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The Taming of the Bronies: Animals, Autism and Fandom as Therapeutic Performance

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***Abstract**: In defining and defending the Brony fandom, scholars and journalists emphasise the way these primarily adult male fans of* My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic *challenge traditional gender norms. These accounts fail to examine the significance of the horse to the Bronies' bid for non-normative masculinities. This article focuses on the implicitly therapeutic function of the animated equine, reading the fandom's discourse about itself in two documentaries within the context of a contemporary (and often antifeminist) rhetoric that links adolescent masculinity to forms of disability that are ameliorated through Equine Assisted Therapy. This therapeutic resonance—based on the characteristic movement of horses—is situated within a broader history of cinema and visual culture in which horses have typically been recruited as vehicles of physical and psychic transport.*

The emergence of the Brony fandom in 2011 in the wake of toy and game manufacturer Hasbro's 2010 reboot of the *My Pretty Pony* (1981)/*My Little Pony* (1983) franchise from the 1980s captured the attention of journalists and scholars alike. Numerous articles and essays explore the subversive potential of these adult male fans of *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* (2010–), hereafter *MLP:FiM*, an animated toy-based children's series created by Lauren Faust, who previously worked on *Powerpuff Girls* (1998–2005). The programme is organised around a group of characters known as "the Mane Six" who are hybrid, anthropomorphic, talking ponygirls.

The Brony subculture of adolescent boys and adult men developed within the online environment of the "Comics & Cartoons" discussion board of *4chan*, an image-board site established in 2003 by 15-year-old Christopher Poole. *4chan* has been described by *The Guardian*'s Sean Michaels as "lunatic, juvenile, brilliant, ridiculous, and alarming" and has been associated with numerous Internet attacks and pranks, most recently and notoriously the Gamergate controversy. The Gamergate drama, in which three feminist game developers/critics who decried the sexism of the gaming industry were subjected to a coordinated campaign of vicious online attacks and threats to their personal safety, caused Tom Mendelsohn of *The Independent* to call *4chan* "a digital plaguepit of particularly virulent woman-hatred". In short, the crucible that formed the Brony fandom was a contentious online environment whose discourse was mired in gender anxieties.

MLP:FiM draws from both anime and *kawaii* aesthetics and partakes of the "sparklefication" and "postfeminist luminosity" that Mary Celeste Kearney associates with post-girl-power, girl-centred animations such as *Frozen* (263). In *MLP:FiM*, Flash animation, professional voice actors and scripts written with both children and adults in mind anchor educational narratives set in the nearly all-female and nearly all-equine town of Ponyville in the land of Equestria, which is ruled by sibling Princesses Celestia and Luna. There is a complex taxonomy to this hierarchical equine culture: there are earth ponies, Pegasus ponies,

unicorns, allicorns, crystal ponies and mermares. Each episode focuses on a value such as loyalty, kindness or sincerity. The programme itself may be utterly unremarkable as an anthropomorphic animation aimed at children and adults—a pink-hued *SpongeBob Squarepants*—but the Brony fandom and its controversy represent a situation in which "the media text to which a community might seem to be devoted … is secondary to the communities themselves" (Driscoll and Gregg 575).



Figure 1: Alicorn Princess Luna, joined by her sister Princess Celestia, lectures unicorn pony Twilight Sparkle. "You'll Play Your Part." From "Twilight's Kingdom Part 1", *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic*, Season 4 Episode 25, 2014, Hub Network. Screenshot.

