Introduction

I SINK INTO THE SEAT NEXT to my mom and sister at the strip-mall movie theater in Waco, Texas. I am twelve years old, and though movies are not an uncommon experience at this point in my life, the hour-long drive to Waco is just far enough that I relish any opportunity to see a movie. We are here this day in December 1993 to see the latest family comedy, *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) starring Robin Williams. The film tells the story of Daniel Hillard who, after he and his wife Miranda divorce, decides to disguise himself as the eponymous elderly British woman in order to be offered a job as a nanny that will allow him to spend more time with his children. I laughed along with the rest of the audience at the slapstick antics of star Robin Williams and enjoyed the film enough that it retained a warm place in my memories for years to come; the film was also significant to me personally because it was one of the first pieces of media I was aware of that portrayed a man dressing as a woman. I had been aware of my transgender identity since I was at least five years old, but I still struggled for many years to come out to my family and friends. The impact of seeing a character cross-dressing on screen was extremely important for me. While Daniel Hilliard would not have seen himself as transgender, seeing him cross-dress let me know, on some level, that I was not alone, that I was not the only person in the world who had the feelings I had and who understood themselves—even if I did not yet have the language to describe it—as transgender.

I continued to seek out representations of transgender people in film and other media. I was always very aware of new films that touched on transgender themes, such as *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*

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(1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), *Dr. Jekyll and Ms. Hyde* (1995), and *The Birdcage* (1996). I also enjoyed discovering older films that included transgender representations, such as *Some Like It Hot* (1959), *Psycho* (1960), and *Tootsie* (1982). To this day, I am still interested in consuming any media, no matter how bad, that includes some form of transgender representation, because I just have to see for myself how transgender people are being presented to the rest of the world.

Even though I have found enjoyment in transgender film and media representations over the years, I came to realize as I got older that most people in the audience were not processing films like *Mrs. Doubtfire* the same way that I was. All they saw was a silly man who barely looked like a woman finding himself in ridiculous situations because of his decision to wear a dress and makeup. Rather than a demonstration of the real possibility of existing as the gender that matches one's gender identity even when it was not the one given at birth, all that most moviegoers saw in *Mrs. Doubtfire* and similar films was a hilarious farce about something they would never experience for themselves. The very ridiculousness of its premise is the foundation of all its humor. I came to realize that while my experience with the film and others like it was a very important part of the development of my transgender identity, it was an oppositional reading of the film.[1] Marketed to a broad, primarily cisgender audience, the film's narrative and visuals were constructed to appeal to this audience, not to the small minority audience of transgender people desperately searching for any external acknowledgement of their identities. These films are not really about or for transgender people, even if transgender people's lives and experiences are an important part of the films. While the concept of representation generally refers to the inclusion of marginalized groups in media texts, more attention needs to be given to how representations are constructed to appeal to certain audiences who are generally not members of the same marginalized group. The purpose of *Distancing Representations in Transgender Film* is to show how the hopeful purpose of challenging binary understandings of gender seen in popular transgender film representations is not fulfilled in the texts themselves.[2] As a transgender woman myself, I want to see positive, realistic depictions of transgender lives in popular film and media, and identifying and acknowledging the shortcomings of existing tests is one important step toward attaining these positive representations.

I want to offer a note of explanation about the meaning of an important word in the title I've chosen. Distancing is the result of the centering of a dominant perspective on a marginalized group. The distancing I address in this book—that of transgender characters from the cisgender audience in transgender films—is accomplished through the use of specific narrative conventions and visual codes to deny an emotional investment or identification with the characters by audience members. The transgender characters are generally distanced from the audience by contrasting them with cisnormative standards of gender. The narrative conventions and visual codes of these films construct transgender identity in ways that prevent audience identification with the characters. The transgender identities of the characters are either discarded at the first available opportunity in order to better focus on the characters' cisgender identities, which are hidden until the last moments in order to create a shocking revelation, or shown to be the result of a tremendous amount of effort and suffering. Because of the prominence of the characters in most of the films analyzed here, audience members may be able to identify with them *despite* these issues, but how the characters are constructed does not *invite* this identification.

