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2017

https://doi.org/10.25595/2730

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Cuntz-Leng, Vera: *Queering Harry, slashing Potter: Between latent meanings and resistant readings*, in: Gender : Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft, Jg. 9 (2017) Nr: 2, 91–105. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/2730.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.3224/gender.v9i2.07

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

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Aufsätze: Offener Teil

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Queering Harry, slashing Potter: Between latent meanings and resistant readings

Zusammenfassung

Queering Harry, slashing Potter: zwischen Subtext und Gegenrede

Als globales Phänomen hat *Harry Potter* unterschiedliche Publika angezogen sowie teilweise widersprüchliche Reaktionen und Debatten ausgelöst. Während in Wissenschaft und Presse mitunter kritisiert wurde, *Harry Potter* verstärke eine heteronormative Weltsicht, zeichnen die vielfältigen Formen der Anschlusskommunikation im Netz – insbesondere in Gestalt sogenannter Slash-Fanfiction – ein anderes Bild. Slash steht für ein breites Spektrum nichtheteronormativer Relektüren und homoerotischer Reorientierungen der Fantasysaga. Durch ein konsequentes Verzahnen der Methoden des Queer Reading nach Kosofsky Sedgwick mit den durch Slash-Fans produzierten Werken lassen sich die Spannungen zwischen latenten queeren Bedeutungen, die *Harry Potter* anbietet, und den subversiven Umdeutungen durch die Fans identifizieren. Isers Konzept der ‚Leerstelle' erweist sich als nützlich, um die vielfältigen Auslassungen, Unbestimmtheiten und Widersprüche herauszuarbeiten, die einen fruchtbaren Boden sowohl für die Dechiffrierung subtextueller Möglichkeiten der Saga als auch für die (transgressiven) Neuschriften im Fandom bereithalten. Beide sollen zudem in einen größeren filmhistorischen Zusammenhang und in den Kontext des Fantasygenres eingebettet werden.

Schlüsselwörter
Harry Potter, Fantasy, Queer Reading, Rezeptionsästhetik, Slash-Fandom

Summary

As a global phenomenon, *Harry Potter* has attracted most diverse audiences and provoked many contradictory responses and debates. While many critics have highlighted the enforcement of heteronormativity in the storyworld, fan responses – and especially slash fan fiction – provides us with an abundance of contradictory queer responses and non-heteronormative re-*readings* and re-*writings* of *Harry Potter*. By constantly confronting and intertwining the academic strategy of queer reading as introduced by Kosofsky Sedgwick with the responses of slash fans, I want to discuss the tensions between latent meanings and resistant readings that embrace the *Harry Potter* universe. In reference to Iser's concept of the *Leerstelle*, the various omissions, indeterminacies, and contradictions in *Harry Potter* that provide a fertile ground for the interpretation of subtextual contents and for transgressive re-writings alike will be explored and discussed within the larger framework of film history and the fantasy genre.

Keywords
Harry Potter, fantasy genre, queer reading, reader response theory, slash fandom

1 Introduction

Harry Potter is both a product and a phenomenon of immense cultural and economic impact. The inventive fantasy setting and the universal appeal of the story have attracted most diverse readers, audiences, and fans. Not only children but also straight and queer adult recipients alike have responded massively – especially on social network sites on the web – to the series about a boy who once lived in a cupboard and became the greatest wizard of all time. On the one hand, *Harry Potter* has been widely criticized for its depiction of desire as "uncontroversially heterosexual" (Gupta 2009: 128), and thus for its reinforcement of heteronormativity as the only desirable life concept and for its rather conservative depiction of gender roles (Heilman 2003; Pugh/Wallace 2006; Pugh 2011). On the other hand, although there are no explicitly or openly gay characters in the original text, some critics have praised Harry's process of becoming a wizard as a strong metaphor for the act of coming out (Bronski 2003) and pointed to the protagonist's non-hegemonic masculinity (Gallardo/Smith 2003; Wannamaker 2008). In addition, fan writers have published hundreds of thousands of stories online, so-called slash fan fiction (Jenkins 1992: 185–222), that are filled with queer utopias and homoerotic fantasies about Harry's world (Willis 2006; Tosenberger 2008a; Tosenberger 2008b; Cuntz-Leng 2015). Writing slash fan fiction and creating slash fan art is a fan-cultural practice that at least dates back to the 1960s, when the first homoerotic rewritings of the relationship between Spock and Kirk, fictional characters from the TV series *Star Trek* (Gene Roddenberry, 1966–1969), were written and shared through fanzines. In the 2000s, and with the development of social media, slash has moved from the margins into the mainstream and is today widely available and accessible online.