In "Of Ponies and Men: *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and the Brony Fandom", Venetia Laura Delano Robertson offers an insightful and definitive overview of the fandom and the issues that it raises, including its self-conscious challenge to normative masculinity. No work to date, however, considers the specificity of the animal that the *MLP:FiM* series relies upon to convey its homilies of loyalty, friendship and personal growth to its target audience of young girls or questions its significance to Brony fan practices. In fact, Robertson asserts that the human-equine relationship is irrelevant to the emotional dynamics of the fandom (and vice versa), proposing that the *MLP:FiM* ponies, when considered as horses, are of interest only because they reiterate gender stereotypes governing appropriate animal-human pairings. She writes:

> While the ponies are integral to the Bronies' emotional investment in the show, this relationship says little about the relationship of humans to horses, except perhaps the obvious problems with the dichotomy of horses for boys, ponies for girls. (31)

In assessing the Brony fandom and, in particular, its much vaunted challenge to gender norms, I find myself in disagreement with Robertson on this point. I will argue the case that the rhetoric of the Brony fandom resonates in important ways with real-world equine performances, especially therapeutic performances. I also contend that it may not be coincidental that the horse plays such a central role in a fandom concerned with denaturalising gender boundaries, given that the horse's significance to moving image representation has always been liminal, linked to its capacity for physical and metaphorical transportation. Thus, I hope to demonstrate that the gendered dynamics of the Brony fandom are implicated in the equine imaginary, a term I have defined elsewhere as humankind's cultural, aesthetic, economic and affective investment in the horse (Pramaggiore). The equine imaginary does not operate merely at the representational level, with the myriad imagistic

projections that humans generate in relation to horses; it also draws from and informs the way humans breed, admire, exploit and destroy horses for sport, work, food or companionship.

The *MLP:FiM* ponies represent far more than spunky pastel-coloured postfeminist signifiers, positioned in narratives designed to sell mass market children's toys. In their respective work on animated and digitised animals, Paul Wells and Michael Lawrence point to the fallacy of dismissing animal animations as irrelevant or as innocuous child's play. Wells suggests that animals are "an essential component of the language of animation" (2); so essential, in fact, that their presence has become a commonplace feature of these films and so naturalised as to be completely unremarkable. Lawrence clarifies the parallels between the digital manipulation of on-screen dogs and the history of dog breeding, writing "the exploitation of the dog's 'plasticity' was dependent upon subjugating and subjecting real animals to the breeders' 'fantasy and will'" (119), and concluding that composite animal performances reveal "the repressed histories of such subjection" (120).

This article seeks to remedy the elision of the equine in discussions of the Brony fandom and attempts to understand what this community might be saying about horses and humans, particularly when it attempts to represent itself. These self-representations have become necessary because the Brony fandom has had to contend with an active anti-fandom. Anti-fans devote themselves to disparaging or parodying media texts; their impact has been traced in the work of Henry Jenkins, Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, Melissa Click and Matt Hills (*Fan Cultures*), among others. Writing on anti-fans of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones argue that "anti-fans position themselves not only against and in opposition to the [texts] but also as superior to fans" (952).

In the case of the Bronies, anti-fans direct their hostility and ridicule exclusively toward the fans, deriding them as emotionally stunted, nonmasculine and socially inept men-children and aligning them with girl fans, whose desires are denigrated not merely by anti-fans but by discourses of fandom itself (Hills, "Get A Life"; Click). Exploring the gendered dynamics of anti-fandom in relation to *MLP:FiM*, Jones concludes that men and women anti-fans alike express rigid views of gender in their "Brony hate" posts on social media sites such as *Reddit* and *4chan* (119). The conclusion that Brony haters are gender traditionalists implicitly supports another view that circulates through popular media and scholarly work, including that of Robertson, Bell and Carey as well as that of Jon Anderson, writing on Bronies in the US military, that the most important and laudable aspect of the Brony fandom is its transgressive intervention in traditional modes of gender identification and differentiation.

In this narrative, Bronies courageously do battle with norms of gender and sexuality, in the face of online and face-to-face bullying, and should be embraced for their kinder, gentler version of masculinity. Robertson asserts that "the Brony community has embraced an identity that transgresses the stereotypical cynicism, hegemonic masculinity, and belligerence that tends to represent internet interactions" (33). According to Angela Watercutter, "their very existence breaks down stereotypes".