The transgender identities of the characters in transgender films are frequently delegitimized in contrast to their cisgender identities. The transgender characters are critiqued by cisnormativity for their poor performance of gender and their focus on outward appearance. The characters are also positioned as separate from cisnormative society, whether through the physical isolation of being forced to leave their homes and go to a new place, even somewhere as nice as a resort in Florida, or the interpersonal isolation of being rejected by others, through such acts as being bullied at summer camp. Finally, the transgender identities of the characters are presented as problems to be overcome rather than as legitimate identities; whether the characters actively claim a transgender identity or are positioned in that identity by external forces, their transgender identities are presented as the root cause of all the difficulties they must endure. All these issues represent an interest in highlighting clear distinctions between the transgender characters and cisnormative society. Making such clear distinctions supports the project of distancing the characters from the audience by arguing that the distinctions are impossible to overcome and that no true connection with the characters is possible.

An example from *Tootsie* illustrates this distancing effect. The main character Michael Dorsey's decision to adopt a transgender identity is based in his inability to find work as an actor, distancing him from the audience not only for his transgender identity but also for his lack of economic privilege. After adopting the transgender identity of Dorothy Michaels, Michael's transgender identity is made problematic through poor performance of gender, such as when he physically tosses a man out of a taxi after a long day of shopping as Dorothy, while his cisgender identity is privileged in his romantic pursuit of Julie. To pursue her successfully, Michael frequently discards his transgender identity even though Dorothy brings him more success and acclaim than he ever had before as an actor. Even with everything he learns through the experience, confessing to Julie that he was a better man as a woman with her than he ever was as a man, he discards his transgender identity for a final time in a dramatic reveal involving removing his wig on live television. By failing to treat Michael's transgender identity with the same respect given to his cisgender identity and having him frequently discard his transgender identity as an obstacle to a successful romance, the film does not allow the audience to make a connection with the character's transgender identity. The character's own privileging of his cisgender identity is reflected in the film's construction of Michael as a character. By working to keep Michael at a safe distance from his transgender identity, the film also works to keep the audience at a safe distance as well. Analyzing how transgender films are constructed to distance the transgender characters from the audience is the purpose of this book. To show how my argument differs, it is important to first look at the existing scholarship on transgender representation in film.

Overview of Transgender Representation in Film

Representation is constitutive of the events that surround us.[3] Representation does not create events; they do exist outside of their representation. But because events cannot signify on their own and must be *made intelligible*,[4] our understanding of events happens through the frame of representation. Events are framed in a particular way and given a particular meaning depending on how they are represented. For example, if a transgender person is attacked and beaten, the way

the transgender person is represented in news media shapes how they are understood by members of society. Representation that focuses, for example, on the transgender person's presence in a gender-segregated space, such as a restroom or changing room, implies that the attack was justified because the transgender person deviated from cisnormative standards for gendered behavior. On the other hand, representation that focuses on the transgender person's attempt to eat dinner or purchase clothing in peace before suddenly being attacked implies that the person's freedom to express their gender without the threat of violence was violated. In both examples, the way the transgender person is represented impacts our understanding of the event. A single, hypothetical story may only reach a small audience, but the representation of transgender people found within can have a larger impact if it becomes the norm for how transgender people are represented in media. Representation is constitutive because it influences our understanding of events and people in significant ways.

The constitutive nature of representation shapes the way I approach filmic representations of transgender people in this book. Repeatedly representing transgender people as buffoons or liars impacts not only an audience's expectations of how transgender characters should act in film but also their expectations of the actions and motivations of transgender people in real life. This manner of representation leads to transgender people being seen as worthy of ridicule or mistrust.

Representations also provide scripts to guide our symbolic interactions. People who have little contact with transgender people often learn from film and other media texts how to treat and interact with transgender people. Furthermore, film and media texts provide scripts that transgender people also, consciously or not, adopt and adapt. Because films like *Mrs. Doubtfire* depicted transgender identity as the result of external motivations, I spent many years wishing and hoping for something external to happen to me, like winning a contest or finding a magic lamp, that would allow me to be the transgender woman that I knew I was, anything other than embracing my identity and coming out to my family. It was only through recognizing the impact of representations in such films on my own understanding of transgender identity that I was able to fully express my identity as a transgender woman.