But if we assume that there are no explicit inclusions of queerness in the actual *Harry Potter* text, the important question is: where does this amplitude of queer responses come from? Is this phenomenon the result of a combination of wishful thinking and the violent distortion of an author's intentions? Or is it an attempt to specify an underlying queer logic that was a subliminal part of the *Harry Potter* narration all along? Or is it both?

After a brief introduction to two central aspects of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon, I will propose the interlocking of ideas from queer theory with the creative output by slash fans as a productive model for analysis. By constantly confronting and intertwining the strategy of queer reading – as introduced by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985, 1994) – with the poaching tactics (Jenkins 1992: 24–27) used by slash fans and slash fan fiction writers, I aim to discuss the tensions between latent meanings and resistant readings that embrace the *Harry Potter* universe. In reference to Wolfgang Iser's (1994) concept of the *Leerstelle* (gap), the spectrum of omissions, indeterminacies, and contradictions in *Harry Potter* will be explored that provide a fertile ground for the subtextual possibilities as revealed by queer reading and the transgressive re-writings and re-orientations through slash.

Finally, I want to describe how the imbuement with these three forms of gaps regarding gender, sexuality, and sexual desire not only in *Harry Potter* but in fantasy storyworlds in general provide the audience with an immense potential for queerability and makes the reinforcement of non-heteronormative interpretations possible. Also, I

will try to draw an analogy to the Hays Production Code era in Hollywood, which strictly regulated the depiction and discussion of sexuality in the cinema (Benshoff/Griffin 2006: 29–30; Cuntz-Leng 2015: 62–68). It was a period of silencing queer voices and of concealment of queer representations in Western mainstream media on a grand scale. At the same time, classic Hollywood movies show a degree of queerability that appears to be quite similar to *Harry Potter*, the *Harry Potter* films in particular, and other contemporary fantasy blockbusters. One only has to think of extensively discussed movies of this era in terms of their queer subtexts like *Ben Hur* (William Wyler, 1959), *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), or *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) (Cuntz-Leng 2015: 65–68). Looking ahead, I want to propose the hypothesis that Hollywood today is reviving its golden years through fantasy storyworlds, and I will give some prospects regarding possible future developments.

2 Crazy about Harry

The monomythic story of an orphaned boy who became a wizard, went to the magical boarding school Hogwarts, and defeated the evil Lord Voldemort may be one of the best-known fantasy series of all times. But it is rather the narrative content itself that makes *Harry Potter* exceptional or new. Instead, it is the craze, the "Pottermania" that has evolved around the seven novels and their eight movie adaptations, with the latter having attracted an even larger audience. And many of the participants in the phenomenon, who purchased their books at midnight-release parties or went all dressed-up to the movie theatre cannot simply be called readers or viewers anymore; they have become active participants, fans.

Harry's maturation as well as the publication period of the books between 1997 and 2007 paralleled the evolution of new technologies for participation and interaction online. This changed the face of fandom substantially (Coppa 2006: 56–57). Fanzines were less relevant and fan-generated content became much more accessible. Starting in the early 2000s, *Harry Potter* fans had the opportunity to actively develop, share, and articulate their own perception of the fictional storyworld and its inhabitants online. Some fans blog about their fandom, others share videos, make art, or become writers themselves. Taken together, more than 730,000 *Harry Potter* stories written by fans are currently archived on the multifandom platforms *fanfiction.net* and *archiveofourown.org.* That is more than six billion words, over six thousand times the word count of the original novels combined. A lot of theses texts are so-called slash, which is both a literary genre and, more generally speaking, a "fannish" concept in which fictional characters are removed from their preferred heteronormative exegesis and transferred into self-made homoerotic utopias that, at first sight, may turn the author's intended meaning upside down. The three most popular erotic configurations in *Harry Potter* slash fictions ("pairings" in fan terminology) are Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy (Drarry), Remus Lupin and Sirius Black (Puppylove), and Harry Potter and Severus Snape (Snarry). However, homoerotic fantasies about nearly every character in every imaginable configuration and situation are produced: from fluffy romance stories to playful gender-switch experiments to oppressive sadomasochistic power struggles between good and evil. The slashers have contrib-

uted a homoeroticized alternate version of *Harry Potter* to the *Harry Potter* storyworld that outnumbers the official content by far. This is a prime example of what John Fiske has described as the "shadow cultural economy" (Fiske 1992: 30) of fandom. Slash fans have not only created an independent network and archive of meaning-making, but their actions have challenged the image of a powerless consumer and led to a reevaluation of the hierarchical relationship between producers and audiences (Jenkins 2006: 169–205).

