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Imagining Possibilities

Trans Representations in Mainstream Film

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Abstract

Trans representations have been a part of film since its inception, and this project is an investigation of the ways that audiences have been encouraged to imagine trans identities and experiences and understand trans issues. Because of the enduring and widespread popularity of these films, and the power and influence of the medium itself, it is important to understand what they enable for mainstream audiences as well as the role they play in cultural discourses about heteronormativity. The ways that the films construct trans narratives and characters tends to be closely tied to the genre they are intended to be part of, and they are understood according to these conventions. This project therefore uses genre analysis to examine mainstream trans representation, in conjunction with the developments in politics and academic discourses that have shaped contemporary understandings of trans stories.

The project covers the four genres that dominate in mainstream trans films: comedy, horror, melodrama, and musicals. Each genre is dealt with in a separate chapter, but the links and intersections between them are explored as well. The chapters consider the particular influences, conventions, constraints, and innovations specific to each genre, through close reading of a few key texts, as a way of tracing the shifts that have occurred and the conventions that have endured, and offers suggestions as to why and how these elements survive or transform.

Through tracing these developments, this project identifies the ways in which trans representations in popular film have played a role in developing and maintaining the trans visibility in mainstream society, and contributed to cultural discourses and understandings of trans issues. Despite the problems and stereotypes inherent in many of these films, they prevent trans identities from being erased or ignored. The films open up gaps in the heteronormative monolith, which can be ever be fully resealed, and which provide a space for other possibilities to be imagined.

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