SCRIPTED INFECTION:

A mixed media exploration of autistic and transfeminine marginalisation

Note. A formative illustration as an avatar for my transfeminine self. The graphic element on the right is writing in a constructed language I began designing in 2020 when I was 17. It may be translated as 'zrlroden'oze' – (the name of the illustrated character). While this figure does not appear in the animations, she is the more complex construction from which the trans-coded protagonist figures drew their inspiration.

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SCRIPTED INFECTION:

A mixed media exploration of autistic and transfeminine marginalisation

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the lonely trans and autistic people struggling to find their place in the world, feeling unloved, misunderstood, and isolated in spaces where their identities are too often swept under the rug.

You are not alone.

This thesis is submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design.

Alyx Vivienne Des Forges

Bachelor of Animation, Yoobee College of Creative Innovation (2023)

25th August 2025

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[1] My full birth name was originally Ben Des Forges which remained my legal name until 2025 when I changed my first name to Alyx. Originally, I wasn't given a middle name at birth, but I have now added Vivienne to my full legal name.

Abstract

Drawing from my lived experience as an autistic, transfeminine person, this study explores how three animated short films and accompanying soundtracks might draw on dream logic and abstraction to create a form of audio and visual storytelling that articulates the experience of not integrating into a cisgendered, heteronormative world. Theoretically, the inquiry is framed by the concept of *scripted infection*, which describes the psychological damage one experiences while trying to conform to societal expectations. In the study, discourses from psychology, film, and queer studies are used to unpack embodied experiences and apply them to narrative and sonic treatments in an artistic mixed media design practice. The study's research methodology is structured along an experimental 2D animation production pipeline. The significance of the study lies in its ability to express the sense of threat, loneliness, alienation and hope that one experiences as an autistic, transfeminine person. As such, the project suppliments existing theoretical discourses with an artistic voice that positions lived experience beyond the realm of the pathologised and statistical.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Welby Ings for supervising this thesis. I felt privileged to have worked with someone so like-minded and experienced. From our many conversations over my project development, it is evident that he is one of the few people who really understands me.

I would also like to acknowledge my second supervisor, Emily Ramsay, who was an especially fun and relatable person to be around. Thank you for understanding, and for giving me tips and resources to further advance my animation career.

I would like to express deep appreciation to my trans friends who understood my imperfections and my determination to pursue growth and maturity.

I'd like to thank my family, especially my mother, father and brother for accepting me for who I am and supporting me throughout my thesis and transition. I am very lucky to have had such an open, non-judgmental environment around me during this intense period in my life.

I'd also like to acknowledge the collaboration of my master's cohort of students who I got to know during my postgrad and transition journeys. I would especially like to thank Madelana Refiti, Rai Zhang, Lucianne Perks, and Gabrielle Gavin. The conversations we had were enriching and I was privileged to meet such like-minded people.

I'd also like to acknowledge my late Grandmother, who passed away during the study. Thank you for all that you've done for me, including accepting me during my coming out and transition. Rest In Peace.

I owe a debt of gratitude to one of my undergraduate tutors, Raymond McGrath, who encouraged me to pursue my passion for experimental animation and helped to supervise the development of my capstone project. He helped me to build the confidence to progress my work into a master's thesis and to further develop and refine my creative skills.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to the Auckland University of Technology School of Art and Design for awarding me a materials research grant that has assisted with the realisation of practical components of this project.

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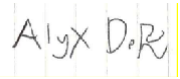
Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where specifically noted) or material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.



Alyx Vivienne Des Forges

25 August 2025

Intellectual Property Declaration

I retain copyright in all images and creative work produced and presented as part of this thesis apart from the following images that are the intellectual property of others listed below in the order they appear in this exegesis:

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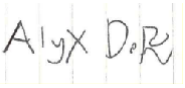


Alyx Vivienne Des Forges

25 August 2025

Ethics approval and consents

This research was an artistic inquiry that did not involve the use of animal or human participants. Because it drew on autobiographical material, it did not use the personal information of others, clinical trials, nor solicited responses from an audience. Accordingly, it did not require ethical approval.

Chapter one: Introduction

A journey to Papatoetoe

Liberation and alienation can be part of the same thing.

Throughout my life, I have struggled with social marginalisation, because of my autism. I was often judged for not being able to blend in. However, I was also raised to embrace this as what makes me unique is that, in many instances, I was able to brush negative remarks off as narrow-mindedness. Nevertheless, during this study, as I began my journey of gender transition, it felt as though this marginalisation had been amplified and it became much harder to see myself in a positive light. The three animations that comprise the practical component of the thesis document aspects of this.

As my transition has progressed, small bumps that were once easy to step over became more challenging. Getting ready in the morning once involved locating the nearest T-shirt and tracksuit pants. Now it is a journey where I must choose the right combination of clothes, apply makeup, and shave the right body parts in order to be perceived by others as the person I've always known myself to be. If I misstep (like forgetting to shave), I will spend the day feeling anxious that I'll be perceived as a creepy crossdresser – a Norman Bates or Buffalo Bill.[3]

When I arrive at the university, I go into the campus's gender-neutral bathrooms and here, the feminising of my appearance takes me an hour. Having meticulously styled myself, I am lucky that I live in a relatively safe world during daylight hours. However, if I work late, and my mum isn't able to drive me home, I must head back home on the train. Before entering this public realm, I carefully cover the feminine features I spent so much time enhancing earlier in the day. I change my clothes, pull a hoodie over my head and hide my makeup under a face mask to minimise the risk of being harassed or assaulted. Even then, commuting can feel like a psychological game of Russian roulette. When someone walks past me (especially if it's a man), I freeze, afraid that he will toss a mocking slur into the instantly curious company of other home-bound commuters. I know their world. It is resourced by social media where right-wing "influencers" create images of trans people that depict us as freaks who should be managed or erased from society to protect the safety of women and children.

[3] I am referring here to the fictional antagonist and cross-dressing serial killer, Jame Gumb (known as 'Buffalo' Bill) in Thomas Harris's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988).

So - at night, on my journey home, I have learned to become insubstantial. I lower my head, and I try to disappear … I pass as an understatement of myself.

Research question

This study asks,

> How might a dream logic communicate the embodiment of autistic and transfeminine lived experiences with societal marginalisation within a mixed-media film production?

Key Terms used in the study

Given that the thesis deals with embodied experience of autistic, trans identity, it is useful at the outset to define seven terms used in the exegesis.

Abstract

In this thesis, I use the words *abstract* and *abstraction* to describe a treatment of visual information where the animator does not seek to replicate the world in a figurative manner. Instead, they depart from concerns with concrete realities, using visual simplification that employs stylised approaches to colour, shape, form, and gesture. Gelertner (2020) notes that humans tend to think abstractly when we are dreaming or daydreaming, describing this state of mind as departing from the rules of reality and embodying who we are in our emotions and lived experiences. In this sense, abstraction may be utilised to depict the world as it is subjectively perceived through human embodiment while alluding to a sense of something being imagined (dreamed).

Autism

According to the support and advocacy network *Autism NZ*, autism is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting the way an individual processes information on a sensory and cognitive level. Because of this, an autistic individual tends to see the world differently from an allistic (non-autistic) person. Autism is considered a spectrum and individuals on this spectrum are unique.[4] A feature of autism relevant to this thesis is the difficulty one can experience in social interactions. According to Hirota et al. (2023), many autistic individuals have difficulty processing social cues and performing verbal/nonverbal communication. They may also be hesitant in initiating social interaction.

[4] A common saying in the autistic community is "if you've met one person with autism you've met one person with autism."

Cisgender

The adjective *cisgender* is an antonym for transgender. It describes an individual whose gender identity corresponds to their sex they were assigned at birth. Although the word cisgender was first used in 1994 (Aultman, 2014), it became a listing in dictionaries in 2015 due to changes in social discourses surrounding the nature of gender (Martin, 2015).

Dream logic

Dream logic in this study refers to a feature of a film's narrative where the story references dreamlike states. This may occur narratively or through the use of illogical or abstract metaphors. In film theory, dream logic is often associated with the term oneiric (pertaining to dreams) (Bacher, 2008; Eberwein, 1984).

Masking

Masking is a social mechanism used by autistic people to suppress behaviour that neurotypical society may consider socially undesirable. Masking is an attempt to "blend in" and be more accepted in society. Miller et al. (2021) have noted that masking, while being a preservation mechanism, can also lead to negative outcomes in mental health, including disconnection from one's sense of self and increased levels of suicidal ideation.

While not directly related, masking shares certain features with *passing*, a term used to describe how queer people consciously monitor and suppress physical or behavioural indicators of their "otherness" when navigating cisgendered, heteronormative environments (Serano, 2013).

Queer

The word *queer* as used in this thesis is an umbrella term that describes sexual/romantic orientations and gender identities that differ from cisgender and heterosexual. Jones (2023) notes that the word queer has, as far back as the 16th century, been associated with deviations from the expected. In an academic context the term queer is often associated with queer theory and the questioning of heterosexual and cisgender social structures. Halberstam (2011) extends this concept, describing queerness as an alternative to traditional disciplinary ways of thinking, that incline towards a capitalist power structure.

Scripted infection

Scripted infection is a term developed for this thesis. It describes the pressure on an individual to conform to the social norms of a larger group at the expense of their sense of personal identity. The theory behind this term derives from Ai et al.'s (2022) description of autistic masking as a form of impression management, where

individuals control how they are perceived by others, so they are able to gain social capital. Defined concisely, s*cripted infection* describes a form of societal infection that attacks the identities of individuals who don't conform to established norms.

Sound tactility

The word *sound* refers to a sensation produced in the ear, or vibrations that travel through the ear.[5] Conversely, *tactility* describes something that is perceptible to touch.[6] *Sound tactility* refers to a form of audio tactile synesthesia where sound evokes sensations of touch on the skin or through the body. Sound tactility can be compared to a type of sound design associated with the phenomenon of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR).[7] In this study, ASMR is of interest because it has been identified in the work of trans and autistic musicians and sound design artists like Patricia Taxxon. Reviewers of her work note the tactile nature of her electronic sound textures and their propensity to express embodied sensations of autism (like stimming).

Stimming

Stimming refers to self-stimulating behaviours. It is a technique that involves repetitive or rhythmic body movements or sounds that individuals can use to self-soothe, regulate emotions, or cope with sensory overload. Stimming is a common behaviour in individuals with autism but it can also be observed in neurotypical individuals.

Rationale for the study

According to Hajek et al. (2023), transgender and gender-diverse people face greater social isolation when compared to cisgendered men and cisgendered women.[8] This is a concern because, as the researchers note, isolation leads trans and gender-diverse people to have poorer mental health and higher rates of mortality. Such isolation, Hajek et al. suggest, is manifested in internalised oppression, experiences of discrimination, and social rejection.

---

[5] Sound: Dictionary.com: https://www.dictionary.com/browse/sound

[6] Tactile: Online etymology dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/word/tactile

[7] ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response. The acronym has become a popular genre of content creation online (Lopez, 2018). Although ASMR can vary between individuals, many describe it as a tingling sensation around their spinal area that helps with relaxation.

[8] Statistically, the study found the experience of social isolation prevalent in 38% of transgender participants and 54% of gender-diverse people - compared to 15-21% for cisgendered men and 17-24% for cisgendered women.

Autistic people struggle with similar experiences of isolation. Schultz (2016) and Hirota and King (2023), note that autistic individuals may have difficulty in processing social cues and this can make it harder for them to sustain long-term connections.

Because of this internalised and externalised marginalisation, trans and autistic people often feel pressured to adjust who they are by passing as neurotypical and/or cisgender. In an autistic context, this may be achieved by concealing behaviours that imitate behavioural "norms" (Miller et al, 2021). For trans and gender-diverse people, isolation may manifest in behaviours like trying to stay in the closet (attempting to present socially as their assigned gender). They may also alter their appearance and behaviour to socially "pass" as binary gendered,[9] a practice that Booking et al. describe as adhering to Gender Ideology (2018). As a person who lives at the intersection of these two identities, loneliness, alienation, and marginalisation are part of my intimate, lived experience.

The importance of this thesis project lies in the necessity to provide media visibility for people who struggle with external or internal marginalisation based on autism or trans/nonbinary identity, because traditional media depictions often problematise or pathologise aspects of these identities (Feder, 2020; Mclaren et al, 2021; Jones et al., 2023).