The second aspect about *Harry Potter* that is worth mentioning in this context and, as I would argue, the crucial ingredient in the recipe for its success and relevance both as a fandom item in general and as an artifact of strong interest for slash fans, is its polysemy (Barthes 1987: 7–8). By not postulating a fixed truth or ideology, *Harry Potter* offers a rich semiotic field, a wide "range of negotiated readings through which various social groups can find meaningful articulations of their own relationship to the dominant ideology" (Appelbaum 2003: 47). The lively heterogeneous debate that critics, scholars, and fans have led about *Harry Potter* illustrates this key aspect of the saga. Hence, it is also the essential starting point for research into the possible challenges of sexuality and gender norms. Although it has been argued that heteronormativity is constantly validated as the preferred outcome of adolescence (Pugh 2011: 83) and conservative recipients were able to identify with the saga and its characters, the polysemy of the text has provided slash fans and the writers of slash fan fiction with an open space of possibilities in which to articulate queer desires. Regarding the reasons for this contradictory reaction, Wannamaker writes:

> "[T]hese complex novels function in a space between, where dominant ideology is simultaneously re-enforced, challenged, and negotiated. Ultimately, these books are popular with so many child and adult readers, not because they didactically advocate either feminist or patriarchal ideals, but because, through their complex portrayals of characters, gender, and relationships, they depict the anxieties, tensions, and uncertainties about contemporary gender roles that readers of all ages are continuously working to define and to negotiate" (Wannamaker 2008: 122).

I would only partly agree with Wannamaker's conclusion – because it is the ambiguity as a consequence of polysemy rather than the complexity in the depiction of characters, relationships, or gender roles that makes *Harry Potter* an interesting case for gender and queer studies. But because there are no openly gay characters or explicit discussions of queer issues in any of the officially released *Harry Potter* material, an analysis will benefit from taking the various queer responses by fans into account. The productive intertwining of the strategy of queer reading with observations from the slash fan community will help to reveal the queer possibilities that result from the openness and ambiguity of *Harry Potter*.

3 Queer reading and slash fandom: confronted, intertwined

In *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduced the idea that novels are infused with homosexual potential and queer desires that cannot be acted upon publicly and are therefore masked as male ho-

mosociality. Harry M. Benshoff (1997) and Alexander Doty (1997, 2000) both transferred her concepts to film analysis, because the open visualization of queerness in Hollywood movies during the rigid Hays Code era was as prohibited and impossible as in nineteenth century English literature. Nevertheless, queer desires were embedded in these movies and can be deciphered, as Doty has conclusively shown. It is essential to highlight that "[q]ueer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful and willful misreadings, or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along" (Doty 1997: 16). Doty's observation is crucial in terms of the connection between queerness and popular culture since it not only refers to the factual existence of queerness in the media, it also takes the audience and the process of reception into consideration.

Since the initial emergence of slash in *Star Trek* fandom (Jenkins 1992: 187), cultural studies scholars and feminists alike have praised this practice of resistant re-writing as a (counter-cultural/feminist) act of active transgression (Russ 1985; Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Penley 1992), while it has been widely ignored by queer theory and queer culture (Dhaenens/van Bauwel/Biltereyst 2008: 335; Cuntz-Leng 2015: 105).

Since queer re-reading enables us to uncover latent meanings and we are able to comprehend what forms of resistant reorientations slash fans create of a certain text, it is reasonable to bring both strategies together into a productive dialogue that can enable us to more completely understand the (possible) queerness of a pop cultural artifact. And this queerness – as *Harry Potter* may show as a prime example – may be part of the general logic of fantasy. Moreover, not only gender/queer studies but also other scientific fields (e.g., literary, film, and media studies) would benefit from taking fan studies and online slash reception practices into account to receive a more comprehensive overview of current queer discourses surrounding novels, films, TV series, and transmedia franchises.