Beyond constituting our understanding and impressions of events and people, representation is also constraining.[5] Representation

orders events; it is impossible to perceive and understand everything, so representation provides the impression that all the random events in our lives are united by a coherent narrative.[6] No representation is ever completely accurate; something is always obscured to make the whole seem more intelligible. For example, a transgender woman choosing not to tell a potential romantic partner about her gender identity on a first date is often offered as evidence of the deceitfulness of transgender people. This representation ignores the possibility that the woman chose to wait before coming out to her date in order to protect herself; she may have feared the possibility of a verbal or physical attack, itself a constraining representation of her date.

As an example of the constraining nature of representation in film, Julia Serano and Kay Siebler argue that the representation of transgender people in film and other media is constrained by its focus on the desire of transgender women for greater femininity, such as Bree Osbourne's preference for wearing pink in *Transamerica* (2005).[7] Serano argues that, based on representations in the media, "most people believe that all trans women are on a quest to make ourselves as pretty, pink, and passive as possible."[8] Siebler adds that media represent transgender people as variously "unbalanced freaks" or people who surgically or hormonally modify their bodies to appear "'normal,' as happy, healthy and well-adjusted."[9] Siebler goes on to argue for moving beyond these two modes of representation to include more queer representations of people who are comfortable identifying outside of the cisnormative, binary gender system.[10] While I support the work of Serano and Siebler in critiquing the reinforcement of the binary sex/gender system through the representation of feminine transgender women, I hope through my own work to find a way of accomplishing this goal without alienating these women in the process.

Serano and Siebler's analyses serve as a good introduction to the scholarship on transgender representation in film and its connection to more general scholarly work on representation. Some scholars, like Serano and Siebler, focus on the constraining nature of transgender representations. Judith Butler argues that many transgender films deflect the homosexual possibilities in their narratives by "produc[ing] and contain[ing] the homosexual excess of any given drag performance."[11] What is constraining for Butler about the films she analyzes, primarily transgender comedies, is that they do not go far enough in embracing the queer potential of their narratives. Marjorie

Garber also finds transgender comedies constraining in their use of "progress narratives" in which individuals choose to cross-dress in order to avoid or escape economic or other external circumstances.[12] Instead of the characters' transgender identities developing internally, their transgender identities solely function as an "instrumental strategy" to address an external problem.[13] Instead of truly challenging dominant systems of gender and sexuality, the films revert back to the cis-heterosexual status quo and dispose of the characters' transgender identities when they are no longer needed.

John Phillips finds transgender films constraining in our understanding of transgender people's lived experiences through their reduction of transgender identity to a "necessary deception."[14] Whether it is cisgender characters who only take up transgender identities under extreme circumstances or characters who actively claim a transgender identity withholding that identity from others, the actions of the characters are presented as necessary to exist in a cisnormative society. Julia Serano argues that variations of this form of deception are at the root of her two main archetypes of transgender representation: the "pathetic transexual" and the "deceptive transsexual."[15] Pathetic transsexuals are unable to deceive others about their gender identity, even though they may want to, while deceptive transsexuals are not seen as successful in passing but rather as "'fake' women, and their 'secret' trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of 'truth.'"[16] In this configuration, transgender characters are either mocked for failing to live up to cisnormative standards of appearance or punished for their success at meeting those standards. Transgender representations "go no further than to hint at a possibility that is ultimately closed off in the revelation of the body beneath the clothes."[17] Any opportunity the films may have at subverting cisnormative standards is undermined through reference to an essentialized gender identity.

Other scholars find more promise in transgender representations as a constitutive site for challenging dominant binary systems of gender. For Chris Straayer, transgender representation in film "offers spectators a momentary, vicarious trespassing of society's accepted boundaries of gender and sexual behavior" while remaining confident "in the orderly demarcations reconstituted by the films' endings."[18] In her foundational work *Hollywood Androgyny*, Rebecca Bell-Metereau supports Straayer's analysis by arguing that transgender films "allow us to enter into forbidden worlds of the imagination."[19] Bell-Metereau

finds films like *Some Like It Hot* to be open to the new possibilities for gender that are presented in the texts.[20] Transgender films, from this perspective, are seen as open spaces in which the characters and the audience are free to experiment with new ways of being in terms of gender. Bell-Metereau reaffirms this perspective on transgender films in her recent work. While she does acknowledge that some films feature negative representations, she argues that the films ultimately "offer a sense of presence and inclusion over time" and also "offer inspiration, possible encouragement, and a sense of participation, visibility, and influence in the larger society."[21] Positive elements in transgender films, such as openness in terms of gender and the engagement of transgender people in the cultural conversation, help to create the positive future that LGBTQ+ people and their allies desire.