Significance of the study

The significance of the study lies in its propensity to expand existing discourses relating to the experience of queerness, autism, and marginalisation through its integration of visual abstraction and sound tactility. By drawing on the potentials of foley, ASMR, and electronic music genres (drone, noise, drum and bass, and IDM), the study explores alternative pathways for how sound design might speak alongside an abstracted visual narrative, where the sonic is treated as visceral and embodied rather than something applied over the surface of a film.

The study is also significant in its introduction of the concept of *scripted infection* as a way of describing and framing the experienced, negative effects autistic and trans-people can encounter when being forced to conform to societal norms. These effects include the depletion of their individual autonomy, a sense of marginalisation, and damage to their well-being. By considering scripted infection as a theoretical idea that can be applied to a creative work, the study seeks to promote the importance of self-acceptance, especially as it pertains to marginalised identities.

[9] According to a 2018 study undertaken by Bookting et al., trans people who expressed a strong desire to socially adhere to traditional binary gender roles, were identified as more vulnerable to internalised transphobia.

The nature of the practice

The three animated films: *Lexopticon, Escape from Babel*, and *Rainbow Gvrl* that form the outcome of the thesis practice, adopt dream logic as an approach to audio-visual narrative storytelling. Each work integrates a complementary sound design.

The three films are formatted as a composite, short mixed media text, exhibited in a 1920x1080 25fps format, that utilises animation and sound design to convey a broader, sequential narrative that is felt from the internal experience of the protagonist.

The structure of the exegesis

This exegesis is divided into six chapters. The first introduces the study. It discusses the research question and the rationale for, and significance of, the thesis. It also explains key terms used in the exegetical discussion. In concluding, the chapter outlines the nature of the project and structure of the document.

In the second chapter I position myself in relation to the study. Since the nature of the research draws on the autobiographic, the writing discusses my lived experiences through memories and photographs that explain the origins of, and motivations for, the project.

The third chapter contains a review of contextual knowledge. Because it discusses theoretical and practical texts, it expands the provisions of a traditional literature review. It considers four realms of discourse: theories underpinning the concept of scripted infection, connections between dream logic and film narrative, the nature of sound tactility and a discussion of work by animators and sound designers that have been influential in the development of the project.

The fourth chapter discusses the research design developed for the study. It begins with an outline of the research paradigm then moves into a discussion of its autoethnographic methodology before delving into methods under phases of preproduction, production and post-production.

The fifth chapter offers a critical commentary on the short animations *Lexopticon, Escape from Babel*, and *Rainbow Gvrl.* In each instance, a synopsis of the narrative is provided (accompanied by illustrative screen grabs). Subsections are then employed to discuss the animation and its social commentary and the work's sonic design.

The final chapter provides a summary of the study, a discussion of the project's contributions to the field and a closing reflective statement relating to my personal journey across the project's development.

Chapter TWO: Positioning the Researcher

Difference

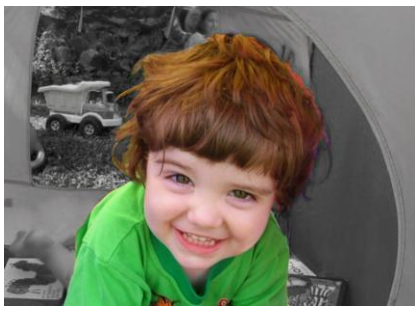
All my life, I have known that something was “off”.

My name is Alyx, and at the time of writing this thesis, I identify as transfeminine (she/her).

At the age of five, I was called Ben and I had recently been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. I was the weird kid, stimming and humming made-up songs. When we had “jump jam”, I hated that I had to perform the same dances as everyone else. I created my own, the apparent epitome of a contrarian.

When I entered primary school, I noticed the critical differences between girls and boys; girls had long hair, and boys had short hair, and from the moment that I saw a boy with long hair, I wanted long hair, too. I would grow my hair as long as I could (Figure 1).

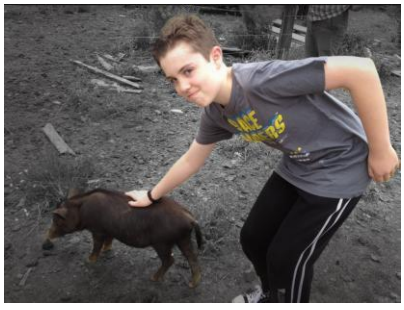
Figure 1.



Note: Me as a toddler with shaggy hair (2006).

Eventually when the length of my hair was deemed excessive, I was forced to visit the hairdresser to get it cut short again. This was an intense experience for me. It felt like one of my limbs was being amputated.

Figure 2.



Note: 12-year-old me petting a farmer’s pig at Coromandel, New Zealand, (sporting the hairdresser’s idea of an appropriate haircut) (2016).

At this stage in my life, I was also captured by the idea of female cosmetics. Once, when I was nine, I entertained the idea of applying toothpaste to my face after seeing a woman on television with white makeup.

It stung.

Foreign worlds

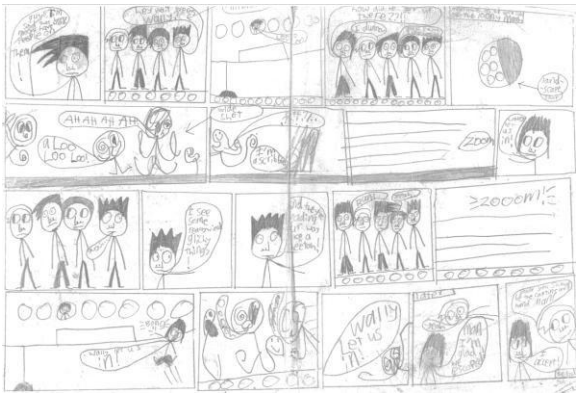
At intermediate school, I was drafted into a class comprised entirely of boys. (This was because the teacher had a reputation for predatory behaviour with female students.)

Figure 3.

Note: Me with my "all male" Year 8 class at Marcellin College (2015).

Consequently, I spent two years in a hyper-masculine environment where I began to realise how different I was from other boys who were sports-mad, swore, messed up their tables and were consumed in conversations about girls and *Grand Theft Auto*. It was not long before I realised that I shared little in common with my classmates; I was passionate, artistic and sensitive. I had never watched a game of rugby in my life. Instead, I created imaginary androgynous worlds of amateur comics into which I could escape (Figure 4).

Figure 4.



Note: A stick figure comic I created in 2015 that shows characters with androgynous hairstyles engaging in a nonsensical adventure.

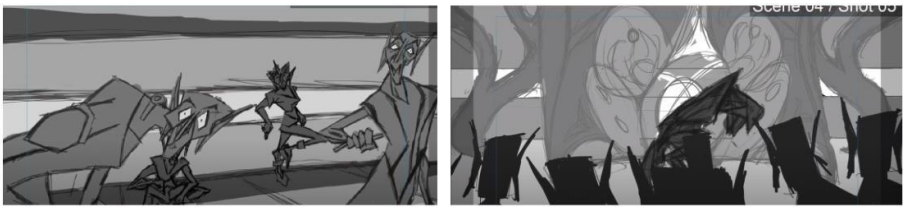
Whenever I discussed these interests, my friends would call them “gay”. Any feminine behaviour that I expressed was attributed to my being on the autism spectrum. Even though I was filled with delight imagining what might happen if I and my classmates were gender-swapped, I gave it little attention, shrugging it off as “just being a bit weird”.

I recall one time, when I was crying, my teacher pulled me aside and told me to stop because I would be seen as a “cry-baby”. As I grew up, such messages began to fester, and I became increasingly disconnected from the person I wanted to be. My emotions were channelled into confusion, anger, and shame. I was afraid to stim and afraid to be openly passionate or sensitive. This fear led to me masking my emotions and secluding myself in quiet spaces. Eventually, I drifted deeper and deeper into isolation and, as I grew up, I became increasingly hesitant to be open about myself to others … and I began masking.

Telling stories

Between 2021 and 2023 I completed a bachelor's degree in animation at Yoobee College of Creative Innovation. During my studies, I produced animated narratives that explored lived experiences with autism. One significant work was an animatic for a short film concept called *Claws and Metal*. This story featured a protagonist named Rejak; an alien creature who navigates a world where he stands out because of his more animalistic appearance when compared to the more humanoid people of the city. In the final sequence, Rejak walks down a street where surrounding pedestrians glare at him (Figure 5) as nervous tension builds. Although I wasn’t “out” as queer at this time, the anxious sensation of being glared at in public was one I have often experienced as an autistic person. I grew up being very self-conscious about not wanting to “weird out” passers-by with my stimming, hyperactive movement or tendency to run instead of walk during my daily commutes.

Figure 5.



Note: Frame grabs from the animatic for *Claws and Metal*, (2022).

In the final year of my undergraduate degree, I continued exploring these experiences while working on a group-led capstone project. *Valley of Despair* (Figure 6) was a short film/music video we created that drew on feelings of social awkwardness and alienation in a society that was largely homogenous. In the film, homogeneity was represented by miners in the opening shot, who looked identical and repeated the same activity (relentlessly hitting rocks with a pickaxe).

Conversely, the protagonist used a pickaxe to create instead of destroy things. This theme was drawn from my experience in intermediate and secondary school.[10]

Figure 6.

Note: Frame grabs from my undergraduate group-led capstone film *Valley of Despair* (2023).

While developing *Valley of Despair*, I was identifying as non-binary, but I hadn't come out to anyone (other than my immediate family and a small number of classmates). However, even though I hadn't discussed this with the group, my identity contributed significantly to the project's design. The character design of the miners is buff and stocky compared to the lanky and androgynous protagonist (Figure 7). This was a reference to the culture of conformist masculinity from which I have always felt disconnected.

Figure 7.

Note: Frame grabs from my undergraduate short film *Valley of Despair* contrasting the design of the miners (left) and the protagonist (right), (2023).

After the creation of these two projects, I began to diversify my creative palette by exploring the potentials of sound design (through foley and electronic syntheses). Key musical influences include the electronic music of the band *Autechre* and solo

[10] The film was originally going to be set in a physical education class with the miners instead being jocks. However, the project's director changed it to a more industrial worker-oriented setting.

artists *SOPHIE* and *Arca*. The musical rhythms and timbres produced by these musicians elicit sensory dimensions that articulate complex experiences relating to social anxiety, alienation, and gender dysphoria. These concerns are especially significant because both SOPHIE and Arca are transfeminine, and the expression of alienation from cis-normative society is a distinctive feature of their music.

The thesis project has its roots in such influences and experiences. It articulates through animation and sound, feelings of alienation that one can encounter when navigating a society where autism and gender diversity are pushed to the margins.

Chapter three: Review of related knowledge

Introduction

This chapter contextualises the practice developed in the thesis. It considers four realms of discourse: the nature of scripted infection, relationships between dream logic and film, the phenomenon of sound tactility, and work by other mixed media practitioners that has been influential in the development of the project.

The nature of scripted infection

The animations *Lexopticon, Escape from Babel*, and *Rainbow Gvrl* use dream logic to explore my embodied experiences with *scripted infection*.

Sociologist Erving Goffman's theory of social dramaturgy (1959) suggests that participation in social life is similar to performing a character in a play. This performance requires that an individual hides the parts of themselves they consider undesirable within the social setting (the stage) to gain control over how other individuals (the audience) see them, a phenomenon Goffman defines as *impression management*.

According to Ai et al. (2022), impression management is linked to autistic social camouflage, a phenomenon where autistic individuals emulate the behavioural patterns of neurotypical people. They suggest that, as a marginalised group, autistic people are pressured to hide their autistic traits through impression management so they can gain greater social acceptance.

While Hull et al. (2017) and Izubma et al. (2011) note that neurotypical people, of all genders, may control the way others perceive them in social situations, research indicates that individuals with autism spectrum conditions have a reduced ability to do so (Cage et al., 2013; Hull et al., 2017).

In a qualitative study, Miller et al. (2021) explored the negative effects of hiding autistic behaviours in attempts to socially camouflage (masking). They concluded that masking causes negative experiences in both autistic and nonautistic participants, including losing an internal sense of self and having difficulty forming authentic social connections. Despite these negative experiences, Miller et al. (2021) and Ai et al. (2022) note that autistic people who do not socially camouflage, tend to face higher social rejection and isolation from peers.

This loss of one's internal self in an effort to effectively integrate into a social setting may be compared to Du Bois's writing about *double consciousness* (1900). Du Bois defines double consciousness as the pressure for black Americans to lose their self-awareness in favour of judging their value by the attitudes of a racist society. This creates a cognitive dissonance between the internal self and exterior perceptions, which Du Bois describes as “two warring ideals in one dark body” (p. 8). Although double consciousness applies to a racial context, Ai et al. (2022) note that social camouflaging can apply across various racial, sexual, and disabled identities.