There may well be many possible starting points for connecting queer reading and slash. In this paper, however, my approach will be theoretically grounded by Wolfgang Iser's concept of the *Leerstelle* because it is quite useful to describe the constitution of the saga. In *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* Iser describes the vagueness of fictional works and discusses the interaction between text and reader. According to Iser, fictional works do not have any fixed true meaning but merely provide a certain framework and a proposition for communication. Meaning itself is created in the act of reading by the imagination of the reader (Iser 1994: 174–177). In this context, *Leerstellen* are of great significance. They can be described as actual markers for the reader to make meaning, as points of entry into the text, and as invitations to fill in the narrative gaps with one's own imagination. In this sense, narrative gaps do not solely indicate a need for completion but a combinatory imperative that Iser calls "*ausgesparte Anschließbarkeit*" (Iser 1994: 284), that is recessed connectability. Queer reading and slash writing can both be understood as products of this process of making (queer) meaning, which is initiated by the combinatory imperative that in turn is accomplished by the incompleteness of the given fictional world.

When it comes to the portrayal of sexuality, gender, and sexual desire in *Harry Potter*, we can make a distinction between at least three different kinds of gaps in the

narrative that I will call omissions, indeterminacies, and contradictions. They differ as they draw different conclusions from a queer reading and their fannish exploitation through slash fulfills different compensation functions, or, in other words, promises different forms of pleasure to fan writers: completion, specification, or correction.

3.1 Omissions: filling in the gaps

Omissions are actual gaps in the course of the narrative: pauses, ellipses, hiatuses; in film: cuts, fade-outs, pan-shots, black screens (Cuntz-Leng 2015: 115). In serial narratives like *Harry Potter*, the whole progress of the storyline is paused after each episode. These omissions are not only inevitable, they are an essential component of the pleasure of seriality (e.g., by means of the insertion of cliffhangers at the end of an episode as a means to increase suspense). Thus, the periods between the publication of the respective *Harry Potter* books are particularly productive times in which fan fiction flourishes. These gaps in the production process are entry points into the narrative and opportunities for the recipient to continue the story independently with no conflicting "true" story available. Countless alternate versions of the seventh *Harry Potter* book were published on the internet long before the actual release of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. But while that may well explain the emergence of fan fiction in general, the gaps in the publication process do not necessarily tell us anything about their queer potential. For this, we have to take a closer look at the omissions that are inserted directly into the episodes. They are filled with the unsaid, the unseen, and the unshowable that provides material for both queer analysis and the realization of slash fantasies.

In *Harry Potter*, the magical world of witches and wizards is itself the most emblematic manifestation of these politics of invisibility. This secondary world is embedded in the gaps of the perceptible Muggle world: Between two ordinary houses, a building and its street number are inexplicably absent and can only be revealed by a magic spell (12 Grimmauld Place); at King's Cross Station is – unbeknownst to Muggles – an intermediate track number 9¾ from which the train to Hogwarts departs; and the quasi-invisible Leaky Cauldron pub is situated right in the middle of London but only magical folk can enter it. In the "real" world, magic is ubiquitous but it remains a non-defined and invisible space for the uninitiated. This dichotomy is not only a major trope in slash fan fiction, the technique of hiding something right under other people's noses is strongly reminiscent of the era before Stonewall, when gay subculture was *de facto* invisible to the mainstream and at the same time situated right in the middle of everyday life. Back in the 1950s and 1960s, only insiders were able to decipher the codes for gaining access to queer subculture, its clubs and secret meeting-points. This analogy supports the hypothesis that the magical world itself operates as a metaphor for non-heteronormative lifestyles. Bronski writes:

> "The interplay between the world of magic and the world of Muggles in the Potter books is identical to how queer historians and sociologists describe the interplay between the closeted gay world and the mainstream world, particularly in the days before the gay-liberation movement. Homosexuals were everywhere, yet heterosexuals usually could not see them. Gay bars looked just like straight bars from the outside. Gay people invented elaborate codes, often in language, dress, and deportment, so they could recognize one another but not be seen as abnormal by the heterosexual—Muggle—world" (Bronski 2003).

Although the analogy seems obvious, it would be more accurate not to use the word "heterosexual" to describe the Muggle world but instead to constitute it as heteronormative, because a general absence of sexuality characterizes both spheres in *Harry Potter*. Sexual desire in general can be regarded as the most striking omission, thousandfoldly compensated by the fantasies in fan writings – not only in slash – that are primarily erotica. Hogwarts headmaster and Harry's mentor Albus Dumbledore is in this regard a character of particular significance: Subsequent to publication of the last novel and outside of the *Harry Potter* storyworld, Rowling surprised the public by outing Dumbledore as homosexual during a reading session at Carnegie Hall (Pugh 2011: 91). Dumbledore's sexual orientation has not been a staple in the diegesis. To slash fans, however, his outing did not come as a surprise (Tosenberger 2008b: 200); Tosenberger argues, in reference to Sara Gwenllian Jones, that in the case of Dumbledore's sexuality, slash fans were able to decipher the intended meaning of the author and therefore became paradoxically what Iser has called the ideal readers of the text. It is important to note that Iser calls the ideal reader a utopian impossibility; hence, the reader and the author can never possess the same code to make meaning of a text (Iser 1994: 52–55). However, the extratextual outing of Dumbledore may put the prevalent perception of slash fans as resistant readers into perspective and position them instead as decoders of latent meanings (Jones 2002: 82; Tosenberger 2008b: 200–201).