Sandra Meiri and Odeya Kohen-Raz locate this sense of openness in transgender films in Lacanian "feminine enjoyment," which "unlike desire, which can never be satisfied, and fantasy, which is doomed to remain in the imaginary, enjoyment . . . is a substance, not unlike Freud's notion of the libido, which achieves satisfaction in the body, functioning as a defense mechanism against desire."[22] Feminine enjoyment is found in transgender film through the characters "assuming responsibility" for their desire, either as a starting point for their journey or as a significant development on their journey.[23] As an example, Meiri and Kohen-Raz argue that Jerry in *Some Like It Hot* is able to find freedom in his transgender identity.[24] Like Bell-Metereau, they see the film, and other transgender films as well, as an open text that creates the possibility for freedom outside of the binary gender system once the characters are able to free themselves from their societally-imposed desires. The audience's continued viewership of transgender films also signals a tacit understanding of the freedom found within the texts.[25] Transgender films are awash in potentiality from this perspective.

While I sincerely hope that the positive potential found by these scholars in transgender films comes to fruition, I differ from them in the belief that this is all that is present within or can be read from transgender films. My concern is similar to that expressed by Joelle Ruby Ryan when she argues that, despite recent shifts in representation, "the *majority* of images of trans people repeatedly downplays the social, cultural and political implications of trans people's lives and focus instead on micro-level experiences and salacious personal

details."[26] The images and narratives found in transgender films paint a more restrictive view of the lives of transgender people than what is found in positive and hopeful scholarship on transgender films. This restrictive view is often dismissive, hostile, and violent toward transgender people for failing to conform to the expectations of a cisnormative society. It is entirely possible to have multiple readings of the same film. It is entirely possible for you to read a film as opening up space for challenging gender norms while I see it as rejecting the possibility of acknowledging a transgender identity. It is entirely possible for you to read a film as presenting a queer character lashing out at the restrictive norms of society while I see it as perpetuating the framing of transgender people as violent and unstable. My argument in *Distancing Representations in Transgender Film* is that the trend up until this point in the texts of popular transgender films exhibits a more negative or restricted view of transgender people because the films are primarily created by cisgender authors for a cisgender audience. The readings of the films as offering positive potentials for challenging the binary system of gender are there, but as I show in my analysis, this is not the primary message being sent through the texts of the films. The potential is there for change in the future, but the trend so far has been supporting the cisnormative status quo.

My perspective on transgender representation in film is shaped by my experiences as a White, able-bodied, bisexual, transgender woman from a middle-class background. My understanding of gender and difference is shaped by the concept of positionality.[27] Positionality is an approach to identity that focuses on the connections between people created through gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and other identities and is similar to standpoint in its focus on connections between marginalized people in a society. Having been aware of my identity as a transgender person from a young age, I have never truly experienced the world in a cisgender way. As I struggled to understand who I was as a transgender person and even struggled to fully express my transgender identity, I often turned to popular film and media for support and escape. My identity as a transgender woman gives me unique insight into the topic of transgender representations in film, but it may also lead me to critique the characters or situations in the films in ways that differ from the analysis made by a cisgender scholar. Other aspects of my position may impact my awareness of race, class, and culture-based issues affecting the positions of the characters. As I

try to use the insights available to me as a transgender woman, I also seek to be aware of the possible limitations this position introduces.