In this sense, it may be argued that scripted infection also applies to a trans context, with many trans people facing societal pressure to pass as cisgender (Hull et al., 2017; Bookting et al., 2020; To et al., 2020). However, the trans support and advocacy network TransHub (n. d.) argues that the concept of passing implies that there is something wrong with having a trans body because society places cisgender bodies above trans ones. Interestingly, Queue (2020) makes connections between passing and masking. Drawing from their lived experience as a transmasculine autistic person, they note that autistic masking and transgender passing both involve trying to change yourself for the benefit of others at the cost of personal authenticity.

The conflict between becoming socially accepted at the expense of losing touch with one’s internal sense of self informs this study’s definition of scripted infection. Drawing on concepts like *impression management* (Goffman, 1959), *social camouflage* (Ai et al., 2022; Attwood, 2007; Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011; Hull et al., 2017, Kopp & Gillberg 2011; Lai et al., 2011), *masking* (Queue, 2020; Miller et al., 2021), and *double consciousness* (Du Bois, 1900), *scripted infection* argues that norms are *scripted*. What is socially normative is prewritten. It is prescriptive (what one should do) and proscriptive (regulated and socially monitored). As an autistic, trans person, one encounters a world that proposes an existing script for how one must appear and behave.

Queue describes this as:

> learning to fit our neurodiverse minds into societal norms. This can include learning how to use eye contact or make small talk by copying behaviours from others, even if it is the last thing an autistic person would want to do. (Queue, 2020, para. 3)

Society's prewritten script stipulates the norms to which one must conform. To "go off script", is to forsake the security of what has been pre-sanctioned. "Off script" behaviour invites alienation, discord and a loss of approbation.

Society's script may be framed as a kind of infection; something that is absorbed unwittingly and is damaging to one's health. Thus, if we consider an infection as the invasion of a system by (social) pathogens and the subsequent reaction of the host to the infection and the toxins they produce, *scripted infection* describes a form of prewritten identity damage that is absorbed into the self as a contaminant. It is against this infection that one must seek a more meaningful and authentic expression of identity.

Dream logic and film

The three films that constitute the heart of the thesis utilise dream logic as an approach to narrative design. According to the Urban Dictionary, dream logic describes the illogical experience of a dream that we intuitively understand during sleep (EVANetc, 2009).

Cline (2020) notes that during Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep, our brain shuts us off from logical reasoning and increases emotional activity. In expanding on this idea, Gelernter (2020) argues that human thinking exists on a spectrum between the day logic of cognitive reasoning and the dream logic of free association. He suggests that free-associative thinking is inseparable from an individual's memories and experiences and is most active while we dream. From a similar position, LaBerge (2004) suggests that dreams are worlds that are moulded from an individual's personality and identity.

In film studies, dream logic may be associated with oneiric theory (the cinematic depiction of dream-like states). Several theorists, including Bacher (2008), Eberwein (1984), Junaid (2021), and Sparshott (1971), have described this experience as a merging of the viewer's consciousness with the consciousness of the screen's subject. Eberwein suggests that, in this fusion, our prior experiences with dreaming "help to create a sense of oneness" (1984, p. 53), and Junaid (2021), proposes that cinema's ability to recapture a dreaming experience enables a viewer's consciousness to merge with the onscreen subject matter, emulating how we experience dreams.

This proposed merging of the viewer's experience of dreaming with dream logic in film may be related to Fowler's observation that "the deep structure of human narrative is conceived in dreams and the genesis of all myth is dreams" (1986, p. 10). Many films employ elements of dream logic as a narrative device, including

Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965), Cocteau's *Orphic Trilogy* (1930, 1940, 1960), Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957), and Henson's *Labyrinth* (1986).

John Cline (2020) discusses David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) as a notable example of dream logic applied to film narrative. He suggests that much like dreams, *Mulholland Drive* prompts viewers to disregard logical thinking and emotionally engage with the film's story. Junaid describes the specific filmmaking techniques Lynch utilises in *Mulholland Drive* to emulate the atmosphere of a dream, including the use of coloured lighting to represent a character's emotional states and editing techniques like jump cutting and cross-dissolves to convey fragmented pacing to the narrative and emulate the fast passage of time during REM sleep.

The nature of sound tactility

The term *sound tactility* relates to audio tactile synaesthesia (ATS), a condition where individuals experience sensations of touch when listening to auditory phenomena. Ali et al. (2023, p. 2) note that:

> In this condition, auditory stimuli can evoke tactile sensations perceived as located on different body parts, such as the hands, fingers, or arms [although] the experience of ATS is different for each individual, and there is still much to be understood about the underlying neural mechanisms of the phenomenon. (p, 2)

According to Koenig and Ro (2022), the frequency of an audio signal can determine how roughly or sharply a tactile sensation is felt and where it is located on the body.

Ali et al. (2023) suggest that audio tactile synaesthesia has a prevalence of less than 1% of the general population, and Sean Day's studies appear to support their findings. Day, in his 2005 study of 1297 individual synaesthetes, found that only 4.38% of his synaesthete participants demonstrated this type. [11]

Lawerence Marks (1975, 1984) and Eitan and Rothschild (2011) have published influential studies on auditory-tactile synaesthesia. Employing a range of behavioural and physiological measures, their studies suggest that the condition is more than a matter of association because it involves distinctive cross-modal processing in the brain.

[11] The percentage relates to synaesthetes in the study, *not* the percentage of people demonstrating audio tactile synaesthesia in the general public.

In relation to auditory-tactile synaesthesia, we might consider a condition that Poerio et al. (2018) describe as *Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response* (ASMR).[12] This is a pleasant form of paraesthesia (an abnormal sensation of the skin) that results from no discernible physical cause and may be experienced by tingling, pricking, chilling, burning, or numbness.[13] As a genre of video design, it has been experimented with by artists (particularly ones with a social media presence) who produce various audio-visual triggers, including whispering and delicate sounds like typing and tapping. Viewers of this content have reported diverse sensory responses including a tingling sensation in their scalp or spinal area (Lopez, 2018).[14] Significant among these artists is Julie Weitz whose digital art work *Touch Museum*, exhibited at the Young Projects Gallery in 2015, featured a seven-room installation of video screenings (Vankin, 2016). The sound design for the exhibition was composed by Benjamin Wynn.

In the same year that Weitz exhibited *Touch Museum*, the composer Holly Henderson released an album *Platform,* that formed part of her Ph.D. from Oakland's Mills College. In this work she included the composition *Lonely At The Top*, that was designed to trigger ASMR (Corcoran, 2015; Jacoby, 2015). In the following year, Holly Pester's multimedia collaborative work *Common Rest* (2016) that included a 10-inch vinyl album and accompanying book of poetry, also explored the potentials of ASMR in relation to lullaby.[15]

Examples of animated, mixed media practice

The design of *Lexopticon, Escape from Babel*, and *Rainbow Gvrl* has been influenced by four filmmakers, Chris Landreth, Jan Svankmajer, Felix Colgrave, and Sam Gainsborough. The animations have also drawn inspiration from the work of two musicians, SOPHIE and Patricia Taxxon.

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[12] There is little current research around the phenomenon of ASMR. The term is attributed to Jennifer Allen who in 2010 sought to describe the pleasurable feeling that travels from the head downward in response to specific sounds, feelings, or descriptions.

[13] Copeland (2017) suggests ASMR can be used as a tool for sleep and relaxation to help people overcome issues relating to stress and insomnia and suggests that it has a connection with synaesthesia.

[14] However, such responses are not universal and other users have reported no reaction (Lopez, 2018).

[15] See sleeve notes for the album: https://prototypepublishing.co.uk/product/common-rest/ Prototype Publishing.

The 13-minute, Oscar®-winning short film, *Ryan* (Landreth, 2004), is an animated documentary about the Canadian filmmaker Ryan Larkin. The animation employs mixed media and dream logic to depict the filmmaker's mental illness that has reduced his life to a fragmented, visually scarred residue of his former self (Figure 8). Blair (2015) notes that Landreth's distinctive visualisation of Ryan Larkin's mental illness is significant because our visual culture often downplays the seriousness of the topic.

Like my films, Landreth's work deals with the depiction of an embodied struggle with mental health and the visualisation of marginalisation. It also demonstrates how abstraction can be used to heighten the viewer's emotional focus because the animator is able to reach beyond the figurative to reveal what cannot be seen with the rational eye.

Figure 8.

Note. Screenshot from the film *Ryan* (2004) depicting the titular character in a broken mental state, illustrated by the fact that parts of his head are missing. Image source: YouTube, Timestamp, 00:06:28. The film can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbkBjZKBLHQ

The second work, *Dimensions of Dialogue* (Svankmajer, 1982), is a 14-minute stop-motion film that portrays negative aspects of human conversational dynamics. In the three parts that form the composite text, Svankmajer uses clay and everyday objects to construct faces that transform, break apart, and reassemble (Figure 9). Sonically, the work is distinctive because its sound design emphasises the audio textures of each interacting material. According to Deputan (2023), Svankmajer's practice adds a dimension of physicality to audio-visual storytelling through subjective and sensational experiences of tactility. While Deputan's critique focuses on the film's visual tactility, I found its sound design (i.e. sound tactility), distinctive in its viscerality and the dominant role it plays in emphasising the emotional weight of each narrative. Of significance within these works was Svankmajer's use of everyday objects (towels, keyboards, pencils, and paper) to evoke tingling sensations in the viewer. This feature also corresponds with work currently being explored by ASMR influencers (Poerio et al., 2018).

Figure 9.

Note. Screenshots from J. Svankmajer's short film *Dimensions of Dialogue* (1982). Here, everyday objects like pencils, apples, and clay interact with each other in the film's three segments. Image Source: YouTube, Timestamps: 00:00:58; 00:05:29; 00:08:44. The film can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-gGpWpra-g&t=330s

A third animation, *Donks* (2023) by Felix Colgrave, depicts diverse toy-like items that assemble and reassemble into living creatures that continuously model and remodel their body parts in a modular manner (Figure 10). In Colgrave's work, character animation is rhythmically synchronised with the accompanying soundtrack to create a narrative cohesion between sound and image that functions as a modern iteration on early animated films like *Fantasia* (Sharpsteen et al., 1940). *Donks*' modular characters depict the nature of protean identity which can potentially be read as queer "iterative and intimate self-making" (Ball, 2021, p. 12) and "continuous building and unbuilding" of the queer self (Halberstam, 2011). Colgrave's narrative is accompanied by a sound design that explores connections between foley and music that respond synchronously to actions enacted by the visual elements. This blending of music and foley is a feature of all three of my films but is perhaps most evidenced in the animation *Escape from Babel*.

Figure 10

Note. Screenshot from *Donks* by F. Colgrave (2023), depicting one of the modular characters flipping through various items to try on and use as a mouth/nose. Image Source: YouTube, Timestamp: 00:03:09. The film can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gvSYEqOMn8

Finally, the 7-minute, mixed media short film, *Facing It* (Gainsborough, 2018), utilises similar techniques to Svankmajer's *Dimensions of Dialogue* to depict the intensive states of anxiety one may experience in seemingly ordinary social situations. In the animation, the protagonist's face contorts into formations that depict his internal state of mind. (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Note: Screenshots from *Facing It* (Gainsborough, 2018). The animation can be watched here: https://vimeo.com/380157225.

These short films all employ metaphor and enigma to portray characters' embodied emotional states. In their film worlds, impossible action becomes acceptable expression, in a way that figurative depiction can never achieve. This facility means that, as viewers, we gain access to internal anxieties made explicit through the animator's engagement with the abstract and the emotionally visceral.

Sonic design

Also contributing to my films is the work of two queer, experimental electronic artists who employ sound tactility as an approach to expressing embodied experience.

The first is the musician and producer *SOPHIE* who, between 2008 and 2021, produced electronic soundscapes that exaggerated and contorted "real-world" sounds into surreal manifestations (Arte tracks, 2018). Her work was distinguished by experimental audio design, synthesized textures, and the incorporation of underground dance styles (Phares, 2024). SOPHIE is also associated with helping to pioneer the British hyperpop microgenre (Russell, 2021).[16]

In her first studio album, *Oil of Every Pearls Un-insides*, SOPHIE explored themes relating to her lived experiences as a transfeminine person. For example, in *FaceShopping* (2018), she employed discordant metallic rhythms accompanied by lyrics like, *"My face is the front of shop"* (timestamp: 00:00:08) and "*plastic surgery"* (timestamp 00:42:00) (Figure 12). These lines may be interpreted as alluding to the pressure trans people experience to alter their appearance through surgery so they can better fit into gender binary conventions (Bookting et al., 2020; Transhub, n.d.).