There is only little evidence of Dumbledore's sexual orientation given in the text, no more than "ghostly traces of homosexuality" (Pugh 2011: 93) that are situated in a distant past. Instead, Dumbledore is "almost completely detached from personal desires or at least keeps them tightly under control" (Piippo 2009: 78). But because Dumbledore's sexual desires are silenced, an omission, one can rethink the conclusion that the slash fan can be perceived as an ideal reader; instead and *vice versa*, it can be argued that Rowling herself became a queer reader of the text, underlining both the silences, ambiguities, and the polysemy of the series and its queer potentials. There is a striking discrepancy between the narrative gap of Dumbledore's sexuality and Rowling's firm conviction that he is gay and that his gayness could be deciphered as an unalterable truth. In fact, her intentions concerning Dumbledore's sexuality may not be questionable. She did, however, fail to communicate them to her audience (Kebarle 2009: 155) and chose to leave her text open enough for various interpretations.

In addition to the level of action, the *Harry Potter* movies find unique aesthetic strategies to visually design the absence of sexual desire. In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (David Yates, 2007), Harry kisses someone for the first time. Being in love with Cho Chang for over a year, one might think that this kiss would be an epiphany for Harry, but the romance of the situation suffers from the fact that Cho is crying, still devastated about the tragic loss of her former boyfriend Cedric, who was killed in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (Mike Newell, 2005) by one of Voldemort's henchmen. If you take a closer look, Cedric is still present in the picture, gazing directly into the camera from a photograph that has been pinned to the mirror behind the two teenagers – thus forming an erotic triangle. The kiss is filmed in an unusual, awkward upward tilt of the camera that places the omission in the center between their bodies – only their lips touch. The physical gap between their bodies creates a discord between the imagined eroticism and intimacy of the gesture and its actual realization and effect

(Cuntz-Leng 2015: 199–201). In this context, Hickethier's claim that the film medium only tells and shows what is important to the story and leaves out what is unimportant is moved into perspective (Hickethier 1982: 142): The cinematographic staging of the kiss draws the audience's attention precisely to this nothingness. Sexual desire, or the lack thereof, becomes the focus of attention.

Interestingly, the staging of the absence is revisioned in *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (David Yates, 2009) when Ginny and Harry exchange their first kiss in the very same room where Cho and Harry had. But the interior has completely changed: Instead of a gym it has became a junk room. Ginny asks Harry to close his eyes so as not to be tempted – at first referring only to a magic book she will be hiding in the room. Then she tells Harry that she could stay up here hidden, too, if he wants her to. Harry's eyes are still closed, he does not react to her self-objectification. Ginny kisses him, their lips touching only briefly, and she then simply disappears into nothingness.

More examples of this phenomenon can be found. In a scene in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part II* (David Yates, 2011), right before the final battle against Voldemort, Remus Lupin and his wife Tonks try to reach their hands across to each other, and another physical gap is put into the center of attention. The camera dwells for a crucial, quiet moment on a close-up of the small space between their outstretched fingers that cannot bridge the last gap to provide a comforting touch. Both characters eventually die during the battle; their dead bodies lie next to each other, still not touching.

The execution of these three scenes supports the observation that not only the relationship between Harry and Cho but "all the individual relationships […] avoid physical contact or any evidence of *sexual* attraction" (Gupta 2009: 129). Instead, they leave gaps that point to a certain ineligibility of heteronormativity and gaps in which the audience can insert their own erotic wish fulfillment fantasies.

3.2 Indeterminacies: specifying potentials

In accordance with Ingarden, Iser and Hickethier both speak of "indeterminacy" in the context of fictional works (Hickethier 1982: 139–143; Iser 1994: 267–280). Indeterminacies, uncertainties, and ambiguities are aspects of the narration that imply contradictions because they are inadequately drafted-out elements of the plot. If an aspect is formulated insufficiently or is under-determined, it evokes a certain inherent instability of the whole fictional world that results in an even higher degree of potential speculation than an omission. Because we know that something is there for a fact, its concrete formulation must be specified during the process of interpretation.