Under this banner, and in response to its negative reception on the Internet and within broadcast media (notably on Fox News in the US), the fandom has undertaken a rebranding exercise, manifested in two documentary films: Brent Hodge's *A Brony Tale* (2014), which screened at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2014, and Laurent Malaquais's Kickstarter-funded *BronyCon: The Documentary* (2012), later retitled *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult*

Fans of My Little Pony. This campaign overtly rejects the familiar model of fandom as dysfunction (Joli Jenson, "Fandom as Pathology") and embraces a newer dispensation that links fandom with pedagogy (Hills, "*Twilight* Fans" 114). According to these two documentaries, Bronies teach us about nonpatriarchal modes of masculinity, using their respect and affection for and identification with the ponies of Equestria to help us all to become better people. The Brony fandom offers a unique and fascinating example of the intersection of online fandom, niche marketing, toy-based television series, and the gendering of childhood and adulthood. Intriguingly, the Bronies point to the way human aging can be gendered. Brony detractors conflate age and gender-inappropriate behaviour. If immaturity is viewed as a normative characteristic of women and fans, then perhaps only male fans can be defined as developmentally stunted.

Examining the Brony affection for the animated horse, I ask whether or not real horses have something to do with the Brony fandom and its rhetoric of self-representation. Despite the abstraction and ambiguity of animated animal figurations, we are never very far from the embodied, organic being-ness of the referent species, as Michael Lawrence, Paul Wells and Rebecca Miller (12) suggest. Animations speak to the assumptions we make about nonhuman animals and to our relationship to them. Just as horse DNA helped to structure the celluloid body of cinema (Shukin 91), the human-horse relationship, which is based historically upon humans being visually captivated by horses and harnessing them as vehicles of physical and spiritual transcendence, is enfolded within the lively dialogue and cutie marks of the *My Little Pony* franchise.

My desire to bring the equine aspects of the Brony fandom into relief is situated within a larger project that turns upon a claim I am making regarding a necessary relationship between horses and the moving image. This link is not only based on the animals' material contribution to cinema's celluloid matrix in the form of gelatine, but also on affective and perceptual responses to the size, physical proportions, speed and direction of movement of horses as well as on humans' imaginative projections of horses as vehicles of physical and spiritual transport.

Film scholar Lynn Kirby argues for the inherently cinematic character of the train, asserting that the railroad, also known as the Iron Horse, should be understood as a protocinematic phenomenon. "As a machine of vision and an instrument for conquering space and time," Kirby writes, "the train is a mechanical double for the cinema and for the transport of the spectator into fiction, fantasy and dream" (2). My proposition that horses are both necessary and central to cinematic representation does not contradict Kirby's fascinating account of the mutual importance of railroad and cinema to modern visual culture. Instead, I suggest that we take a closer look at the possibility that horses—as organic engines, as animals on which humans have depended to traverse real and imagined spaces long before the modern era—laid the groundwork for the modes of pleasurable transport that we now associate with trains and with moving images.

Kirby persuasively links the modern industrial technology of the train with that of the silent cinema. I want to posit a pre-existing relationship between the equine species and cinema based on the horse's size and proportions, rhythmic, linear motion and capacity for material and metaphorical transcendence. (Real and manufactured proportions are both relevant to this discussion, as Albrecht Dürer's mathematical quest for the "ideal equine form" has played an important role in the visual aesthetics of the modern horse [Cuneo 120]). To put it in the terminology of the digital era, horses are to cinema what cats are to the

Internet, although I am not yet prepared to fully define what that analogy encompasses. Perry Stein of *The New Republic* gathers together a cluster of arguments to explain the unanticipated dominance of cute cat memes and videos on the Internet, beginning with the fact that the human interest in cats extends back to the ninth century. Citing Michael Newell, Stein also argues that cat physiognomy is compelling because it reminds us of human children. Neither of Stein's explanations accounts for the unique marriage of the feline and the Internet video form, however.