[16] Hyperpop was a music microgenre that originated in the United Kingdom early in 2010. It was distinguished by its integration of pop and avant-garde sensibilities and elements found in electronic, hip hop and dance music (Russell, 2021).

Rovinelli (2021) draws a connection between SOPHIE's music and the expression of living in a trans body. She suggests that the musician's plastic contortion of electronic sound mirrors embodied mental processes of self-reflection and self-reinvention that trans people often partake in while transitioning. In this sense, SOPHIE's music demonstrates how the processing and manipulation of sonic texture can act as an expression of trans embodiment.

It is this process of self-reflection and self-reinvention that I have embraced and drawn upon, as a trans person, in the composition of the sound design for my work.

Figure 12

Note. Frame grabs from the music video for *Faceshopping* by SOPHIE (2018). From YouTube, uploaded by the YouTube channel, SOPHIE, Copyright (MSMSMSM; Future Classic; Transgressive records) All rights reserved. The video can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=es9-P1SOeHU

The second sound artist whose work contextualises my practice is Patricia Taxxon. Taxxon is a queer American musician and media analyst whose YouTube channel profiles analyses of media and videos for her songs and albums. Taxxon has openly discussed being on the autism spectrum. Many of the comments under the YouTube posts of their album *Bicycle* (2024) describe people's listening experiences as tactile, "sensory", "stimming", and "physical".[17] One commenter notes that the music "tickles" the brain, in a manner similar to how Lopez, Polerio, and Copeland have described listeners' experiences of ASMR as tingling sensations around the scalp. Arguably, Taxxon's music may be perceived as an example of sound tactility practice. This positions her musical compositions, especially on *Bicycle*, as an important reference point for me in designing the soundtracks for my films.

[17] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivjW83wNmp4

Figure 13.

Note. Album cover for *Bicycle* by P. Taxxon, (2024). Image source: Bandcamp. (This content has been removed by the author due to copyright). Taxxon's album can be listened to here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivjW83wNmp4

Having contextualised the practice developed in the thesis by considering the nature of scripted infection, relationships between dream logic and film, the phenomenon of sound tactility, and the practice of other mixed media practitioners who have been influential in the development of the project, it is useful to turn now to the research design that underpinned the study.

Chapter Four: Research design

Research design

The project's practice-led research methodology was structured along a 2D animation production pipeline that was divided into three phases. The first, (pre-production) was resourced with autobiographic journalling, concept design inside world creation, mood boarding and storyboarding. The production phase was associated with the construction of iterative animatics, animation experiments and sound design. Finally, the post-production phase was concerned with refined editing and audio treatments.

Paradigm

A research paradigm refers to the values that orient a research project (Faumuina, 2022). Ling and Ling (2016) describe it as:

> … a set of assumptions and understandings about key aspects of the research: the nature of reality or truth (ontology); the intent, ethics and values of the researcher (axiology); the understanding of the nature of knowledge and how it may be known (epistemology); the way information is obtained (methodology); and the nature of the research outcomes. (p. 19)

This study orients itself through practice and it understands the research as something realised through iterations of making and reflection on both the self and what is made (as an expression of the self). Thus, paradigmatically the study aligns with Candy's (2006) definition of practice-led inquiry as an "original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice" (para. 2). It also aligns with Mortensen Steagall and Ings' (2018) description of practice-led research as an inquiry that is "undertaken to advance practice [where] practice is used as a vehicle for reforming, critiquing and advancing the research question" (p. 67). Faumuina (2022) proposes that such research is used to understand and advance understandings of an idea "through processes of synthesising, forming, critiquing and advancing iterations of the research question" (p. 8).

Methodology

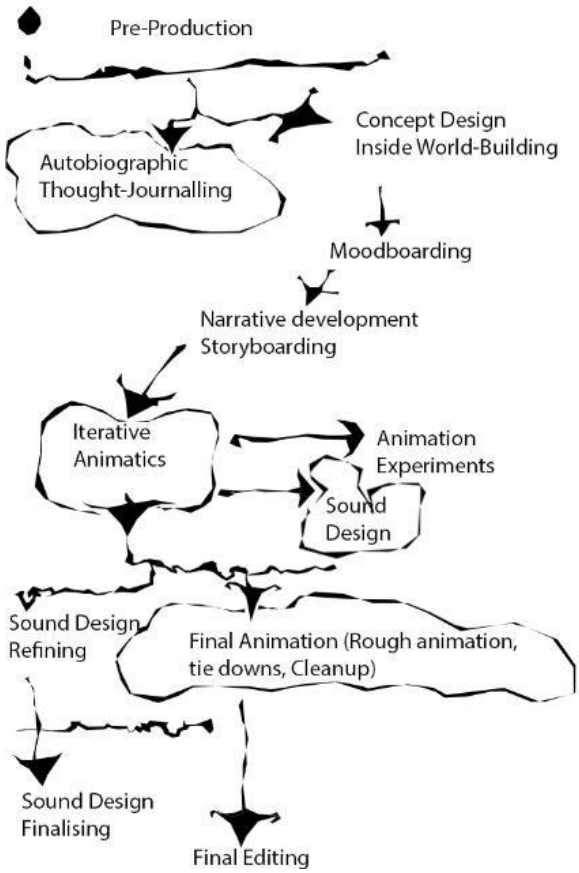
Methodologically the thesis study may be described as an autoethnographic inquiry. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) describe autoethnography as a qualitative research method that involves data collection from the researcher's thoughts, memories and experiences. Autoethnography can incorporate a variety of methodological frameworks, including narrative and arts-based approaches. For example, in Reilley's (2013) autoethnographic study, she utilises the metaphor of the fairytale Goldilocks to derive meaning-making from her role and impact as a woman and trauma researcher. Similarly, Cooper and Lilyea describe a narrative research approach to autoethnography that structures key events in the researcher's life as an evolving narrative with key "turning points" in a plot and progression that are affected by supporting characters.

In artistic practice, theses ranging from graphic novels to film narrative and textile design have employed autoethnography to draw personal experience into texts that speak to broader societal issues (Cheung, 2023; Chooi, 2017; Faumunia, 2015; Konings, 2010; Panaita, 2018; Tavares, 2011; Trussardi, 2012).

In their autoethnographic research into teaching, Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) emphasise the necessity to express authentic thoughts and experiences while maintaining an objective standpoint on the broader societal issues that affect the researcher's experiences. Drawing on my experiences as a trans person who regularly navigates public spaces during my daily commute, the research has explored the potential of abstract imagery and dream logic narratives to articulate embodied human sensations through emotion and sensation rather than pictorial realism.

Methods (structured as a 2D pipeline)
A 2D animation pipeline refers to a workflow where a combination of hardware and software is used to transform an idea into a functioning animation narrative. All three of my films progressed through three phases: pre-production, production and post-production (Figure 14).

Figure 14



Note. An illustrated visualisation of my animation production pipeline (2024).

Phase 1: Pre-production

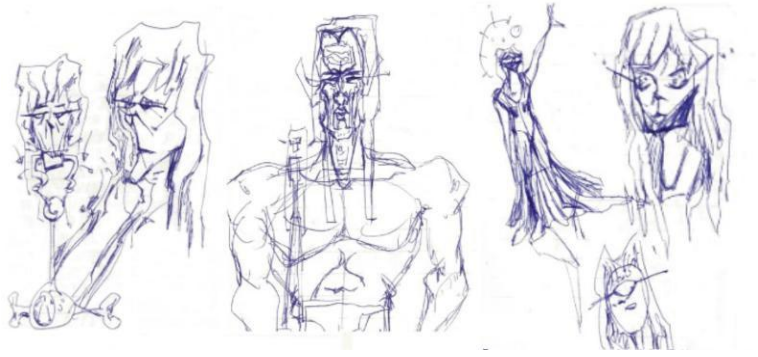
Autobiographic journaling

Because the research question examined my identity as a trans and autistic person, specific memories, thoughts, experiences, and artefacts that influence these identities were catalogued in a journal. Experiences included moments where I was self-conscious about how people perceived me and I felt pressured to socially camouflage (Ai et al., 2022). These written recollections were then channelled into sketches, sound design experiments, and word-building concepts to "flesh out" how scripted infection shaped my social and emotional interactions.

Cooper and Lilyea (2022) describe how self-reflective journalling in an auto-ethnographic inquiry can provoke an emotional connection through a process of "descriptive-realistic" writing, that paints detailed, raw pictures of experience. In the journalling process I drew on their technique of writing questions to myself about intense events in my life. Given the artistic nature of the project, my journaling also involved sketching processes where I reflected on myself as a trans-autistic person (Figure 15). This provided an evolving process of self-reflection during a significant period of my life where I was medically and socially transitioning from male to female.

The development of the project synchronised with my starting hormone therapy, getting laser hair removal, learning how to dress and apply makeup, and finding ways to safely navigate public spaces. Although these changes alleviated a lot of the dysphoria I experienced prior to my transition, they also caused a drastic shift in how I perceived and presented myself to the world.

Figure 15



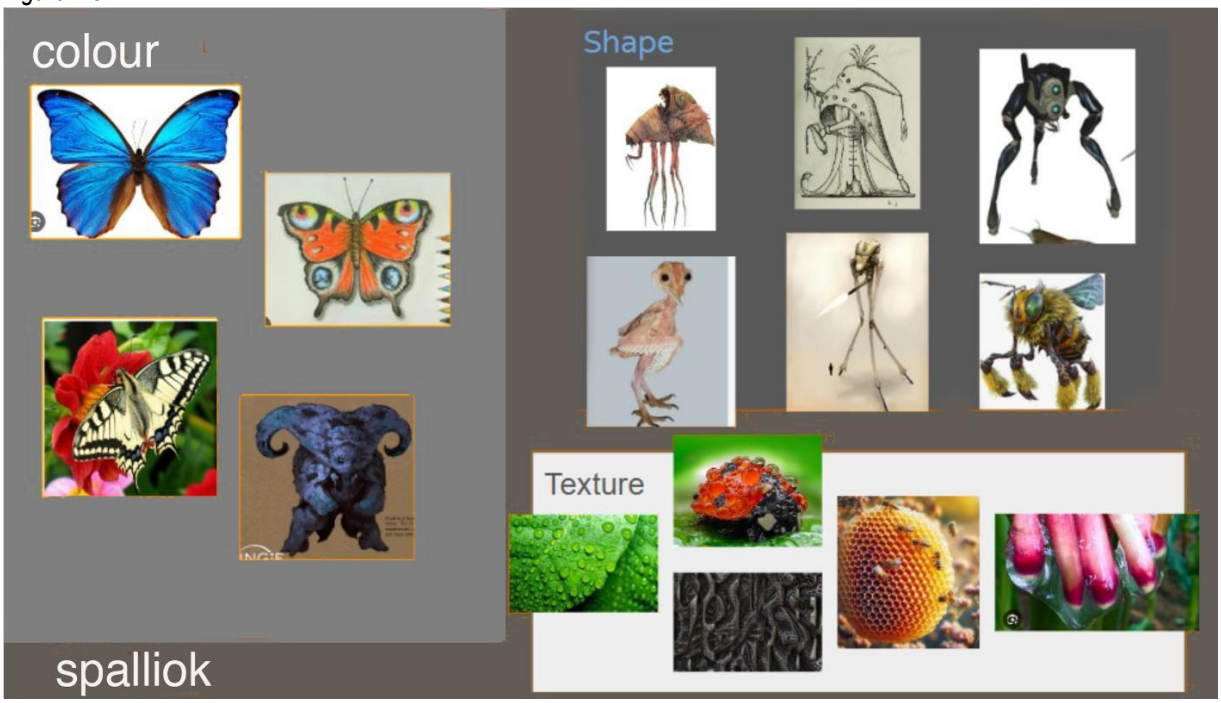
Note. Comparative drawings depicting dream logic perceptions of myself as a trans-autistic person (left), compared to imaginings of my ideal self (right).

Moodboarding

To enable personal reflection to progress into an animatable narrative, I created moodboards. This involved the compilation of artworks and photographs from sites

like Pinterest[18] and Google Images[19] (Figure 16). Inspired by work as diverse as Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Bosch, 1490-1510) and *All Tomorrows* (Koseman, 2006), I gathered expressions of anxiety and alienation that resonated with my navigation through public environments as a transfeminine person. In addition to emotional states, moodboards also enabled me to consider form, texture, pattern, and the potentials of abstracted hybridity.

Figure 16



Note. Moodboard developed to resource character design (August-September 2024).