Among the many indeterminacies in *Harry Potter*, I want to single out two: the conception of the hero and the transformation trope. Although we witness Harry's adolescence, his gender, physical maturation, and his libido are insignificant issues. They remain under-determined. As Gallardo and Smith have argued, Harry easily brings concepts of femininity and masculinity into accordance (Gallardo/Smith 2003: 191–199) and declines the attribution of hegemonic masculinity onto himself (Wannamaker 2008: 121) – most deeply symbol-laden in his abdication of the elder wand, the ultimate phallus. That other heroes of the fantasy genre share these attributes with Harry Potter

– Peter Pan and Frodo Baggins, among others – hints at a high degree of queerability of these texts and it may explain the strong attraction of slash writers to the fantastic. Slash fandom makes allowance for the sexual under-determination of the protagonist through a subset of fan stories and fan art that explore Harry's character as either bisexual, female, and/or transgender, who (magically) switches his gender at will (Cuntz-Leng 2015: 119–123). These stories are a forum in which it is possible to reflect playfully on current gender issues and social norms. When Ron, for example, questions Harry's gender identity in the fan fiction *And Now For Something Completely Different*, a wise Hermione explains: "He's all one. um. He's all very much one thing. […] his *essence* hasn't changed, you see. What he is *really*. Like, say, if you used polyjuice to disguise yourself as Harry – you'd still be you" (www.fanfiction.net/s/1241778/1/).

That gender switches are popular in *Harry Potter* slash can further be attributed to the inflationary usage of the transformation trope in the original. *Harry Potter* features lots of physical transformations: for example, animagi characters like Sirius Black, who is both human and dog, and Peter Pettigrew, who is both human and rat, the metamorphmagus Tonks, who can change her physical performance at will, and the werewolves Remus Lupin and Fenrir Greyback. Other transformations are Snape's drag performance in *Prisoner of Azkaban* (Alfonso Cuaròn, 2004), various uses of polyjuice potion from *Chamber of Secrets* (Chris Columbus, 2002) to *Deathly Hallows*, and Voldemort's rebirth in *Goblet of Fire*, and more subtle double identities (all the DADA teachers (Cuntz-Leng 2013: 172–179) and the so-called "half-breeds" like Hagrid). Hence, masquerade, metamorphosis, and transformation operate as metaphors for queer and transsexual bodies (Chappell 2007: 237; Brandes 2011: 77), the transformation trope is an indeterminacy that highlights the instability of characters, the fluidity of their bodies, and their possibly queer identities. In the world of *Harry Potter*, identity and gender are not unchangeable conditions, they are a process of constant choices and negotiations. This resistance towards definite identity assignments makes both factors of indeterminacy – the instability of the transforming body and Harry's under-determination – markers for queerness itself. None other than Dumbledore himself has already told us – like a credo for the process of gender, sexuality, and identity formation – that "[i]t is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities" (Rowling 2004: 245).

3.3 Contradictions: making things right

In the chapter on fantasy literature in *Re-reading Harry Potter*, Gupta extensively discusses a paper by John Pennington, who claimed that *Harry Potter* is "failed fantasy" because it does not play by the integral ground-rules of fantasy literature (Gupta 2009: 55–66). According to Gupta, Pennington's crushing verdict of the saga is the result of a non-critical adherence to Rosemary Jackson's claim that secondary-world fantasies from *Peter Rabbit* to *The Lord of the Rings* are sentimental and reactionary (Jackson 1989: 155–156). Jackson has argued in this context that precisely this kind of fantasy is characterized by "providing coherence and unity" (Jackson 1989: 156). However, Pennington explains that his "trepidation over the Harry Potter series is founded on the disconnect between what the books attempt to say […] and how Rowling says them,

a disconnect between form and content" (Gupta 2009: 62). Pennington's unsettling *Harry Potter* experience, described with the strong attributes of "trepidation" and "disconnection", contradicts the coherence characteristic. I would agree with Pennington that an unsettling experience of contradictions is in fact at hand in *Harry Potter* as it is at the heart of fantasy in general. However, it is more of a subversive power source than an attempt of restful preservation as Jackson would have argued. Contradictions are an important and subtle element of all kinds of fantasy that have often been overlooked by literary criticism. The breaking of rules is an integral part of the *Harry Potter* narration. The disregard of coherence, the embracing of inconsistencies, contradictions, and implausibilities are not failures, they are the main pleasures and the strength of the series, as well as another important analogy with queerness. What is contradictory is not definite, what is not definite can be queered. Whenever a recipient thinks that something is incoherent or wrong, queer potential can proliferate unhindered.

