinema, even beyond those that produce gender identification. In this scene, Jackson and his cyborg through a choreographic re-enactment of ritualistic movements, are *producing themselves*. Rather than in dialog, their first ever “conversation” articulates the kind of signification and identity that physicality can embody.

In terms of other queer ideas intermingling with Haraway’s cyborg, it is important to note Lee Edelman’s conception of the queer body as an irreconcilable outsider identity that is oppositional and, potentially fatally, subversive to the status quo (Edelman, 1998). There is some incorporation of this politicised dystopian vision into the future cinematic space where the MyMy creature dwells. In this space, the queer body exists alone in a void, that could be read as nihilistic or annihilated, and yet it is this visionary space that paradoxically or perversely births (through technological means) a queer body in the cinematic space of the “here and now.” Perhaps this is one anarchic vision of creation, in which there must first be a phase of destruction, as opposed to gestation.

This is not a trans film

It is important to state as a filmmaker that I do not share the experiences of transgender people, which it must also be said are varied and cannot be summed up here. My own experiences as a gender variant person have informed the film, and are intertwined in a complex way with my own understanding of queer (I personally embrace “genderqueer” as descriptor for my own approach to gender identity), yet I do not mean to in any way equate this with, or attempt to overlay it upon, the experiences or identities of my subjects.

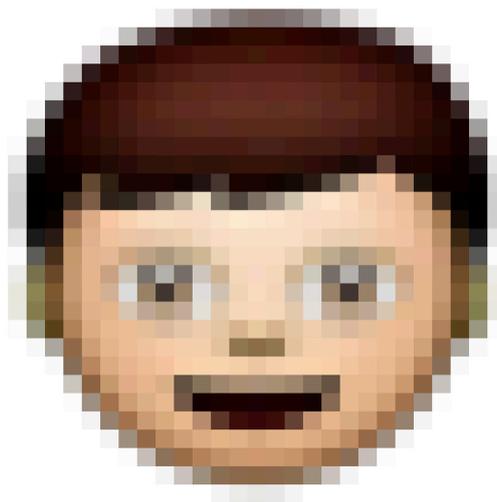
The film features two subjects who were assigned female at birth, who are considered transgender by a gender-normative society, though they may or may not personally or politically identify as such. How my subjects, or characters, identify exactly is not a matter of concern for the film, or this paper. This is not a film centrally about trans* experience, it is a queer film about identity, friendship, acceptance, intimacy and the self that happens to feature two young men, their trans* status being of lesser relevance here. Trans* people are forced to answer unwanted questions about their gender identity on a regular basis, which forms one means of Othering trans* people by the rest of society. In this film, those questions are not demanded of my subjects and the space for having other questions to ask is opened up.

The subjects in my film identify with the term queer in terms of the way they engage with the world around them, the politics they embody. This, rather than what gender they may be, contains a methodology for deconstructing some universal experiences of selfhood within the film, and is much more relevant for this reason. This paper is not about “transgendering the cyborg,” and neither is my film. Rather, it is about “queering the cyborg”⁴.

In understanding how transgender relates to Haraway’s cyborg in *MyMy*, it is clarifying to note Haraway’s assertion that her usage of the term “post-gender” within her cyborg manifesto was intended as a provocative tool, rather than a simplistic utopian aim. She, in reference to the term post-gender, has said “Just because you or your group got at how it works doesn’t make it go away, and because you get that it is made doesn’t mean to say it’s made up.” (Gane, 2006, p. 137).

My understanding of Haraway’s position on post-gender is that the concept of being beyond gender operates like much of science-fiction, as a site of possibility, rather than a blueprint for the future, and in no way is she instructing transgender people who may personally prefer to inhabit fixed gender identities, nor to bother asserting their gender identities, nor is she invalidating their identities and experiences. The desire to problematize gender, even to the point of imagining futures beyond our current rather limited cultural understandings of it, is a world away from the desire to annihilate it, or from a practice of denying it⁵.

Cyborg consciousness and queer avatars



Emoji: boy—Image credit Apple Inc.

⁴ It is important to state here, that the intention of my usage of Haraway’s cyborg in a film featuring transgender subjects was not to undermine any of my subject’s gender identities, which in any case I don’t believe it does, though I do wish to problematise gender, along with other political identities, a goal shared by most people involved in the making of this film.

⁵ In any case, my stance on my performer’s gender identities in the film was to respect, accept and honour them, as I would do with any person, while feeling perfectly free to problematise notions of gender and all aspects of identity on my own terms.