World building

From moodboarding I began a process of world building. Von Stackelberg and McDowell (2015) describe this method as the creation of imaginary worlds with consistent geographic, social, cultural, and other features.

Butler (2013) emphasises the importance of immersion in worldbuilding because it can enable a detailed process of nuanced discovery that enables a designer to help an audience eventually suspend disbelief when they engage with a fictional or allegorical narrative.

Worldbuilding enabled me to immerse myself in an increasingly detailed environment that contained multiple concepts including characters, social hierarchies, and environments.

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[18] Pinterest was a site that further extended my research because it recommended images that shared stylistic parallels to what I was gathering.

[19] A Google slideshow document containing the moodboards and written descriptions of the world can be accessed as Appendix 1.

Sketching was an important process in my world building because the worlds were very abstracted and each of the three narratives played out inside dream logic (Figure 17).

Figure 17

Note. Rough sketches showing abstracted character design and development.

When designing characters and environments from abstract visualisations, I surrounded myself with electronic music like the band Autechre's *NTS Sessions* album series (2018).[20] Concurrently, I composed sonic tracks that expressed the atmosphere underpinning the "felt" world of each animation (Figure 18)

Figure 18

Escape From Babel Extended Track.wav

Note: Initial aural track used to establish the ethos of the world that was to eventually become the city of Babel - and the loneliness of the protagonist who will initially be lost then eventually resist its predatory mechanisations.

[20] *Autechre* are a British electronic music group formed in Manchester in 1987 led by Sean Booth and Rob Brown. The group is known for their organic approach to electronic music. Their work consists of compositions that progressively evolve in timbre and tempo to convey complex and enveloping auditory atmospheres (Pareles, 2020).

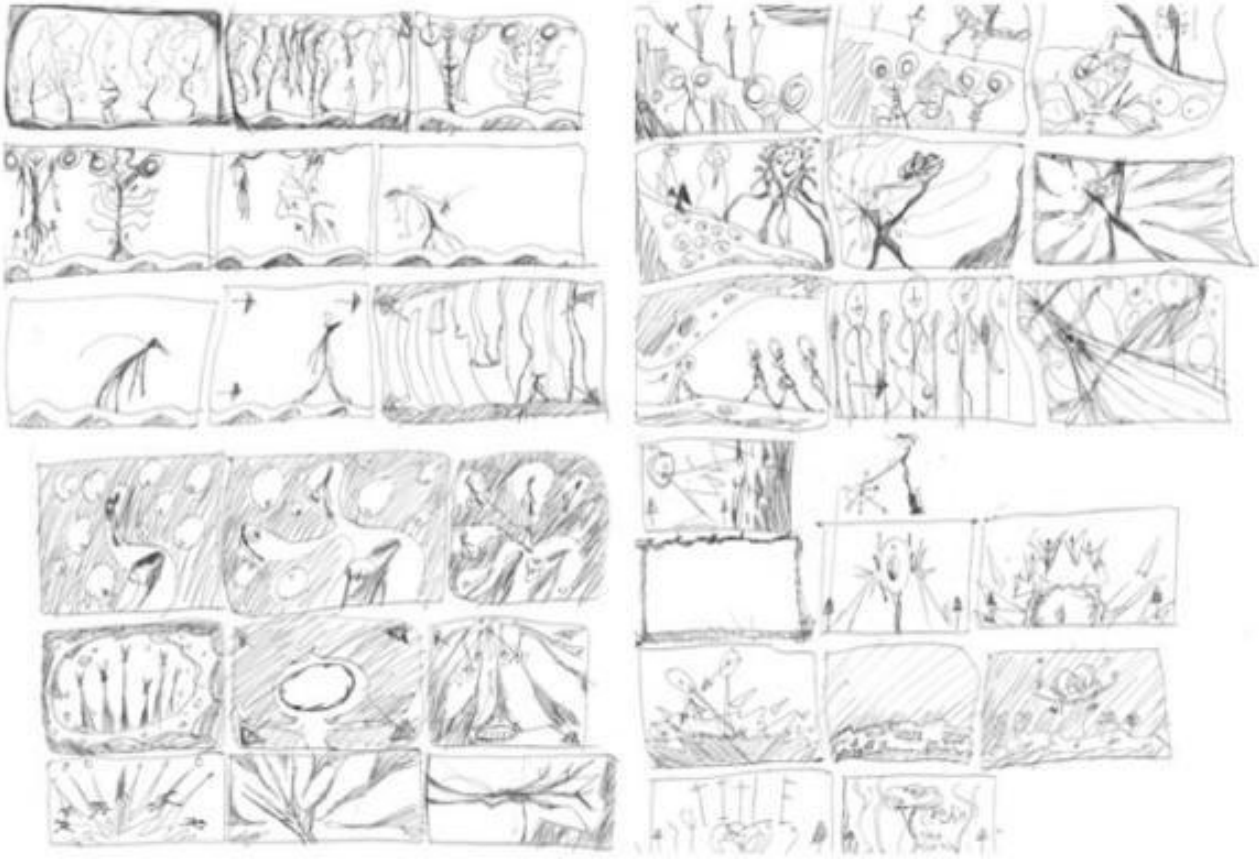
Storyboarding

Storyboarding was used to structure each film's visual narrative (Figure 19). The storyline was developed by discussing feelings and experiences with my supervisors. As significant recollections suggested metaphorical possibilities, I transposed these into worlds populated by alien creatures.

Because storyboards were used to resource discussion and reflection, they were roughly rendered because they were only needed to trigger thinking about pacing, composition or story beats.

Storyboarding became an iterative process that enabled me to construct incidents and responses that I had explored in the world building exercises. By visualising consecutive narrative episodes, I was able to refine and simplify the arcs of the story into cohesive narratives.

Figure 19. Storyboards



Note. Storyboards showcasing the early visual narrative structure of my film used for discussion with my supervisors.

Phase two: Production

Iterative animatics

Because storyboarding was a discursive, transitional method, as sequences became clearer conceptually, they were transferred into a rough, iterative animatic that was

used to conceptualise the general look of each film's narrative before I advanced it as a formal animation.

The animatic was developed in parallel with the sound design, but most scenes had their sound design developed before character keyframes, breakdowns, and in-betweens were added. This was done so I could build the animation around the sound design's rhythm and timbre (particularly during scenes that embodied more intense states of anxiety).

The production phase utilised digital software including VCV Rack 2 and Adobe Audition for the sound design, (including foley production[21]). Adobe Photoshop was used for the animatics and final animations. Fully animated sequences were composed in Adobe Photoshop and the animatic's sound design was progressed through a combination of foley and synthesized sounds. The foley was recorded using a Zoom H4n Pro microphone.[22] Synthesized sounds were composed in VCV Rack 2.[23] Analogue and digital material was then compiled in Adobe Audition before being exported to Adobe Premiere Pro and positioned alongside the animatic sequences.

Sound Design

The soundtracks for the three animations were developed as a way of exploring the emotional atmosphere of each narrative. As a consequence, the narrative and visual content of films were developed from sound rather than a traditional script.

I used software VCV Rack 2, instrumental timbres, melodies, and soundscapes to spontaneously experiment with a wide variety of sound variables, including frequency, reverb, Filter eq, waveform modulation, and audio mixing.[24] Segments of these experiments were then cut into smaller samples that were strung together over emerging visualisations of the animation. After these electronic arrangements were arranged, I recorded myself performing the final composition in VCV Rack 2, (tweaking certain audio parameters and increasing/decreasing the volume of various instruments to create an evolving audio experience). I then exported these recordings as extended mixes into Adobe Photoshop or Adobe Premiere Pro.,

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[21] Foley is an analogue approach to sound design where sound effects are produced using physical objects. The sounds produced are recorded and synchronized to the movement of characters and objects (or used to enhance the atmosphere of an animated environment).

[22] The Zoom H4n Pro is a microphone developed in 2015 as a successor to the Zoom H4n. It is a portable microphone made for a variety of recording uses.

[23] VCV Rack is an open-source virtual modular synthesizer program that simulates euro rack hardware. According to the VCV Rack Manual (n.d), the company VCV was founded by Andrew Belt in 2016 to provide wider accessibility to modular synthesizers. See the About VCV section in the VCV Rack manual appendix for further details: https://vcvrack.com/manual/About

[24] Building on Taxxon's (2024) concept of "sound tactility", I explored the potentials of rich sound textures and timbres. These experiments sought to abstract the familiarity of real-world sounds into uncanny manifestations of dream logic.

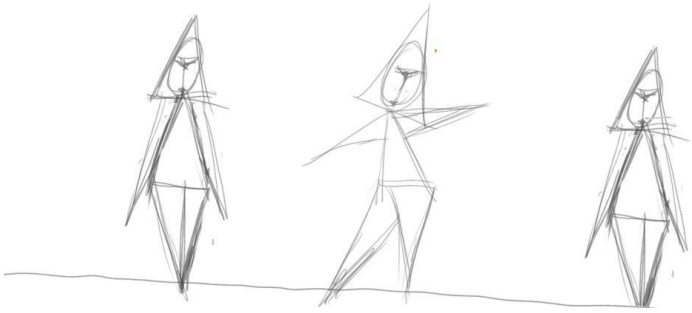
chopping the mixes up into smaller samples that provided a succinct version of the piece that synchronised with the animation.

After the base narrative of the animation was developed (either as a refined animatic or as a final work), I composed additional micro tracks to synchronise with character movement. This helped to solidify thematic connections between the visual and audio storytelling.

Animation experiments

When developing the visuals for the three films, I considered potential imagery based on what the compositions provoked in my head. These concepts were solidified into a storyline and drawn up using rough thumbnails. Here, I experimented with stylistic treatments (as rough animations) where only key character poses were drawn e.g. *Rainbow Gvrl,* (Figure 20), or as a fully animated sequences as in *Escape from Babel*.

Figure 20



Note. Key poses blocked in and experimented with prior to advanced development of the dance sequence in the first box of *Rainbow Gvrl* (May 2025).

Animations were created in Adobe Photoshop using frame-by-frame 2D animation techniques, drawing on the 12 principles of animation[25] to achieve realistic character movement. This was important because it was necessary to make the characters lifelike and relatable, so the geometrically abstract nature of their design would not be read as “lifeless”.

At times, traditional 2D animation processes were extended using more experimental methods. For example, in *Escape from Babel* I adopted a monochromatic approach to colour, with characters and objects reduced to very simple geometric designs. This led to an animation process that digitally emulated

[25] Thomas and Johnston’s 12 principles of animation (1981) are often used as guides for creating effective animated motion. The principles include techniques squash and stretch, anticipation, and timing. These assist in conveying weight, emotion, action, and reaction through movement. (https://lesley.edu/article/the-12-principles-of-animation)

stop-motion paper cut out animation, with 2D shapes being cut out and moved around.[26]

This aesthetic was achieved using Photoshop's Polygonal lasso and paint bucket tools to create angular shapes that were then moved around the digital canvas, frame by frame using Photoshop's manipulation tool (with the occasional remodelling of characters' limbs) to produce an illusion of movement (Figure 21).

Figure 21

Note. Screen grab from *Escape from Babel* showing the preservation of initial lines on a character's hand indicating that their fingers had been moved from their original drawn position. By not erasing these residue lines, I was able to suggest a sense of the animation having been "sketched" in.

Phase three: Post-production

Finalising sound and image integration

As each narrative took form, sonic connections (such as BPM) were composed between the micro tracks, the extended mix, and animation so I could transition between scenes and synchronise sound with key animated sequences. These were then refined to create smooth transitions in mood/atmosphere.[27]

[26] The process circumvented the need for traditional hand drawn rough animation pipelines (rough animation, tie downs, cleanup, and colouring).

[27] For example, in *Rainbow Gvrl*, when the protagonist is exploring different boxes, the micro track representing the culture of each box is drawn into her sonic character rhythm. What resulted was a fusion of her presence and the conformist character of the box's culture that she is passing through.

As each film established its rhythm and emphases, time animation frames were tweaked (timed out) to provide better pacing, with certain shots being extended to provide breathing room in story beats. Frames were also adjusted to synch with actions within the scene.[28]

Finally, after the animation and sound design were fully integrated, sound effects and refined versions of the extended mix were sampled and integrated to enhance the final iteration of each animation.

[28] Abbado (1988) notes that the strategic alignment of sound with abstracted visual movement has the potential to make sound an aural representation of the animated image. Artistic examples of this technique may be traced back to early animators like Oskar Fischinger. The device is also evident in Felix Colgrave's animated short film, *Donks* (2023) (see Chapter three).