Stein cites the long history of the human–cat connection to establish a context for the feline-obsessed Internet. Using a similar logic, there is evidence that humans have worked with/exploited, looked at and sought to represent horses for a very long time. The domestication of the species dates back to 3500 BCE (Outram). Focusing on visual culture, the connection is far older. Cave paintings at Pech-Merle, Niaux and Chauvet, the latter made famous by Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), are between 14,000 and 35,000 years old and confirm that horses have held a particular intrigue for human visual artists for a very long time. The most prevalent animal depicted in French cave paintings are horses, despite the fact that the artists encountered a plethora of beasts in their daily lives, including bears, snakes and reindeer, which they hunted but did not paint. During a visit to Niaux in 2015, I witnessed a guide demonstrate the theory that the three dimensional paintings, which utilised projections of the rock for depth, could be made to appear to move, if a source of light such as a lantern or torch were to be waved in front of the wall. It's easy to imagine that the humans who created these images of horses were early cineastes, captivated by the potential to make their images move like the animals they depicted.

The possibility that there is an organic link between the horse and the cinematic imagination remains speculative, and this work is informed by scholars pursuing different approaches to this question, such as Derek Bousé, who connects the history of the wildlife film to film itself (41), and Jonathan Burt, who considers animals to be the inspiration for cinema (210).

The fact that the horse was critical to the transition from static photography to moving images is well documented in the annals of film history. I would like, however, to interrogate the Palo Alto Stock Farm origin story: the familiar narrative that Leland Stanford's wager about whether or not a galloping horse's four hooves leave the ground at the same time led to the commissioning of a study by Eadweard Muybridge, whose serial photography experiments represent the "birth" of motion pictures. Setting aside the cave paintings, I specifically want to probe the story's aleatory elements by proposing that there might be deeper connections to horses rather than mere contingencies. Was it a coincidence, for example, that Stanford, a former governor but also a railroad magnate, sought to understand the movement of horses rather than that of another animal? John Ott links Stanford's interest in equine locomotion to his financial interests in horse breeding and in railroads ("Iron Horses"); the anticipated profitability of these enterprises, along with the thrill of scientific discovery, must have played a role in the collaboration. But Arthur Knight reminds us that Stanford's curiosity regarding the equine gait was generated during a period of illness in which his doctor prescribed a vacation. Stanford couldn't travel and purchased a horse instead, a scenario that offers an instance of metonymic substitution (he couldn't move, but the horses could) as well as a therapy modality (watching horses helped him recover).

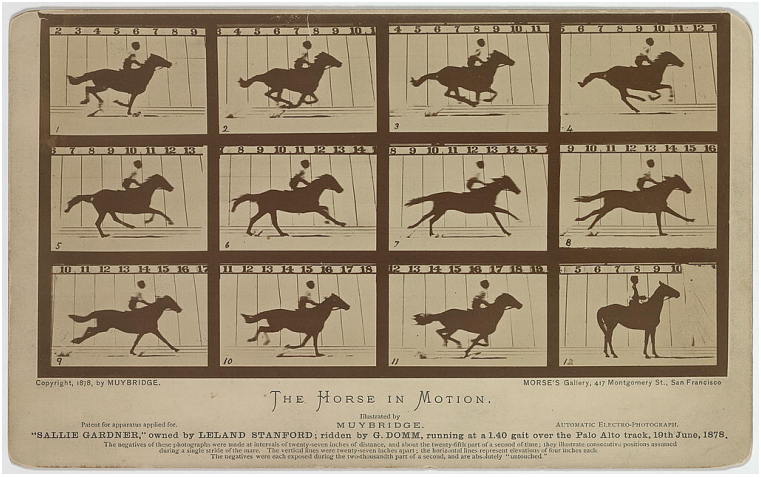


Figure 2: "The Horse in Motion." Sallie Gardner, owned by Leland Stanford. Palo Alto, CA, 19 June 1878. Eadweard Muybridge. Photographic print on card. US Library of Congress.