Haraway advocates for the cultural practice of irony thus:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. (Haraway, 2013, p. 149)

MyMy depicts some of the ways in which Vincent and Jackson indulge in fantasies of identity—some of this is role-play and some of this is real, and all of it is both. All of it is ironic in a sense of being uncomfortably both heartfelt and disingenuous. As Vincent says, he likes to “tread a fine line between bullshit and genius.” Within the culture of this small group of friends, as within other queer micro cultures I have been a part of, an idea can be taken up for its political usefulness, flipped around and indulged in for pleasure and humour, and then set aside.

So, the blend of real-life and fictional characters you see in the film are ironic queer avatars in the process of self-creation. The first example you see in MyMy of ironic queer self-identificatory processes is when Jackson dresses himself in a TMNT (teenage mutant ninja turtle) costume.



Still from MyMy – Jackson dressing as a TMNT – Image credit Anna Helme

This can also be understood as an example of Muñoz’s *disidentification*, which he describes as “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 4).

Jackson, in real life, has a kind of fanboy/fetish relationship to TMNT that involves dressing as one himself, and sometimes encouraging other people to do the same, as you can observe in this pod of peas:



Instagram pic: Queer family / teenage mutant ninja turtles—Image credit Jackson Stacy

The identity of the TMNT is remixed and repurposed, in order to enact Jackson's somewhat obscure personal and playful desires, re-positioning TNMTs within Jackson's own homosocial/homosexual fantasy, but also queering these rebellious and (literally) underground characters who formed us as children and teenagers of the 1990s as much as any other cultural role-models.

The next example is when Jackson follows instructions from the cyberfeminist CD-ROM to sew a life-size doll version of himself (that presumably will somehow come to life):



Still from MyMy: Jackson wonders if his doll has come alive yet—Image credit Anna Helme

This doll (a more traditional avatar) is also drawn directly from Jackson’s own life/practice, based on a doll he constructed of himself to keep his girlfriend company when he went overseas:



Photograph from Jackson Stacy’s collection, Jackson holding doll he made of himself—Image credit Jackson Stacy

In a tender sequence the film, Jackson inscribes upon his doll the same tattoos he has given himself using the DIY “stick n poke” technique (a handmade tattoo technology that doesn’t require a tattoo gun), re-enacting this intimate practice of body-modification. In this case, a classic example of ironic imagery—the

smiley face, which can neatly flip between ingenuous remnant of the good vibes of raver culture, or painfully deep sarcasm.



Still from MyMy: Jackson “tattoos” his doll just as he has tattooed himself—Image credit Anna Helme

The most realised metaphor of ironic self-creation in the film comes next, when Jackson’s cyborg comes to life. He emerges from a trailer caravan called Sweet Dreams that has materialised (or landed?) in the yard, that is a twin of Jackson’s own trailer Cheap Thrills. Vincent looks almost the same, just a slightly corrupted copy. He wears the same sort of teal tracksuit, and also sports a rat’s tail.



Still from MyMy: Vincent emerges from Sweet Dreams—Image credit Anna Helme

From a documentary perspective, it becomes complex within a hybrid film such as MyMy to consider the layered interrelation of the subjectivisation and self-identificatory techniques of the subjects with the

process of enacting character. From a narrative perspective, characterisation can be understood in relation to sci-fi tropes and is also informed by Haraway's own political myth-making. Yet, across all these real-life and fictional processes of characterisation, it is possible to track the cultural trope of the Trickster.

The archetypal figure that Haraway has chosen to affiliate with the cyborg is the folk icon of the Trickster. The Trickster is a shape-shifter, jokester, idiot-savant, deviant oracle, perverse prophet. The Trickster embraces chaos and ambiguity and constantly reminds the Modest Witness that nothing is as it seems. (Scott, 1997, para. 1)

As representations of a hybrid monster of self/Other, both the cyborg (Vincent) and the MyMy creature play this Trickster role in the film, as echoes of each other.

Eve Sedgwick's description of an aspect of queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8) can also be considered as a means by which character is queered in *MyMy*. In this case, queer characters, and thus queer cyborgs, and queer tricksters, can also be hybrid, mutable, and permeable.