Chapter Five: Critical Commentary

Introduction

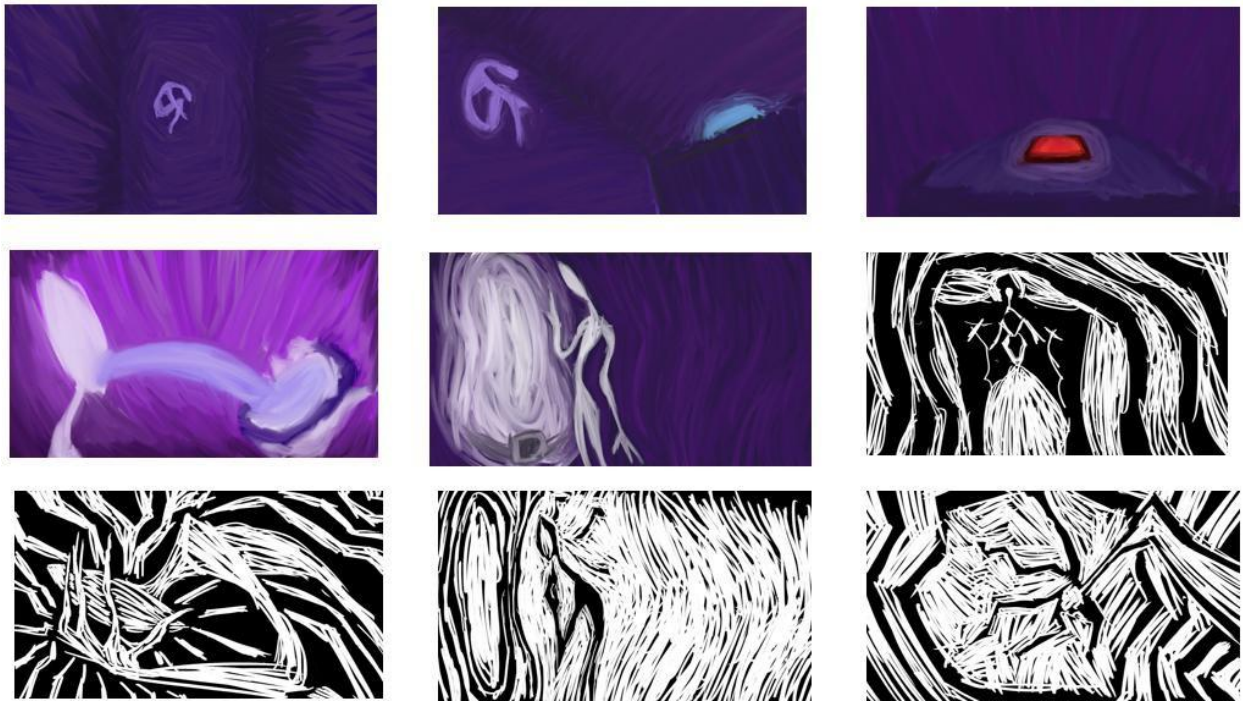
This chapter offers a critical commentary on the three animations, *Lexopticon, Escape from Babel,* and *Rainbow Gvrl.* Following a brief synopsis, each film is discussed in relation to content, contextualising theory and audio design.

Lexopticon

Synopsis

Lexopticon opens with a genderless figure lying in a foetal position in a dark room. They are attracted by a flashing, rectangular object that emits a seductive glowing light. When they pick it up, the object is revealed to be a phone. However, once touched, the device begins to force-feed the figure with the conformist cultures of social media (represented by floating app icons). Staggered by the onslaught, they drop the phone which morphs into a large mirror attached to a wall. When the figure gazes into this mirror, they begin to generate a hyper negative self-image as they are surrounded, then penetrated, by negative words and dissonant, primal howls. Yielding to this "scripted infection", they attempt to amputate the "ugly" parts of their body. However, the penetration of the knife triggers pain that exceeds the power of the persuasion and they flinch, breaking the mirror in anger and eliminating the device's influence (Figure 22).

Figure 22



Note. Sequential frame grabs from the 1:10-minute animation, *Lexopticon* (2025).

Commentary

Lexopticon is a portmanteau title comprising the words “lexicon” and “panoptocon”. Lexicon derives from the neuter form of the Greek term *lexikos*, (from the root *lexis* meaning ”word or way of speaking”).[29] In contemporary English, a lexicon refers to the vocabulary of an individual, group, or field of study.[30] The word panopticon, was adopted by the 18th century English jurist and philosopher, Jeremy Bentham (from the Greek word *panoptes* for “all seeing”) (Briskin, 1998, p. 77). A panopticon refers to an architectural design (often for a prison) where a sentry is positioned at a central tower with cells cylindrically arranged along an outer wall (Figure 23). This structure enables the guard to see into each cell from a singular position, and it conditions prisoners to assume that they’re always being watched.

In creating this title I also allude to the postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault’s positioning of Bentham’s panopticon to describe a hierarchical institution that enacts control by imposing omnipresent systems of surveillance that cause an individual to become “the principle of his [sic] own subjection” (Foucault, 1975, pp.195-228).

Figure 23

Note. An illustration of a prison panopticon created by Jenni Fagan for the New York Times. (This content has been removed by the author due to copyright).

[29] Etymon Online. Origin and history of Lexicon: https://www.etymonline.com/word/lexicon

[30] For example, a lexicon of music theory.

Lexopticon uses dream logic and abstracted animation to create an audio-visual narrative which depicts the nature of scripted infection as it relates to social media consumption.

The inspiration for the animation came from the intense sense of shame I experienced early in my transition. Before I began hormone replacement therapy in September 2024, I felt bombarded by the restrictive nature of female beauty standards that were fed to me by social media like Instagram, Pinterest, and Facebook. Such imagery, Makwana et al. (2018) note, is often associated with the generation of body dissatisfaction. With the rise of apps like TikTok (a platform estimated to currently have over 1.59 billion users)[31] there has been a continued consolidation of social conditioning that aligns thin bodies with beauty.[32] Despite protests calling for stricter regulation of TikTok's algorithms, women and girls continue to develop greater body dissatisfaction because of exposure to "pro anorexic" content (Ittimani, 2024; Blackburn & Hogg, 2024). This has led to a notable rise in eating disorders and declining mental health.[33]

The impact of negative messaging impacts on trans individuals. According to a study conducted by Zwickl et al. (2025), regular exposure to anti-trans rhetoric, (whether online or offline), was found to correlate with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.[34]

My personal experience at the time that I began transitioning was heavily impacted by body dissatisfaction. As a result, I began experiencing intense discomfort over my appearance. I thought that I looked like a giant ugly monster dressed up in a tiara and tutu.[35] This self-image was reinforced by large volumes of transphobic online content that often handpicked a select number of "ugly" trans women to paint the whole community as degenerate sexual perverts (Figure 24).

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[31] https://www.demandsage.com/tiktok-user-statistics/#:~:text=TikTok%20is%20the%20fifth%20most,is%20third%20with%202.50%20billion.

[32] Biddle et al (2020) note that TikTok algorithms are programmed to incentivise conventionally attractive individuals over those who are "abnormal" or "ugly".

[33] For example, a study conducted by Blackburn and Hogg (2024) found that among a sample of 238 female-identifying individuals from 18-28, exposure to TikTok content promoted disordered eating habits that led to greater internalization of female beauty standards and an increase in body image negativity. Due to the randomly generated nature of TikTok's "recommended" pages, exposure to negative content could be involuntary. The researchers suggested that this process was insidious because even limited amounts of exposure were seen to cause mental harm.

[34] The study examined the experiences of 807 Australian trans and gender diverse individuals.

[35] See Figure 15.

Figure 24

Note. An example of negative media depiction of trans women. The cartoon by Stella Perrett was first published in the print edition of the British newspaper the *Morning Star* on Tuesday 18th February 2020. The image depicts a trans woman as a large, ugly alligator praying on the helpless cis women coded newts. The illustration is indicative of widespread politicised portrayals of trans women. (Image used under the provisions of s.42 of the Copyright Act 1994).[36]

The global rise in anti-trans hatred is often disseminated by conservative politicians using the framework of "biological determinism" (Atwood et al, 2023).[37] This paradigm gives rise to arguments like, "trans women can't compete with cis women in sports because they are biologically male". Biological determinism thus implies that gender is a fixed characteristic that cannot be changed. Atwood et al. suggest that this political narrative is linked to discrimination against both cisgender and transgender women because it argues that differences between genders are primarily biological (rather than socially constructed). The argument, Brescoll and Zefrance (2004) suggest, also adds legitimacy to, and reinforces, the perpetuation of gender stereotypes like female beauty standards.

Menguizzo et al., (2024) believe that the proliferation of thinness (as the ideal female body image) along with the bioessentialism that underpins anti trans rhetoric

[36] A contextual discussion of the illustration can be accessed here: https://www.workersliberty.org/story/2020-02-26/morning-star-depicts-trans-people-predators

[37] The theory of biological determinism proposes that an individual's characteristics are primarily determined by their genes and biology (rather than their environment).

may also play a role in why young trans people statistically experience greater levels of body image dissatisfaction.[38]

In my experience, the negative lexical material from transphobic postings is paradoxically supplemented by much trans-positive online content that promotes a fixed lexicon for "how", as a transfeminine individual, I should frame myself. Promoting words like "valid" and "identify", and placing emphasis on specific pronouns, the lexicon replaces my complex human identity with simplistic, cookie-cutter phrases and sloganeering. Although my exposure to this material was a first step in my transition journey, as I progressed, I found that that my transgender experience was substantially more multifaceted and complex, and it required more nuanced description. The simplistic lexicon ascribed by influencers (although positive in intention) made me feel like I had moved from one straight jacket to another.[39] Thus, the lexicon of anti-trans rhetoric *and* trans-positive prescription (despite their stark difference in intention) both felt like a form of identity colonisation that is framed in the animation (and wider exegetical writing) as "scripted infection".

Sonic design

The soundscape of *Lexopticon* was constructed using a morphing palette of sound pieces.[40] The film opens with an abstracted minimalist ambience that speaks to the isolated environment the figure inhabits. As the phone is revealed, flickering tactile beeps begin populating this soundscape. These illustrate the device's role as a stimulus that draws the figure into its trap of conformity.

At this point in the narrative, I introduce a high tempo percussion as the protagonist is overwhelmed by scripted infection. This climaxes in a metallic "blood-curdling" howl that illustrates self-hatred resulting from existential dread. This sonic sensation correlates with my early experiences of gender dysphoria pre-hormone therapy and the pressure I experienced to assimilate with female beauty standards.

Once the protagonist succumbs to the scripted infection, the soundtrack transitions into a haunting melody with tactile string plucking sounds that mimic a distorted

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[38] Parker and Harriger (2020), suggest that factors like internalised transphobia may lead to higher instances of disordered eating among trans individuals (compared to the cisgender population) because trans individuals can seek to escape the psychological stress of transphobia through the pursuit of "passing".

[39] This segment from an interview with the American comedian George Carlin aligns with my position that caution needs to be applied when identifying with groups of similar individuals. See: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/CZ8Yd5h9pk0

[40] This may be contrasted to the extended sound mix used in *Escape from Babel* and the micro tracks developed for *Rainbow Gvrl.*

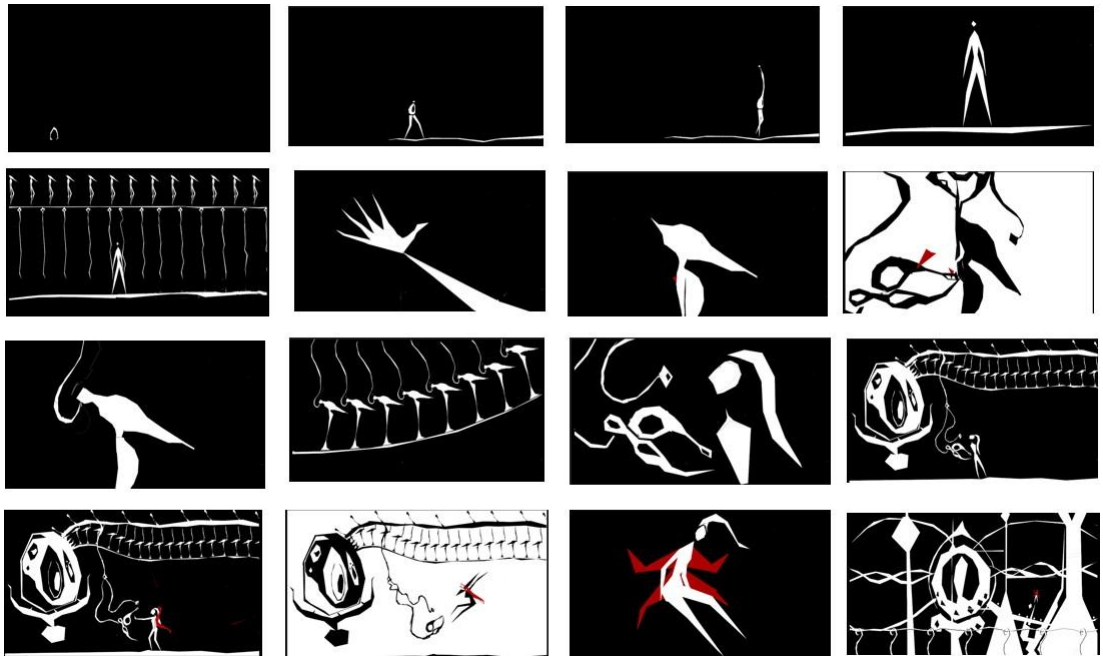
guitar solo. The unstable rhythm of this piece emulates the internal instability that the figure radiates as they hesitate before attempting self-amputation. However, as soon as the knife strikes, the hesitant string riff fades, and an ear-ringing sound dominates the mix. This highlights the dangerous experience about to result from the protagonist's self-harm. This discordance ceases as the protagonist draws back from their attempt to remove their distinctiveness and they smash the tool of scripted infection. This action causes the composition to transition into slow sonic buildup, through which a more fully composed, electronic song rises (that emulates a "punk-esque" sense of rebellion). The narrative climaxes with the breaking of the mirror. Here, the song takes full form, signifying the protagonist's transition to an autonomous person, now liberated from the tyranny of scripted infection.