The man whom Stanford commissioned to experiment with his horses, Eadweard Muybridge, also came to the horse photography experiment after an illness, having suffered head injuries related to a stagecoach accident in 1860, after which his behaviour changed. This is the official story documented in Muybridge's trial for the killing of the man he believed was his wife's lover (Ball 243–59). Psychologist Arthur P. Shimamura speculates that lingering brain damage affected Muybridge's ability to interact socially, as he was prone to emotional outbursts (350). Muybridge began his photography career after the accident, as his physician had counselled him to work outdoors (Shimamura 350). He first established a reputation as a landscape photographer, becoming famous for capturing the large, empty and static natural settings in which he would later deploy moving animals. Creating images of horse locomotion rehabilitated both Stanford and Muybridge and this therapeutic role of the horse finds a parallel in the (defensive) discourse of the Brony documentaries

The rhetoric of the Brony fandom has been marshalled in defence of its marginalised masculinity. Lauren Rae Orsini writes that Bronies are typically presented as "obsessive, Cheeto-chomping virgins" (Orsini, "Brony Psychology" 101). Bronies are seen as failed men. John Hawkins, writing for *Right Wing News* in 2012, complains:

> Who's responsible for these "men" failing as human beings and turning out to be complete losers who undoubtedly make everyone associated with them in any way feel completely ashamed? Is it liberal feminists, Barack Obama, some sort of heretofore undiscovered form of loser gene, crab men? It's impossible to know for sure, but it's completely appalling to see people who think of themselves as "men" behaving like this.

A 2012 *CollegeHumor* video entitled "My Little Brony: Friendship is Tragic," which has racked up more than five million hits on YouTube, humorously reiterates these stereotypes from the perspective of the *MLP:FiM* characters, invoking a toy collector with Cheetos, a five o'clock shadow, inadequate social skills, an online Korean girlfriend (a double-edged and problematic trope in itself) and unusual sexual practices involving toys, fan fiction and flashlights.





Figures 3 and 4: Pinky Pie and Twilight Sparkle find themselves captives of a stereotypical, Cheeto-eating Brony (left); and Twilight Sparkle is the unwilling object of adult Brony affection (and unkempt stubble) (right) in the *Funny Or Die* parody "My Little Brony: Friendship is Tragic". *CollegeHumor*, 2012. Screenshots.

And, indeed, one recurring concern that the Brony fandom constantly polices is the potential for eroticisation of children's toys, children's programming and, by extension, children themselves. Images of *MLP:FiM* blow-up dolls and plushies—some of them made by Bronies themselves as part of the creativity licensed and encouraged by this "participatory" fandom (Jenkins)—met with anxiety when publicised on the Internet. Bronies engage in a wide range of prosumer practices as they create familiar outputs such as fan fiction, artwork, music and laser light shows at Bronycon and also go farther, to "rework biblical narratives using characters and images from *MLP*: *FIM*" (Crome 400). Bronies, like many fan communities in convergent media culture take seriously the promise of fandom as a "permanent outlet for their creative expression" (Jenkins 42).

Some forms of that creative expression are decidedly controversial. In January 2015, the *Huffington Post* published David Moya's piece: "Inflatable Life-Size 'My Little Pony' Doll Arousing Controversy With Bronies (NSFW)", which describes a 5'9" "Sexy Inflatable Girl Pony" made in China by Hongyi Toy Manufacturing. The article quotes an unattributed source as saying: "And this is why I'm slowly regretting becoming a Brony, this community is just delving deeper and deeper into the disgusting" (qtd. in Moya).

Showing similar creative chops, UK artist Hoppip created a plushie sex toy from a minor character named Lyra Heartstrings and auctioned it off on the *Dealer's Den* web site with a surprisingly literal tag line: "This is the very first *MLP* plushie to feature a special hole in her butt that you can stick your penis in" (qtd. in Orsini, "Sexually Functional"). The need for such directives suggests that, at least in the eyes of the manufacturer, the target demographic for this product may require careful instruction as to the "appropriate" inappropriate sexual behaviour.