My analysis of transgender representations in film is grounded in my identity as a transgender woman. My focus on distance comes from my own feelings of distance from the characters. As transgender characters, I should feel a connection to them, but I often do not. My work on this book has helped me understand the ways the films are constructed to prevent that connection. Having experienced various forms of marginalization in my own life has also made me sensitive to the ways the characters are marginalized from others in the films. Cisnormativity, as with most dominant ideologies, works to build itself up by putting others down. Pushing for a place for transgender people in a cisnormative society is not necessarily the solution; finding ways to dismantle cisnormative privilege would be a solution that would benefit everyone, not just transgender people, but my experiences of marginalization have taught me that marginalization is more about the dominant group trying to stay in control than any actions on the part of the marginalized. Finally, my lived experience as a transgender woman makes me more critical of the ways transgender representations focus on transgender identity as nothing more than outward appearance and behavior. The experience of being transgender should be given the attention it deserves, rather than being glossed over in a quick cut between scenes, but there is more to being transgender than the amount of time it takes me to get dressed in the morning. My transgender identity influences all aspects of my analysis, but my analysis should not be dismissed because of my transgender identity. My experiences as a transgender woman give me unique insights into transgender representations, but these insights are grounded in the content of the films. My analysis is situated in a particular social and historical context that has shaped my position as a transgender woman.

Positionality is also important in examining characters in popular film because it enables a consideration of their gender identities as positions taken during the events portrayed in the films rather than presuming the presence of clues to their essential gender identities. Positionality moves beyond searching for a character's "true" or "real" identity and looks instead at the physical, social, and economic conditions that make up their position. A positional approach to gender accepts all the elements that make up a person's identity at face value without searching for an essential element that underlies and explains

everything. Many of the characters under examination would not identify as transgender, but that does not mean being transgender does not make up part of their position at certain points in the narratives in which they are featured. I adopt the umbrella definition of *transgender* in this project, defined by Susan Stryker as "movement away from an initially assigned gender position,"[28] which includes everything from temporary cross-dressing to seeking permanent bodily change through hormone treatment and surgery. This umbrella definition is broad enough to encompass both self-identified transgender characters, such as Bree from *Transamerica* or Dil from *The Crying Game* (1992), to characters who are only engaging in transgender behavior to escape a temporary situation, such as Joe and Jerry from *Some Like it Hot* or Malcolm from *Big Momma's House* (2000). Rather than imposing a transgender identity on the characters, I make use of a broad definition of transgender identity to allow for the analysis of characters that communicate important ideas of what it means to be transgender to both cisgender and transgender audiences even in cases where the characters never personally identify as transgender.

My perspective on transgender representation in film is also shaped by my understanding of society as cisnormative. I define cisnormativity as "the systemic expectation that there are only two mutually exclusive genders and the gender of all members of a society will match the sex assigned to them at birth, with attendant benefits given to those who adhere and the labeling of those who do not, transgender and queer individuals, as deviant."[29] Cisnormativity is the current system through which gender is understood in American society. Clear expectations are created that people should adhere to a strict gender binary, and those who do not are often punished, both individually and systemically, for their failure to adhere to the standards. I use the term *cisnormative* in this book to refer to the system of expectations around gender and to certain patterns in the narrative and visual representation of transgender people in film and other media that follow this system. Cisgender people usually support these standards, whether consciously or unconsciously, but a person's identity or gender performance cannot fully embrace cisnormativity as a system, so I will not be referring to any people as cisnormative.

Cisnormativity as a concept is theoretically grounded in the concept of heteronormativity. *Heteronormativity* refers to the normalizing of heterosexuality as the assumed, "default" status of people.[30] While

heteronormativity and cisnormativity as systems have negative effects for everyone because they limit how we perform, interact with, and express our identities, transgender activist Kate Bornstein argues that it is still transgender people who receive the fullest brunt of negative attention.[31] My position as a transgender woman living in a cisnormative society shapes my approach to transgender representation in film. From my position, I see transgender films less as hopeful spaces from which to challenge the binary system of gender and more as constraining texts that present transgender people as undermining cisnormativity. The constraining representations found in transgender film is the result of how the identification is created between the authors and the audience.

Identification, Affect, and the Audience

My approach to the audience in *Distancing Representations in Transgender Film* is at the intersections of the rhetorical concepts of identification and the first and second personae and the cultural studies approach of encoding/decoding. Filmic representations of transgender people are constructed with a primarily cisgender audience in mind. This is the main reason the cisgender identities of the characters are privileged throughout the films. Film, in general, seeks to reflect the interests and concerns of the audience, so if the audience is viewed as primarily cisgender, transgender representations are constructed to appeal to this dominant audience. Because those involved in the creation of popular films assume that a cisgender audience will find transgender characters to be shocking or disgusting, the narrative conventions and visual codes of the films are constructed in such a way that the transgender characters match these expectations. Trying to accurately represent the lived experiences of transgender people for a transgender audience is, at best, a secondary concern.

