

The "Cyborg Manifesto" Author Offers Hope for the Planet



A new film about Donna Haraway delves into the feminist environmentalist's innovative thinking on her family and other animals.

Standing atop the deck of a home, surrounded by lush Californian forest and birdsong, a slender woman speaks to the camera about alien body snatchers and her experiences with orthodontia. Donna Haraway, the scholar-theorist of a teeming body of work that spans gender, technology, biology, and vast elsewhere, animatedly drops the revelation that, at the turn of the 19th century, orthodontists used sculptures of Greek gods to determine the "correct" facial bite for a century of mouths. But not before a bee lands on her grey-crowned head. With a gentle ruffle, she helps it back on its airborne path. (Haraway was also, unexpected as it may seem, the muse of [this week's Gucci Fall collection](#).)

The film, *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*, was directed by Belgian filmmaker Fabrizio Terranova. Like most, his first contact with Haraway's work was *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), the post-structuralist tract that linked racist, male-dominated capitalism with the history of science, which also argued that, in "our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs." This was revelatory for Terranova.

"At that time," he says, "that kind of philosophy was like air for an asphyxiating field of activism. We needed new ways to slow down and breathe again." So, after meeting at a conference, Terranova reached out. "The first conversations were funny and highly demanding, like her!" And he's right: When I called Haraway in Santa Cruz, our conversation veered from the politics of family, to the symbolic order of tentacled beings, to her relationship with Cayenne, an Australian shepherd—all of which populate the film.

Haraway, born in 1944 in Denver, Colorado, is the daughter of a sportswriter, so while this author of numerous books, articles, and experimental texts doesn't come from a family of intellectuals, she grew up in a house was filled with stories. Besides this, it was the liturgical, ritualistic "fascist Catholic scene" of Denver, which her family was part of, that made her appreciate storytelling.

Terranova's filmic portrait of Haraway—poignant, quirky, psychedelic—reveals the subject's keen self-awareness and traces the scholar's development in the tangled field of postmodern critique. In one piece of archival footage, from a series produced by Paper Tiger Television in the late 1980s, Haraway explores National Geographic's representation of the gorilla Koko. Rather than a dense, continental academese, which is not hard to find in her written work, she uses props in the video to discuss ideas of history, philosophy, and nature.



Still from *Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival*, a film by Fabrizio Terranova, 2017. Courtesy of Icarus Films

"The layer cake, the ball of yarn, all of these ways of metaphorizing the many enfolded layers of popular culture and technical science, literature and imagination," she tells me somewhat breathlessly, "it's the tangling and layering of it all that's always really interested me." This style of cultural critique is complex, but needfully so. It's "not just critique in terms of *against it*," she says, "but critique in the sense of what's generative and interesting to build on."

Besides her unspooling soliloquies, *Story Telling for Earthly Survival* meditates on Haraway's relationship with her dog Cayenne ("dog of my heart"); there's grainy old footage of Haraway running agility courses, Cayenne bounding over hurdles, zipping through tunnels, zig-zagging weave poles. A dog person from an early age, later in life the theorist was "interested in health and genetics activism in dog land, the questions of breeding and disease," and had a connect to a breeder of Australian shepherds. She decided to take in a nine-week pup who was deaf in the right ear. They trained relentlessly, and eventually Cayenne earned an agility championship title. "On her best days, she was as good as the best dogs in the central California area," Haraway says. "And on bad days, we were good entertainment."

In the film, Terranova muses that "Donna's dog was our spiritual compass." Indeed, Cayenne serves as a touchstone for thinking about kin-making and trans-species relationships, a key thread in Haraway's work. Transgressing the borders of family has not only been a pivot of Haraway's scholarship, but a feature of her home life. "We lived in Sonoma County, outside of Healdsburg, in a house that began as a kind of commune," she says. Living in the house was Jaye—a gay man Haraway was married to—as well as a man named Bob, and her current husband Rusten, a contract computer tools designer and natural history radio producer.

They sought a model of family that was beyond the typical, hierarchical patriarchy. "Whether it's heteronormative or homonormative, we live in a society that's extraordinarily committed to nuclear family and biogenetic kin," she says. "It's not that we're against people having babies, not at all. But it's a kind of affirming—making kin without making babies, especially in a world with already more than 7.6 billion people." The four experimented in alternative family, but tragedy struck: In 1986, Bob died of AIDS, and then Jaye of the same disease in 1991.

Still, Haraway and Rusten persisted. She ponders the barriers to radical family structures, citing "the extraordinary pressures to have a baby to consider yourself as properly mature. The lack of ritual and appreciation of people who don't have babies," the lack of apparatuses for adopting adults, the fact that insurance is centered on nuclear family, the concentration of so much wealth by her generation. "And then there's the re-educating of ourselves emotionally, to really understand that we are building *enduring* kin, not something you can walk away from." For almost 25 years, Haraway and Rusten's extended kin network has included their friend and colleague Susan Harding, and her adopted son Marco Harding.

Lest you think that new models of family spring purely from theory, Haraway references histories outside white America. “I think we need to look to people who have never given up non-biogenetic kin-making practices,” she says, recalling her colleague Kim TallBear’s work in decolonial sexualities, and then adds: “The whole history of black kinship in the US and elsewhere is about taking care of other people’s children, not just your own. There’s a huge amount for white people to remember, that this doesn’t all have to be invented from scratch—it’s about joining with people who have been doing this under really difficult circumstances.”

Outside the human world, Haraway’s research has taken on tentacled things: squids, octopuses, cuttlefish, all of which make hallucinatory appearances in Terranova’s film. This makes sense, since her PhD was in biology, and also because these animals have represented, throughout time, “metaphors for really crucial issues like entanglement,” Haraway says. “Squids squirt out dark-as-night ink, raising questions of disguise, hiding, unknowability, enmeshment, escape, predation.”

Coming back to the concept of trans-species relationships, I broach the question of bestiality. “I think it’s abusive and a terrible idea,” she says, but then goes on to unfurl the nuance of the issue: “However, eroticism is not necessarily genital and penetrative. Eroticism takes many forms, and I think there can be a kind of eroticism across species. I think it’s OK for people to get turned on by the octopus they’re watching in the tank—the octopus couldn’t care less about them! I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. It’s sort of beautiful actually,” Haraway says. But when it comes to physical contact, she’s firmly against the idea that animals can consent to sexual advances from humans.

The breadth of knowledge and feeling that Haraway possesses is striking, and *Story Telling for Earthly Survival* is an ode to this thinker’s expansive mind and life. Besides a heady, speculative journey through theory, politics, sci-fi, and so much else, you get a sense of the deep joy that Haraway takes in all life. “Fundamental relationships with other organisms is *who we are*,” she says. “There’s a cartoon version of what it means to be human that is regularized in law, in the teaching of politics and literature and much more—but it’s not true,” the scholar notes. “And I think a lot of people know it’s not true.”

The New York premiere of [Donna Haraway: Story Telling for Earthly Survival](#) is presented by the Swiss Institute and screens at Anthology Film Archives, New York, on February 22.