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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 Weltanschauung, 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. Iser's 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 imbuelement 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