In response to the negative perceptions generated by the press—especially Fox News, whose incredulous and mocking attacks, beginning with Bill Kristol's on "Red Eye on 'Bronies'", aired on 17 June 2011, have been uploaded to YouTube by Bronies and their allies—Bronies have taken matters into their own hands. James Turner of New Hampshire sought to raise $2,000 on IndieGoGo but raised $14,000 instead to fund a video to run on *MLP:FiM* network *The Hub* in order to thank the programme's creators.

In revamping their image, the Bronies have returned to an older media form—documentary film—which is also a recognised platform for advocacy. The two films, Hodge's *A Brony Tale* and Malaquais's *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of*

My Little Pony promulgate a strongly sympathetic view of a tame Brony herd. The films link *MLP:FiM* exclusively to young men and adolescent boys with an anti-cynicism ethos and a New Sincerity sensibility. Any whiff of adult Bronies or sexual perversity is suppressed. In *Bronies*, an animated professorial horse instructs the audience in a typology of Bronies; when he mentions "clopping"—the practice of masturbating using *MLP:FiM* programmes and paraphernalia—he stops, flummoxed before his class of innocent students, and immediately moves on, never defining the term or returning to that subject.

Both films are narratively invested in telling the stories of awkward young men who find acceptance at Brony conventions. They offer glimpses of *MLP:FiM* creator Lauren Faust as well as voice actors Ashleigh Ball and John De Lancie as they come to terms with their Brony fans. Ball, who initially expresses misgivings, learns that Bronies are nothing more than geeky, loveable non-threatening boys. John De Lancie, who provides the voice of the character Discord on *MLP:FiM*, indicated his motivations for helping to produce the *Bronies* film at the Ottawa ComiCon on 13 May 2012. A *YouTube* clip records his statement:

> I was really taken aback by how disrespectful a couple of things were said [*sic*] about the community on national news… I've decided to do it in a way that I think is the right way. So I think I'm going to be entering further into that world. ("John De Lancie Announces")

After Faust signed on, the film became the second-highest funded film on Kickstarter, with over $300,000 in pledges, according to De Lancie's website.

In *A Brony Tale*, Ashleigh Ball, who voices the characters of AppleJack and Rainbow Dash, admits to her discomfort with her own fans: "You see a guy that's wearing a pony outfit and you're like 'That's weird. I don't know about that. That makes me uncomfortable'." By the end of the film, her interactions with cheering young men have allayed her concerns.

The two documentaries are highly sympathetic texts that subscribe to the dictum that the best defence is a good offence. In them, the voice actors learn to stop worrying and love the Brony fandom; fathers of Bronies learn to accept their sons' unconventional choices, and Bronies themselves learn to navigate anxious social situations. In one poignant narrative in *Bronies*, which follows several young men who live in North Carolina, Maine, Israel and England as they make their respective pilgrimages to BronyCon, Daniel Richards, a young man from Rugeley near Manchester, England, discloses his Asperger's diagnosis. For him, Asperger's means "not understanding people's emotions": text superimposed on the screen defines the condition as making people "difficult with social interactions". At one point, prior to embarking on his much anticipated and emotionally freighted solo journey to BronyCon, Daniel visits some horses in a field and thus forges a link between real animals and the comfort he derives from his fandom:

> Animals I find much more like easier when I'm trying to relax or cool down from talking with a lot of people. They don't have any demands … any major emotional demands anyway, so I feel like they're much easier to understand, interact with.



Figure 5: Daniel finds comfort interacting with horses. *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (Laurent Malaquais, 2012). BronyDoc, LLC, 2013. Screenshot.