Still from MyMy: Vincent utters the single word of dialogue written in the screenplay, "My."
—Image credit Anna Helme

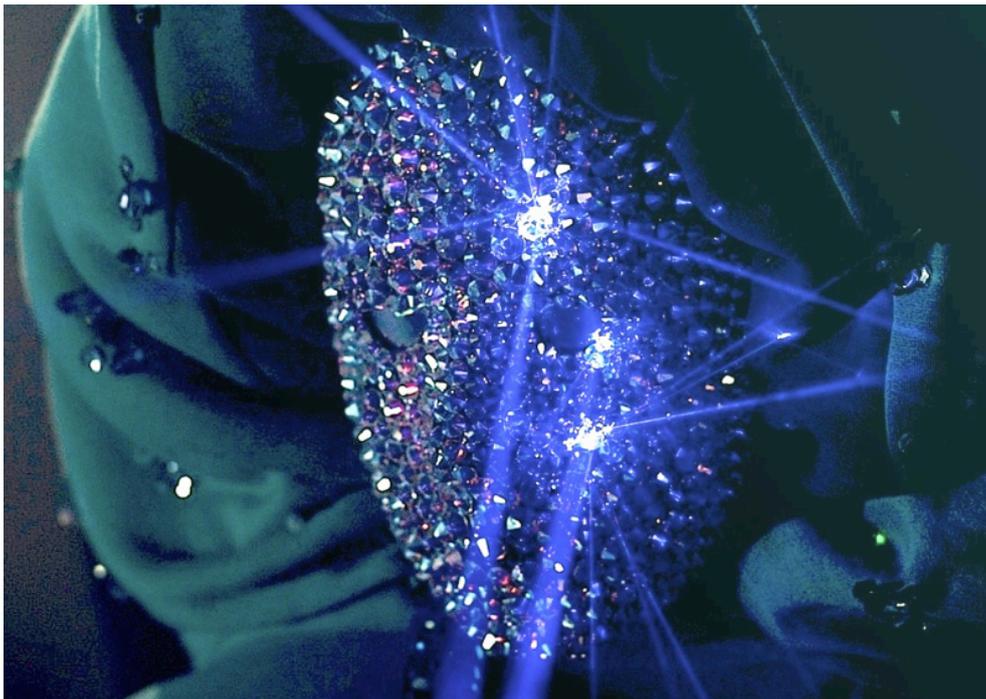
After their initial dance conversation, shy curiosity quickly gives way to rapid intimacy and queer family connection, and Vincent utters of the first word in the film (and the only word of dialog in the script, as all other dialog was improvised), the simplest statement of queer belonging: "my" (a word frequently spoken by these friends as a way of claiming each other at the time, and also a word which is tattooed onto Vincent's arm, a dictum of self-ownership).

Vincent is Jackson's cyborg twin—so though they've never apparently met, they know each other quite well. The two share a bath together and discuss the biomechanics of the situation. "Are you a robot?" "Yes! Oh... I don't... no?" "Are you a human boy?" "Probably I'll feel more and more like a human boy... don't you think?" "Probably."



Still from MyMy: “Are you a human boy?”—Image credit Anna Helme

There is a scene of conflict in which the cyborg twin begins to rebel against Jackson’s increasingly controlling directions, and Jackson must decide whether or not to delete his creation. But by the end of the film, Jackson accepts this replication of both the self (a clone) and the Other (a clone who is not actually identical, a most frustrating kind of otherness). However when Jackson and his cyborg go to sleep again at night, the “second ending” of the film suggests that things might not be this simple. We see an image of the MyMy creature, whose mask is fractured into multiple laser beams. This is visual metaphor representing the multiplying of identities, but also the darkness, subconscious, the selves we haven’t met yet, the parts of ourselves we can’t control or write a happy ending onto—the other side of Sedgwick’s “*open mesh of possibilities*” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8) hovering just below the surface of our eyelids.



Still from MyMy: final image from the film—Image credit Anna Helme

Conclusion

As Haraway notes, “Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted,” (Haraway, 1985, p. 149). MyMy takes inspiration from Haraway’s cyborg manifesto in resisting predominately masculinist, militaristic and capitalist manifestations of the cyborg. MyMy gets involved in this struggle, from a queer perspective, though it also toys more light-heartedly with cultural phenomena such as the monkey-wrenching of queer avatars within narcissistic feedback loops of postmodernity. The film queers what was seemingly an already very proto-queer cyborg in Haraway’s essay, through expanding its ironic narrative possibilities, but also through rooting the process of making the film firmly in contemporary queer politics, queer community and queer performance practices.

It seems Haraway’s Cyborg Manifesto and cyberfeminism in general is having a resurgence at the moment, being taken up by various people and re-purposed in interesting ways. As in MyMy, cyberfeminism collides with queer explicitly, in Laboria Cuboniks’ Xenofeminism, where I have been excited to recently find a renewed feminist rebellion against naturalism and essentialism, and a more detailed geeky platform (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015, p. "0x10") for action than could be found in Haraway’s ironic myth-making. In my ongoing dual life as a technology and media activist in parallel to my praxis as an artist, researcher and filmmaker, Xenofeminism strongly appeals to me as a galvanising and rather more pragmatic, updated, contemporary vision for feminist action via technology, though as an artist I do miss, a little, the humour, irreverence and irony of cyberfeminism that is to be found in Haraway and the VNS Matrix’s poetics.