Contradictions are inconsistencies in the logic of the narrated world. The term "plothole" literally highlights the interruptive quality of textual incoherence. On the one hand, plotholes help the slash fan to more smoothly validate a potentially contradictory interpretation of the narration, a character, or a relationship in the fannish reorientation of the text. On the other hand, inconsistencies create a desire for correction, a desire to repair the damaged credibility of the original source. In other words: They create fantasy (in the sense of "imagination").

The eight *Harry Potter* movies provide their audiences with numerous occasions in which the dramaturgy of gazes is super-charged with conflicting sexual energies (especially between Harry and Snape (Cuntz-Leng 2013: 178)). Moreover, some contradictions in the characters Remus and Sirius have led to a huge fan debate that I would like to discuss in more detail: "Though Rowling has never made any explicit statements on the topic, many fans defend, passionately, the pairing of Remus Lupin/Sirius Black as canon, a reading which many other fans just as passionately oppose" (Tosenberger 2008a: 187). Tosenberger highlights some aspects that Puppylove slashers use to validate the canonicity of the pairing: their close, long-lasting friendship and their status as shape-shifters. As dog and werewolf they are sexually compatible in both human and animal form (Tosenberger 2008a: 197). Sirius is not attached to any female characters, after decades in prison he straightaway comes looking for Remus (and for Harry as substitute for the deceased James Potter). *Prisoner of Azkaban* provides the viewer with an exceptionally intimate reunion between Remus and Sirius in the Shrieking Shack that is also echoed in a sequence at 12 Grimmauld Place in *Order of the Phoenix*. While their bond seems to be easily eroticized, the relationship between Remus and his later wife Tonks is much less developed in the series. In fact, the introduction of their romantic relationship in *Half-Blood Prince* was quite a surprise, because there had not been any preliminary in-text events that would have endorsed this development. To make matters worse, we see Lupin constantly struggling with his new role: He tries to keep his distance to Tonks in *Half-Blood Prince*, tells her that he is too old, poor, and because of his condition as a werewolf also too dangerous for her. Despite the information that they nevertheless marry, Remus is still ashamed in *Deathly Hallows* and frightened to become the father of their child, and he is determined to leave his heteronormative family without having second thoughts to go instead on the hunt for Voldemort's hor-

cruxes with Harry and his friends. It is the adolescent Harry who reminds Remus of his responsibilities and refuses to take him along. For sure, it can be argued that the poorly developed, palely staged, and contradictory relationship of Tonks and Remus is the result of Harry's limited perspective on the couple, but it nevertheless raises questions regarding the plausibility of their love and indirectly prompts the recipients to question the true motives of the characters.

Something similar occurs with Harry and Ginny that cannot be downplayed by the restricted viewpoint of the recipient. Although we are well informed about Ginny's affection for Harry that sparked at their first meeting, it is quite odd that her feelings for him can easily be distracted and redirected to other potential partners: She acts as a willing tool for the memory of the young Tom Riddle in *Chamber of Secrets*, as Neville's date at the Yule ball in *Goblet of Fire*, and as loving partner of Michael Corner and Dean Thomas. Particularly with regard to the usual stability, integrity, and exclusiveness of female emotions in romantic relationships in fairy-tales and fantasy (e.g., Wendy's affections for Peter Pan, Arwen's love for Aragorn, Tenar's feelings for Ged in the *Earthsea* novels), Ginny's emotional volatility is discomforting and lessens the credibility of her interest in the hero. Moreover, it lessens the reliability of a heteronormative life concept in general.

When Harry finally comes to terms with his feelings for Ginny, he may indeed no longer take any interest in other girls, but more contradictions are evoked by the lack of any textual evidence for his attraction to her, paralleled by his increasing obsession with Draco in *Half-Blood Prince* (Cuntz-Leng 2015: 355–358). Although Ginny and Harry are now together on the Gryffindor house team, "Harry, however, had never been less interested in Quidditch; he was rapidly becoming obsessed with Draco Malfoy. Still checking the Marauder's Map whenever he got a chance, he sometimes made detours to wherever Malfoy happened to be, but had not yet detected him doing anything out of the ordinary" (Rowling 2005: 383). It is not surprising that the disparity between Harry's only shallowly drafted-out emotions for Ginny on the one hand and his highly emotionalized and irrational fixation on Draco on the other are grist to the mills of writers and readers of Drarry slash.