Later, on his way to BronyCon, he loses his bearings and becomes anxious; the scene is quite tense, as Daniel clearly doesn't know how to approach a stranger to ask for directions. Near its conclusion, however, the film depicts Daniel at the centre of a circle of young men giving one another the Brony equivalent of a high five, the brohoof. In voiceover, he shares the joy of that experience and also conveys his belief that the BronyCon experience, which forced him outside his comfort zone, has made him far less socially anxious. Through literal and metaphorical acts of transportation—on a train to BronCon and through his affection for the ponies of *MLP:FiM*—Daniel finds an accepting Brony community, and perhaps even a wider world; groups of people that have become more like the living horses in the field with whom he found it comfortable to interact. Daniel's narrative, along with that of Lyle, a young Maine boy whose stern and uncomprehending father begrudgingly agrees to watch some episodes of *MLP:FiM* after attending the convention, helps to shape the film's resolution as a heart-warming tale of lonely boys saved by a loving, like-minded Brony community.





Figures 6 and 7: Daniel (with his back to the camera) orchestrates a massive brohoof; and Daniel happily recounts his experiences at Bronycon. *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*. BronyDoc, LLC, 2013. Screenshot.

In its characterisations of itself in the documentaries, and in the Wofford College Research project (*Brony Study*), the fandom inherits several strands of boyhood culture from the past several decades: the geek charm of *Star Wars* fandom, Harry Potter's magical coming of age narratives and the much-ballyhooed gender fluidity associated with Carol Clover's influential analysis of male horror fans in *Men, Women and Chainsaws.* In short, the Brony fandom has embraced a position within the potent dialectic of masculine vulnerability.

Whereas some Brony commentary points to the anxiety of post 9-11 culture in general as a factor explaining the desire for cuddly safety (Lambert), there is a different case to be made, one that points to antifeminist discourses around masculinity and disability as one key to the Brony fandom. These discourses return us to the matter of equine therapy and underscore the connections between horses, movement and cinema.

This therapeutic mode of fandom echoes the one theorised by Camille Bacon-Smith in the "Training New Members" chapter of her pathbreaking study on *Star Trek* fan fiction, *Enterprising Women*. Bacon-Smith writes that women attempt to renegotiate patriarchal gender norms by "[talking] to each other about themselves in the symbolic language of their literature" (156). In the documentaries, Bronies are indeed talking about themselves, but the fact of their talk therapy is less important than the terminology used, which resonates with a chorus of lament that has emerged in popular self-help culture regarding the state of contemporary masculinity.

The Brony phenomenon must be contextualised within the re-emergence of a culture of gender-distinct childhood during a historical period (particularly in the US) in which feminist gains have come to be understood as not only empowering girls, but also as disadvantaging boys. Recent scholarship and journalism on the pathologisation of childhood misbehaviour has been informed by an antifeminist agenda. A 2014 *Esquire Magazine* feature entitled "The Drugging of the American Boy" draws extensively from the work of Ned Hallowell, a psychiatrist diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) whose books include *Driven to Distraction* and *Delivered from Distraction.* The article reports that "by High School, nearly 20% of all boys will have been diagnosed with ADHD—a 37% increase since 2003". Hallowell claims that the US is pathologising boyhood in part through the "girlification" of elementary school (D'Agostino). Hallowell is joined in this venture by Philip Zimbardo, of the famed Stanford Prison experiment, who has published *The Demise of Guys: Why Boys Are Struggling and What We Can Do About It* and *Man Disconnected: How Technology Has Sabotaged What It Means to be Male* with Nikita D. Coulombe. These two manifestos (and a related TED talk) blame video games, porn and workforce gains by women for the failures of boys in school and in relationships. Sociologists who have written on the "the medicalization of childhood deviance" (Hart, Grand, and Riley 132) characterise ADHD as a construct that originates within the white middle class in the US, a group experiencing a decades-long decline in the resources (largely, unpaid female domestic labour) available for dealing with childhood "deviance".

