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Mitch Kellaway [Become a fan](#)

Birth of a 'Brony': A Queer Man Watches *My Little Pony*

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I'm a queer man with a queer antenna. I can feel it rise anytime a piece of pop culture sheds light -- purposefully or, more delightfully, inadvertently -- on our society's conflation of bodies, gender identity, expression, and sexuality.

I feel a tingle when media is particularly clever in questioning, resisting, or ignoring the most sacred of binaries: female/male, woman/man, feminine/masculine, and gay/straight. I like my playfulness and critical edge in equal measure, and I find that fantasy universes -- quite often well-detailed animated ones with intimately entwined characters (erotic and not) -- fit the bill, all the more if they can play off their own assumed innocence.

So when I flipped idly through my Netflix options and felt that instinctive tug, I had to slow down. One documentary's title caught my attention: the newly released *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*. "Intriguing," I thought, and clicked "play."

Being [no stranger to fervent fandoms](#) or cartoon worship, I couldn't quite share the title's awe. It isn't unexpected to find adults intensely invested in a children's show. Cartoons and children's media -- from *Animaniacs* to *Invader Zim*, *Spongebob Squarepants* to *Harry Potter* -- have a history of appealing to the post-childhood lot.

However, I did recognize the implied difference: *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is a cartoon not considered masculine or gender-neutral (read: masculine) but heavily, unapologetically marked as feminine, indeed with an overt femininity that [has become newsworthy](#) for not repulsing otherwise gender-normative men -- or at least ones similar to the sensitive souls featured in *Bronies*.

It turns out that the source of the *Bronies* film's incredulity, which is intended to mirror that of a presumably heterosexual audience, is not *exactly* age: It's more that the fandom's visible masculinity disrupts the unspoken assumption that "feminine" equates to "childish," which, in turn, is shorthand for "trivial" and "dismissable." For beyond its gendered meanings, *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is a high-quality cartoon: It is artistically rendered, features a detailed world, is tightly plotted with strong characterizations and voice acting, and is rich with witticisms.

But there's more to this than the joy of seeing artistic talent, time, and energy put into crafting something for girls. The age question, though it gets billing in the documentary's title, is truly part of the overarching Unexpected: male gender performance -- that is, gender identity and gender expression, along with the question of sexual orientation that these fraught categories evoke. And *that's* where my queer antenna starts rising.

Without denying that the apparent majority (according to the documentary) of adult *My Little Pony* fans, both male- and female-identified, are straight and possess genders that fall comfortably within the gender binary, their presence as a fandom and -- once I watched the enchanting cartoon -- their adored subject itself resonated deeply with me as a queer person. Why?

To rephrase the question: How can a phenomenon that does not center on explicitly queer people (or ponies) still be affirming of a queer worldview? Still *feel* queer?

When I tasked my closest friends -- three queer men like myself -- with watching the documentary and show, their gut reactions were the same: There's something gloriously queer going on here, something more than numerous straight-identified bronies partaking in, and [sometimes undergoing the common queer experience of being harassed for](#), situational gender nonconformity. *It's the show itself*. See, *My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic* is a queer text. And I don't mean the kind of queer that's a shorthand for LG(BT). I mean that when a viewer enters the show's universe, their inherited binaried outlook is reframed, questioned, or abandoned. I mean it has a way of screening gender and sexuality that doesn't rely on "coming out" or being visible in only socially acceptable, labelable, or permanent ways. I mean it features intense intimacies and objects of non-normative desire, such as [others of the same gender, objects, oneself, everything, or nothing](#).

I mean it in the way that sounds almost inexpressibly theoretical but floods me with that I-know-it-when-I-see-it warmth whenever I encounter it in the real world.

The little pony land of Equestria runs on a different logic than our "real" world, or even other cartoon ones -- and that makes it a downright freeing place to be. Queer potential starts at the foundation: Equestria is a land where [women are largely unconcerned with men](#) (who, interestingly, are usually unselfconsciously employed in what we might consider "feminine" roles of service and domestic labor) and invested in each other (and vice versa). Their world lacks emphasis on the two key themes that [media scholar J. Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*](#) tells us would otherwise transform a cartoon's radical potential into something tame and conventional: nuclear families and coupled romance.

While many of the male fans featured in the *Bronies* documentary seem unable to articulate why they're so drawn to the cartoon, I recognize here a magnetism that queer media generates -- an effect made all the more subtly powerful when present in culture our society tells us is inconsequential: that pertaining to children and femininity.

Without space to offer more examples, I'll get right to the conclusion I reached after a fun, week-long *My Little Pony* marathon: This show's male audience isn't unexpected when you consider their beloved, liberating fantasy world -- just *uncommon*, because mainstream queer texts are still so.

What if queer logics pervaded more of our culture, beginning logically with the whimsical worlds of animation? Perhaps for starters, taking brony fandom as an indicator, we could look forward to a waning of the fear that engaging in "girls" culture weakens masculinity.

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