Escape from Babel

Synopsis

The second animation, *Escape from Babel* follows the birth and evolution of a silhouetted protagonist as she makes her way through an abstract, dream logic city populated by humanoid birds. It considers my journey, post “scripted infection”, into a hostile world. While longing to join people and become part of a community, the figure discovers that the birds are being manipulated and amputated by a skeletal machine. When the machine is about to pounce on her, she flinches backwards and suddenly grows the wings that the machine has been mechanically removing from the other birds. With these wings she makes a rapid escape, flying through the city before eventually rising above its skyline (Figure 25).

Figure 25



Note. Sequential frame grabs from the 1:00-minute animation, *Escape from Babel* (2024-5).

Commentary

Escape from Babel is a 1-minute visual animated narrative. The animation component samples pieces from a longer, 3-minute audio track.

The term Babel derives from the story of the Tower of Babel in chapter 11 of the book of Genesis. However, in the context of my animation, I used Babel in reference to an imagined library of Babel; a seemingly infinite repository containing all that ever was (and ever will be) written in all the human languages. This concept provoked a feeling of great loneliness and alienation in me. I imagined a seemingly endless stretch of man-made scripted infections now reconstituted as a city inside which one would get lost. Such a world would be familiar yet alienating.

During my transition, I grew more cautious when navigating urban environments, afraid that cisgender passersby (especially men) would harass or hurt me. This increased my sense of alienation and made me hesitant to approach people, because I did not know how they would react to a transfeminine person.

Babel is a predatory city that insists on maintaining a cis-normative hegemony. It is mechanical and it accepts no deviation from the norm. It practices scripted infection by amputating body (identity) elements that could result in individuals escaping from the conformist society. The city "edits" people, removing their wings and amputating them when necessary. We see individuals systematised on a conveyor belt of uniform obedience, moving in synchronisation with one another (almost as if they are marching in military formation) (Figure 26).

Figure 26

Note. Screen grab showing regulating nature of Babel with individuals hooked through the head, being processed into the social machinery of the city. In a bleak reference to the birds that are being processed, the tool that the city uses to amputate individuals resembles the enlarged, mechanical avian skull.

Initially, this animation was going to portray the isolation I experience and my hesitancy to interact with others (see the initial aural track in Figure 18). This alienation is retained in the final animation (being represented by the singular protagonist initially reaching out her hand to the larger group of birds - longing to join them). This mirrors how I often see groups of people walking and talking together … and my hesitance to approach, that creates a sense of yearning.

In the film, the small red anomalies growing on each bird's back are assiduously plucked off by the city's machinery (Figure 27). These growths are later revealed to be burgeoning wings (representing an individual's potential freedom to escape social conformity). With their wings ripped out, each creature is forced to stay grounded

before being fed into the great city of Babel by the assembly line production of cis-heteronormatvity. [41]

Figure 27

Note. The birdlike "editing" machine of Babel removing nascent wings from a captured bird.

The film's monochromatic colour palette reinforces the narrative's atmosphere of conformity and alludes to our cisnormative binary thinking about gender identity. It also reinforces a sense of the dystopia. The only anomaly is the red wings that might eventually develop and enable an individual's escape (to a potentially more colourful world beyond the binary gendered confines of Babel).

Conceptually and narratively, the film talks about my desire to find safety and community in a group when this is provisional on my sacrificing my sense of self.

Escape from Babel argues that one must embrace and cherish their uniqueness by rejecting social conformity (even if it is at the cost of loneliness). I suggest that it is only when we accept our sense of self that personal growth can occur, and we can become a fully realised entity.

Sonic design

The sound design for the animation was predicated on the concept of sound tactility (Ali et al., 2023; Deputan, 2023; Koenig & Ro, 2022). This involved pushing the sound effects to the forefront of the mix to establish a more intimate relationship between the viewer and the film's events. For example, when the protagonist begins maturing out of her egg, her footsteps emit a crisp delicate sound as if we are witnessing the fragile strength of new life in very close proximity. This is contrasted with the deep metallic thumping emanating from the birds, which provokes an uneasy impression of their regulated state and relentless indoctrination. The sound design also

[41] Thus, in the film, wings represent our ability to break away from oppression and determine our own identity.

represents the protagonist's embodied perception of her environment. For example, in 00:31 and 00:49, abstracted electronic noises grow more intense to signify the existential dread of the bird skull preparing to edit its victims. These sounds reflect how I often rationalise my abstract anxieties by tapping, grating, speeding up or slowing down, in a manner similar to how a heartbeat accelerates during stress.

Behind the foley, the soundscape is abstracted; building up at the beginning as the protagonist begins exploring the city. I designed this environment with few melodic qualities (aside from the alternating of two notes which I employed to represent the monochromatic, conformist nature of the world). The soundscape combines an air of mystery but also the dread of Babel. The protagonist is at first naïve to the city's danger until she discovers the brutal way it ensures conformity.

My approach with the sonic mix was to create something monochromatic inside an audio dream logic where the atmosphere is synthetic (not resembling any real-world phenomena). This emphasises the sense of alienation the protagonist feels as she treads with brittle steps through a world that neither she, nor the listener, can understand.

To create the tactility of Babel's soundscape I used electronically generated timbres to convey the essence of lifelessness. This is reflected in the synthetically generated drones, metallic clangs and dissonant sirens that reverberate throughout the mix. This encompassing soundscape surrounds the listener, transporting them to deep space, lightyears away from the warmth of oxygen, people, plants, and animals. Here, the familiar, and the organic is replaced by the cosmic horror of an alien megastructure that is described more by sound than image.[42]

[42] The intensity of layering and movement in the design is best listened to through headphones or surround sound speakers because these devices allow for a more immersive, aurally tactile experience.

Rainbow Gvrl

The third work, *Rainbow Gvrl,* is a 2:00 minute animated narrative that integrates a series of micro tracks. It considers the journey I make to fit in with, but eventually transcend, the proscriptive norms of social groups.

Synopsis

Rainbow Gvrl opens with a world of boxed rooms. We enter an interior containing a row of feminine figures dancing in synchronicity with each another. With them is a figure who initially fails to conform but then begins to break away and dance more expressively than the other dancers.

As the narrative develops, we see the Rainbow gvrl unable/unwilling to conform to a world where everyone exists in isolated boxes. These are realms already conditioned by scripted infection. (Therefore these spaces have strict rules that culturally regulate what is socially acceptable). As the Rainbow gvrl's self-realised identity transgresses expectations, she becomes alienated, and this causes her to search for a community where she will be accepted (Figure 28).

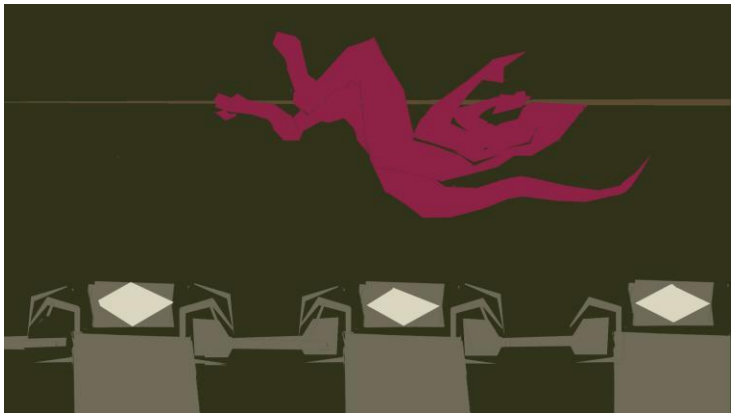
Figure 28

Note: Sequential frame grabs from the 02:00-minute animation, *Rainbow Gvrl* (2025).

Escaping from the world of TikTok dancers, the Rainbow gvrl begins to investigate other spaces, all of which require her to perform synchronistic conformity. Sometimes we see her attempt integration, before discarding it in favour of her own dance. Indicative of the spaces she encounters are rooms that contain men who perform hypermasculinity (Figure 29), religious dancers who repeatedly chant an

abstraction of the word “praise”[43] (Figure 30) and child dancers who perform simplistic yet strict movements that demonstrate their obedience to adult authority.

Figure 29



Note. Screen grab of the Rainbow gvrl attempting to dance with the hypermasculine dancers, who smash their fists to emphasise their macho status.

Figure 30

Note. Screen grab depicting the Rainbow gvrl encountering the theologically-coded dancers.

Empowered, the Rainbow gvrl dances in and out of each of these spaces until she eventually reaches a space overlooking many boxes. In the distance, on top of one of these rooms, she sees an individual like herself who bursts out and proceeds to dance with pride above the realms of conformity.

Commentary

This idea for this animation was inspired by my childhood refusal to participate in primary school’s “Jump Jam” events (an activity that required everyone to follow

[43] While transitioning, I was often looking for social groups where I could establish myself in my new authentic form. One of these groups, that on the surface appeared to accept me, disguised the fact that it was encouraging conversion to Christianity, a faith I had left in my late teens, partially due to my difficulty reconciling its teachings with my newfound queer identity. When it became apparent to me that this was the nature of the group, I left.

prescribed dance moves).[44] My reluctance to follow the prescribed pattern and my desire to express a personal interpretation of the song meant that I often danced very differently to the other children in the class. This was apparently such a problem that the vice-principal complained to my mother about it. This was an early sign of my apparent predilection to reject conformity (and it epitomises contrarianism that appears to be a core trait of my identity).

The synchronised dance in the animation also alludes to the way that society (through the popular media) presents us with a homogenised performance of femininity. In *Rainbow Gvrl*, I designed the dance to imitate videos on the social media app, TikTok, (where conventionally attractive people post videos showcasing their dance moves to a popular song).

The critique of TikTok as an agency for grooming heteronormative, cisgendered conformity (scripted infection) has a rich analysis that surfaced before, during and after the COVID pandemic (Biddel et al., 2020; Harvey, 2019; Kennedy, 2019; Lamont, 2020). Indeed, Melanie Kennedy argues that "girlhood" as represented on TikTok, "is highly constructed, and its characteristics are restricted to a narrow set of gendered, racialised, classed and sexualised ideals" made to distract from boredom, isolation, and political turmoil (Kennedy, 2020, p. 1069). This may be evidenced in Biddle et al.'s. (2020) exposure of internal documents from the makers of TikTok that instructed its moderators to algorithmically suppress posts by users that they deemed to appear "abnormal", "ugly" and "slummy", and to suppress content that they felt was ideologically or politically 'vulgar',(with content discussing LGBTQ topics being censored because of these guidelines).[45]

When I navigate public spaces, especially on the university campus, I often come across women who embody traditional beauty standards. Being hyper conscious of my possible masculine features (tall height, broad shoulders, deep voice, etc) I am almost pre-conditioned to believe that they will see me as a towering, ugly monster; a wolf in sheep's clothing ready to prey on "real" women (Hill & Willoughby, 2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2015; Worthen, 2016).