Through the making of this film, it seems clear to me that re-visiting Haraway’s ideas can be very useful to contemporary radical queer communities. We often have trouble resolving internal conflicts that are still negotiated based on some very out-dated threads of identity politics. Though largely we have gifted ourselves the project of dismantling global systems of domination beyond the borders of our own communities, discriminations people experience within our communities are of course very real, and the internal politics of queer and feminism are clearly very important also, and we tend to engage in the same level of in-fighting as occurs in any space within the radical left, and often still turn to essentialist, narrow, biological and fixed notions of identity, even within very supposedly queer circles, for lack of a more nuanced shared understanding of identity and subjectivity. In her later essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988), Haraway extends upon her concept of a cyborg/subject free of innocence in the Cyborg Manifesto. She offers us a more complex way to navigate truths, oppressions and privileges than we can often seem capable of handling individually, as we all experience, on a very personal level, oppressions and privileges, to considerably varying degrees.

There is good reason to believe vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful. But here lies a serious danger of romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. The positionings of the subjugated are not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation; that is, from both semiological and hermeneutic modes of critical inquiry. The standpoints of the subjugated are not "innocent" positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge. (Haraway, 1988, p. 583)

I find this passage vital for queer communities in unlocking a method of hearing a diversity of voices, and speaking from our multiple subject positions that lie within a complex entanglement of various vectors of privilege and oppression, and in assisting us in the aggregation of experiences in the ongoing contested spaces of community. This can help create a more nuanced space outside a totalising binary choice that appears to me to be between: power and privilege is the only truth (because social supremacies seemingly demand it) and lack of privilege and power is the only truth (because social justice seemingly demands it).

The mythologising of the oppressed as innocent, creating competitive hierarchies of oppression and the ensuing conflict between individuals experiencing different oppressions, is one thing that presents problems inside queer communities, and a related issue is the fixed borders we draw around oppressed

identities (often, in queer communities, our own identities). Krista Scott describes a key problem for the project of community based on essentialist or monolithic identity politics, as raised by Haraway's cyborg myth, as a continuous problem of definition between an "us and them," and that only a fragile conception of collectivity can be based on such classifications, as aspects of ourselves inevitably drift between the two definitions, given that our unruly identities seldom follow strict or fixed rules (Scott, 1997).

This problem is very much alive in the queer community from which MyMy emerges, and radical left communities worldwide. It is referenced in the Xenofeminism Manifesto as a "puritanical politics of shame—which fetishize oppression as if it were a blessing, and cloud the waters in moralistic frenzies... we want neither clean hands nor beautiful souls, neither virtue nor terror" (Latoria Cuboniks, 2015, p. "0x0c"). In my experience, all of us in queer communities take part in the ongoing formation and re-formation of "not-them" groups as a practice of self-formation that is even more seductive when our identities and bodies are in a constant state of erasure, and as a matter of survival in an environment of violent oppression, while simultaneously finding the problematics of this positioning endlessly frustrating on a personal, political and social level (especially when we are thrust into the "not-us" camp by our peers, or aspects of ourselves drift into the "them" camp guiltily, as Scott suggests, but also as a generalised problem as our communities fracture along the lines of endless split hairs). Haraway offers hope by envisioning that "a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints," (Haraway, 2013, p. 154). This practice of conceiving kinship beyond immediate biological relation, as deployed in MyMy's techno-mythology, is closely related to (the practically imperfect projects of) the anarchist practice of affinity, the socialist practice of solidarity, and the queer practice of creating chosen families, all of which I believe are threads contributing to the potential to overcome our divisions.

With MyMy I aimed to trouble notions of identity and the self, and re-centre notions of affinity within debates about identity, but also to contribute to the utopian project of Haraway's "world-changing fiction" (Haraway, 2013, p. 149), and Muñoz's analogous queer "world-making" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 35) whilst embracing elements of the more frightening possibilities offered by psychoanalytic queer and feminist theory—a contradictory approach which queer science fiction seems entirely capable of embodying. My cyborg is (self-)programmed to be a cyberfeminist agent within science fiction cinema, and within feminist, anti-capitalist and queer movements for social change, "a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind" (Haraway, 2013, p. 149).

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