In this wider context, the celebration of the Brony fandom has been achieved in part through a reframing of masculinity as disability (with boys the victim of feminist gains) and through the appropriation of therapeutic discourses aimed at remedying the situation. In this regard, *MLP:FiM*'s anthropomorphic creatures are no coincidence: it matters that they are animals and horses. The case championing the Bronies is linked to the growth of not just animal-assisted therapy for a host of human ills—comfort dogs to lower blood pressure, for example—but to equine-assisted therapy (EAT) for children diagnosed with ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), a disorder for which boys are diagnosed at a rate four and a half times that of girls. According to Edwards and Redden's *Brony Study*, the community it surveyed reported a high incidence of social anxiety-related disorders. Among those disclosing a diagnosis, 28.3% reported depression, 23.3% reported ADHD/ADD, 22% anxiety and 14.6 % Asperger's.

The posited benefits of EAT, rather than Animal Assisted Therapy, in children with ADHD and ASD is that riding horses helps them to focus and addresses social anxiety (*Equine Therapy*; Malcolm; van den Hout et al.). Practitioners posit that the horse's dance-like movements—movements I would characterise as central to the horse's capacity for various modes of transport and transcendence—compensate for the neural underconnectivity and lower cortisol levels for children with ASD and anxiety (Pendry et al.). The documentary *The Horse Boy* (Michael Orion Scott, 2009), based on the book of the same name by Rupert Isaacson, details the EAT method Isaacson developed with his son Rowan and eventually expanded into the "Horse Boy method", a therapy now offered in conjunction with the University of Texas, where its effects are being studied by educational psychologist Jennifer Anne Lockwood. The theorised therapeutic pathway relates to the way the horse's rhythms produce oxytocin, calming anxiety. Issacson eventually taught his son to read books while on horseback, believing that he could focus better while riding. Those involved in EAT draw upon the horse's material and metaphysical capacities for transportation, as the horse helps the children to navigate and negotiate the relationship between the self and the world.

Brony Luke Allen makes a connection between his Asperger's diagnosis and Brony fandom in an article published in *Psychology Today*:

> This weird alchemy that Lauren Faust tapped into when she set out to make the show accessible to kids and their parents hooks into the male geek's reptilian hindbrain and removes a lifetime's behavioural indoctrination against pink. As a person with Asperger's syndrome, I learned more about theory of mind, friendships and social interactions from this season (of MLP) than I had in the previous 31 years of life. (Qtd. in Griffiths)

As the Brony fandom attempts to champion its members as progressive gender nonconformists while neutralising the sexual threat of adult males identifying with animated ponies and their young girl fans as well as viewing the ponies and girls as objects of sexual desire, the characterisation of adolescent Bronies as a vulnerable population, potentially disabled by their masculinity in a feminist world, resonates with a broad cultural alarmism concerning the academic and social performance of young boys. The connection between the animated ponies that Bronies use to "self-medicate" (to pursue the therapeutic discourse) and the real horses conscripted for human therapeutic purposes relates to the unique importance attributed to the horse's organic, rhythmic motion and its purported benefits for children with ADHD, ASD, anxiety, and Asperger's. In this linkage, the horse is recognised as moving humans physically, emotionally and spiritually—moving them beyond their limited frame of reference to new and other worlds, which is the equine capacity that I would define as essentially cinematic.

The case of the Brony fandom thus raises numerous aesthetic, cinematic and cultural issues that extend beyond its putative challenge to gender normativity. I have argued here that it is not coincidental that horses, both real and animated, occupy centre stage within the melodrama of contemporary masculinity and its expression within moving image culture. Horses have been treated as organic machines that enable human work of all kinds (including emotional work) and provoke imaginative flights of fancy; they are understood to possess empathetic qualities that make them useful to humans who are lacking in those attributes. Thus they remain subject to varied practices and projections of humans through the aesthetics of the moving image and the fandoms spawned by those images.

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