In *Rainbow Gvrl*, when the protagonist becomes taller and more "monster-like", she seeks an exit from each room of ideological conformity. As she moves through the boxes in the story, we see that the otherwise monstrous nature of her figure possesses abilities that enable her to climb walls and leap across, and into buildings

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[44] Jump Jam was an aerobic program resource kit designed by Brett Fairweather for use in New Zealand primary and intermediate schools. The programme was predicated on shared synchronised exercises (a fusion of dance and fitness) that referenced the look, attitude, and elements of adult aerobics and fitness classes.

[45] Their article was initially published in *The Intercept* on March 16th. https://theintercept.com/2020/03/16/tiktok-app-moderators-users-discrimination/

(Figure 31). This enables a verticality of movement that the ideological conformists lack because of their simple, geometric design.

Figure 31

Note. Animation sequence of the *Rainbow Gvrl* showing her anatomical ability to race up walls.

Sonic design

The soundtrack for *Rainbow Gvrl* is comprised of multiple micro-tracks that represent the conformist communities the protagonist encounters.

The first track was composed for a room populated by yellow TikTok girls (Figure 32). This piece samples the royalty free beat, *Thick* (by REENIE).[46] The track emulates the sound of the popular female hip hop artist, Ice Spice. However, in the narrative, as the protagonist's sense of self develops, the composition transitions into something more avant-garde (whilst maintaining the original's core rhythm).

Figure 32

[46] The sampled track can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sS6938KGlLg&list=PLlYoYolOELTE1RlLPJ8AfZ1kic_ofOoiA

Note. Screen grab of the protagonist running away from the TikTok dancers who assert their cisnormative hegemony through the formation of a patterned background wall.

The second, darkly coloured room, which contains the hypermasculine "alpha male" culture has a soundtrack that is my cover version of the phonk track, *Ouch* (by 18 d3stra). Phonk music emanates from an online culture and is often used in association with the manosphere.[47] Its composition alludes to TikTok and memes where phonk music accompanies alpha male influencers like Andrew Tate.[48] My cover version of *Ouch* references phonk's indicative instrumental timbre but I interpolated the beats and melody at a lower BPM; contorting it into something more hypermasculine and inclusive of beats that sound like gunshots set against a dissonant melody.

Christian Youth Fun Town was the third micro-track I composed. This piece embodies the conformist nature of organised religion. The music is a contorted, abstracted, instrumental parody of the popular song *Story of my Life* by the band One Direction.[49] I felt that the melodic motifs of this song resembled the upbeat Christian youth music that permeated my Catholic secondary schooling. *Christian Youth Fun Town* electronically emulates the strings of a guitar, but I increasingly cause the tune to slide up and down to create a sense of the uncanny. This interprets the facade of

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[47] The *manosphere* describes a collection of websites, blogs, and online forums that promote templated framings of masculinity in conjunction with misogyny, and opposition to feminism (Hodapp, 2017).

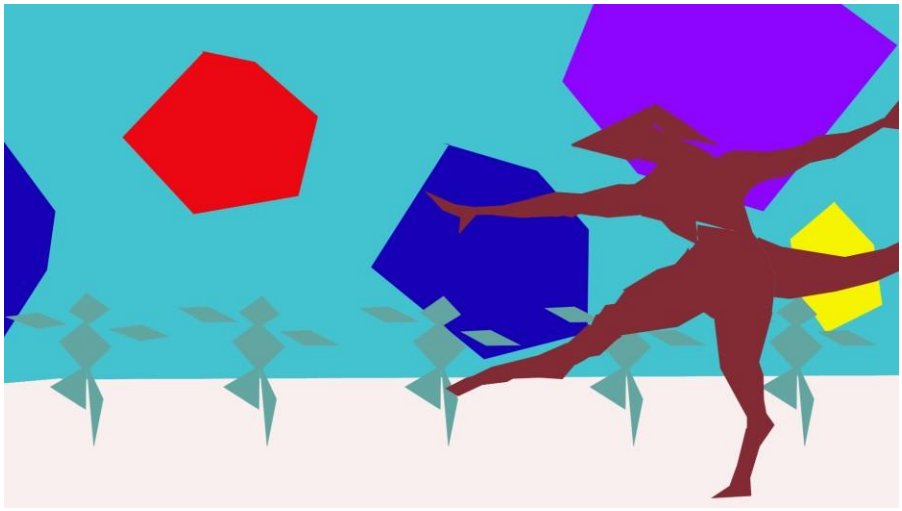
[48] Andrew Tate is an internet personality who has gained notoriety through advocating for a return to traditional gender roles. He is often seen as a role model for reactionary young men who are encouraged to embody a traditional form of masculinity (often called being an alpha or sigma male). An example of phonk music being edited over a clip of Andrew Tate can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/_3P0Nan0iDA

[49] The music and video for *Story of my Life* can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-TE_Ys4iwM

forced joy that is sometimes plastered over the mechanisms of uniformity and oppression that are indicative of many Christian youth organisations.

The fourth piece was composed as a satirical response to the infantilising nature of early childhood education programming (Figure 33). When I was in primary school, I was forced into a rigid, simplistic box. My classmates and I were made to sing in unison, read simple books, and dance at Jump Jam. We were labelled "disobedient" if we challenged these restrictions. For this work, rather than choose an existing song, I constructed the melody from scratch. I intended the sound to be as simplistic as possible.[50]

Figure 33



Note. Screen grab of the dance sequence that shows abstracted, infantilised dancers in front of whom the protagonist expresses her complexity. The palette applies saturated colours to simple shapes.

The last two rooms feature highly abstract, sonic accompaniments that were inspired by the dancing style and audio profile of Japanese idol pop music and hyperfeminine personalities (personified by celebrities like Kim Kardashian).

The six micro-tracks in *Rainbow Gvrl* are permeated by an interwoven main mix (*BoxSlasher*). This represents the individuality of the main character and is at the forefront of the mix when she is alone in a shot. I composed *BoxSlasher* before the animation took form and it was from this "score" that the story and its animation developed. The composition has a greater level of flexible muscularity in it (compared to the music designed for the six rooms). This complements the complexity of the Rainbow gvrl's anatomy and spectrum of movement that distinguishes her from the constrained uniformity she encounters.

[50] In this work, the timbre of the melody gradually becomes increasingly dissonant (a response to the irritation one can experience when hearing an endlessly repetitive children's song).

When compared to the atmospheric drone of *Escape from Babel*, *BoxSlasher* is distinctively more upbeat in tone, yet it is equally experimental in its electronic sound texture. The piece was composed to represent the unique individuality of the trans-coded protagonist who transcends conformist groups, where her radical self-expression is shunned as “otherness”.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter closes the exegesis. It offers a summary of the main ideas in the thesis, a discussion of contributions to the field, considerations of further research and a parting reflection.

Thesis summary

Scripted Infection has involved an animated and sonic, mixed media exploration of autistic and transfeminine marginalisation. To resource the study I have drawn on my lived experience. The practical outcome from this inquiry has culminated in the development of three short films: *Lexopticon, Escape from Babel*, and *Rainbow Gvrl.* These works are narrative but also abstracted so, while they document stories of my experience, they draw on dream logic to create a distinctive form of condensed, audio and visual storytelling meant to represent the eighteen months of my transfeminine transition.

As a suite, the films follow an arc from social manipulation - to searching for community for belonging – to eventually finding self-love and confidence to connect with like-minded people. Throughout this journey we see the marginalised nature of my autistic transfeminine identity evidenced in my inability to integrate into cisgendered, heteronormative worlds.

Underpinning the study is the consideration and application of Scripted Infection. This describes how the pressure to conform to societal expectations can damage one's sense of self. (In my case, this refers to my experiences as an autistic, transfeminine person, searching for authentic identity and belonging).

The study has been contextualised by scholarly research and a creative and analytical consideration of online environments. In the project I have tried to highlight the work of contemporary trans artists (primarily in the field of music composition) and draw into creative synergy abstract illustration and composition that employs sound tactility.

Contributions to the field

The first contribution the study makes is its addition to academic and online media discourses relating to autistic, transfeminine identity and marginalisation. It does this by positioning three artistic works that integrate abstracted, animated illustration and sonic design.

The study is also significant in its experimentation with animated audio-visual storytelling. The films demonstrate how sound design can operate within an abstracted visual narrative, to interpret and communicate visceral, embodied experience. Specifically, the research seeks to humanise my lived experience as an autistic transfeminine individual through an autoethnographic portrayal of my

thoughts, feelings, and self-image. This portrayal is significant because it illustrates the complex humanity of transfeminine people, a demographic which has traditionally been pathologised and restricted to negative tropes and stereotypes (Fedar, 2020).

The study is also significant in its introduction of the concept of scripted infection as a way of describing and framing the experienced, negative effects autistic and trans-people may encounter when being forced to conform to societal norms. These effects include the depletion of their individual autonomy, a sense of marginalisation, and damage to their well-being. By considering scripted infection as a theoretical idea that can be applied to a creative work, the study seeks to promote the importance of self-acceptance, especially as it pertains to marginalised identities.

Further research

This thesis is a beginning. I see potential for expanding the animated autoethnographic narrative into a longer film that documents the nature of my transition as a story that begins before the narratives in this study and extends beyond them. This project will require funding, but I hope to use the three films as catalysts for a funding application to the New Zealand Film Commission's He Kauahi Catalyst short film funding system.[51]

The films developed for this thesis also sit in a broader realm of engagement where I design work for other researchers. Indicative of this is an animation I produced (concurrent with this study) for a PhD student at the University of Waikato whose project was an adaptation of a letter professing their love for Aotearoa/New Zealand. In this work I incorporated similar animation approaches to those I created in the thesis films (Figure 34).

Figure 34

Note. Screen capture of the animation I developed as part of a PhD project for a student at the University of Waikato (2024-5). A link to the full animation can be found here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AJA2LZoG04xgGNVnHg0Vq9pwGWmt9oae/view?usp=sharing

[51] https://www.nzfilm.co.nz/funding-and-support/funding-programmes/short-film-funding

... in closing...

Over the year-long development of this thesis, I've experienced a significant shift in my life. How I navigated the world twelve months ago, compared to now, has changed dramatically - and for the better. Although I am still at the beginning of this journey, the thesis has given me a way of expressing the complex, transforming view I have on myself and the world. Despite the great changes I've experienced during the development of this thesis, the study has constituted a constant (albeit publicly invisible) throughline. Every space I walk into, I feel the pressure to advocate for myself, to establish that I am trans and I have a right not to feel invisible or misgendered. This thesis has constituted a stand against invisibility. I hope that it helps to promote understanding and insight.

I want New Zealand and the world to know that transfeminine, autistic people exist as complex, sensitive human beings; individuals who warrant more than patronising, demonising, or social erasure because we don't fit neatly into proscribed boxes. We are a testament to the complexity of all humanity and the antithesis of societal systems that control and mould individuals into simple archetypes.

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Appendix

Examination screening

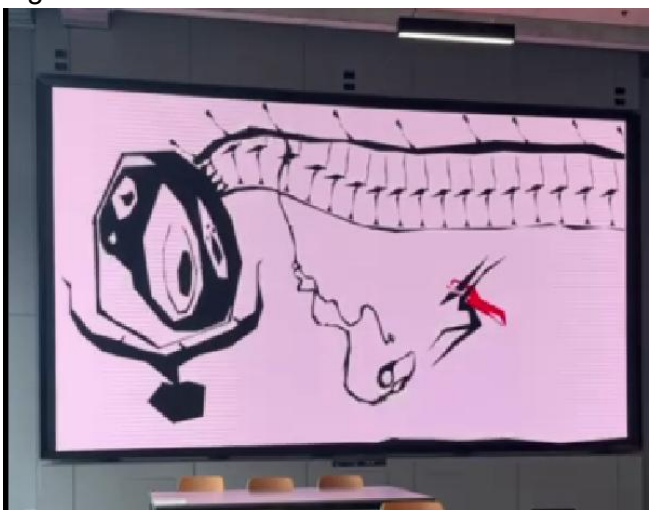
Date: September 25th 2025

Location: Light Emitting Diode (LED) wall, Room WZ100C, Auckland University of Technology.

Figure 35

Note: Screengrab of animation *Rainbow Gvrl* during its exhibition screening.

Figure 36



Note: Screengrab from the animation: *Escape from Babel* During its exhibition screening.

Nine second video screening of *Escape from Babel.*
Link: https://vimeo.com/1131521540?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci

Note: The animations were compiled as a single 1920x1080 25fps mp4 file. Audio was formatted as separate .wav files before being encoded with the animation as an mp4. The screening wall measures 5.46m x 4.49m.