4 Conclusion

Kosofsky Sedgwick defines the term "queer" as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1994: 7). Characterized and enriched by omissions, indeterminacies, and contradictions, *Harry Potter* provides its audience with such an open mesh and must therefore be understood as a queer text in its broadest sense even though openly queer characters and issues are absent. Due to this ambivalence between openness and absence, it is not possible to clarify whether slash is in fact an act of exposing or subverting of meaning. If meaning-making is always the center-piece of the reception process and never part of the actual text, the subversion of a narration is an impossibility by definition. In return, the queer readings by *Harry Potter* slash fans

cannot ultimately show or prove a latent queerness of the *Harry Potter* text, but they do highlight its polysemy, the queerability resulting from the openness of the *Harry Potter* storyworld, and the power of the reader. It is quite striking that *Harry Potter* in fact attracts more queer responses than other pop cultural phenomena (e.g., *James Bond* or *Twilight*). *Harry Potter* slash fan works can be a showcase for the queerness that seems to be a crucial part of the reception of fantasy and in fan discourses.

Today's queer studies primarily focuses on the critical exploration of the ways in which contemporary writers, artists, directors, and producers engage with the opportunities offered by popular fantasy to exceed or challenge gender and sexuality norms, but this is not easy to apply to the case of *Harry Potter*, where queerness is absent yet at the same time queerability is enabled by the high frequency of *Leerstellen*. It is neither important nor definite if fantasy is reactionary or subversive, but one might argue that the *Leerstelle*, like "queerness disrupts [the] narrative equilibrium and sets in motion a questioning of the status quo, and in many cases within fantastic literature, the nature of reality itself" (Benshoff 1997: 5).

The openness of the *Harry Potter* world may parallel Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queer, but its conceptual indefiniteness likewise makes the reinforcement of social norms, orders, and hierarchies possible and plausible, as is proven by the "far from-homogenous responses to the series [and] intensely contradictory views" (Ehnenn 2011: 232). The more points of entry into the text, the greater the diversity in different readings, interpretations, and reorientations. In this sense, *Harry Potter* takes the path of least resistance toward the mind of the audience. The series reinforces and confirms the values and beliefs of the individual recipient (Cuntz-Leng 2015: 390).

There is a strong analogy to Hollywood cinema in the period between 1934 and 1967 (Benshoff/Griffin 2006: 29–37), when the Hays office controlled and censored the content of movies in regard to profanity, nudity, sodomy, etc. Dhaenens, van Bauwel, and Biltereyst argue that writers of slash fan fiction "approach the textual material in a similar way to how certain queer readers approach classic Hollywood cinema; they deconstruct traditional narratives and reveal the queer from reading between the story lines" (Dhaenens/van Bauwel/Biltereyst 2008: 343). However, these fan writers do not – like queer readers of classical Hollywood cinema – deconstruct what is there, they reflect upon what is irritating and inconsistent because of its absence. According to Doty, who has read movies like *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming & George Cukor, 1939), *The Red Shoes* (Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1948), and *Gentlemen Prefers Blondes* (Howard Hawks, 1953) under a 'lavender lens', "classic texts and personalities actually can be more queer-suggestive than 'openly' gay, lesbian, or bisexual texts" (Doty 2000: 1). These movies are not only cult classics to a gay audience. Straight and conservative viewers alike are able to enjoy them to the very same extent. Their queer suggestiveness is the result of a constant under-determination of sexuality. Therefore, queerness is not a necessity, it is an option – an option though that other items of popular culture that openly deal with normative sexuality are unable to provide (again, e.g., *James Bond* or *Twilight*).

In this sense, not only *Harry Potter* but the fantasy genre in general continues the tradition of classical Hollywood cinema of enforcing queer readings and responses by silencing sexuality *in extenso*. At the same time as fantasy blockbusters memorize the

Cinema of Attractions through their spectacular effects, fantasy is the ambassador of Hollywood's nostalgic longing for its "golden years", the last preserver of an innocence long lost. However, given the enormous success of *Game of Thrones* (David Benioff & D. B. Weiss, 2011–) on the small screen, it is unclear how long fantasy cinema will be able to withstand an uprising countertrend of filling the absences in fantasy narrations with sexual and erotic content before the audience does.

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