In the context of an ideology of cisnormativity, cisgender moviegoers are assumed to be unable to connect to or identify with transgender characters, thus leading to the distancing of the characters from the audience. The narrative and visual construction of film in general works to move the audience to connect with the characters on screen. The constant repetition of this feeling of identification is one reason millions of moviegoers continue to flock to theaters each

week. Because the assumption is that members of a cisnormative society are incapable of identifying with transgender characters, the narrative conventions and visual codes in transgender films work to keep the characters at a distance from the audience. The audience watches the events in these films from a perspective far removed from the experiences of the characters on screen; they may laugh at the characters, scream in fear of them, pull away in disgust, or even feel sorry for them, but the message encoded into transgender films is that audience members can never see themselves as the characters.

The overarching assumption is that every member of the audience will react this way, viewing transgender characters as deviant and failing to identify with them. While this assumption may not be true (many audience members may identify with the transgender characters and may get angry about how these characters are represented), the basic assumption about how a cisgender audience perceives transgender characters shapes the entire narrative and visual structures of transgender films. A deeper understanding of the audience for transgender representations is important, but it is equally important to remember the ways each of our decodings are based on our own interpretations from identity positions that are embodied, specific, and historically situated. No matter the assumptions about who makes up an audience, each member brings their own experiences to their viewing of a film. Rather than making assumptions about the audience, we would do better to remember the variety of decodings that are possible. A rhetorical approach to identification helps us to understand how a text is constructed to appeal to an audience made up of certain identities.

Identification is important in analyzing film because it helps to explain the audience's experience of and connection to the film as a text. In contrast to approaches to identification based on the audience's subjective experience of viewing a film or on the characters,[32] I take a rhetorical approach to identification informed by the work of Kenneth Burke. For Burke, identification precedes persuasion and occurs across differences.[33] Two subjects, one of whom is attempting to persuade the other, search for real or perceived similarities through which to build persuasive arguments. In this process, which Burke labels *consubstantiation*, differences persist while similarities are enhanced.[34] Consubstantiation can be read through the text in terms of the first and second personae. According to Edwin Black, the first

persona is the implied author, and the second persona is the implied auditor or audience.[35] The first and second personae do not encompass everything about the author or the audience but instead reflect the image of themselves the author wants to present and the ideal audience they envision for the text. The images of the author and audience found in the text are intended to increase connection and the likelihood of persuasion.

In a rhetorical approach, identification is not found with the characters or the camera but in the relationship between the implied author and audience. Here *author* refers to all those who have a hand in the creation of a film (the director, cinematographer, editor, screenwriter, actors, etc.), and *audience* refers to those members (not as individual people but as a group) of the undifferentiated mass audience to whom the author is trying to appeal.[36] The appeal is made across certain similarities between the author and the audience that serves as the point of identification. A film is then constructed narratively and visually in line with the identification between author and audience, within certain constraints like genre.

For dominant identities like being cisgender, the identification that exists between the author and the audience is often not explicitly stated. Most mainstream Hollywood films are produced to appeal to as broad a group as possible. The ideal audience would be White, male, straight, cisgender, middle to upper class, and so on. The widest group of people can find some category with which they identify in this ideal audience, so declaring mainstream films to be for this audience would be redundant. The audience for a film is usually only explicitly stated for films aimed at a minority or marginalized group, such as films labeled Black films, women's films, gay films, and so on. Dominant group members can, therefore, assume that all movies are meant for them unless a marginalized audience is identified. Even if a film centers on a member of a marginalized group, it is still generally constructed to appeal to the largest audience possible since the point of identification for mainstream films is that dominant ideal audience. As a result of trying to appeal to a broad audience, messages about the marginalized group that are consistent with maintaining the dominant hierarchies and power structures in society are built into the film through its narrative and visual construction. In terms of gender identity and expression, the point of identification for transgender films is a cisgender, not transgender, identity. Dominant cultural ideas about

transgender people are still mistaken or purposefully negative, and transgender films reflect this dominant perspective back to audience members, who are most likely of the dominant group themselves.

The point of identification between the cisgender authors and audience often leads cisgender audience members to be distanced from the transgender characters. While a space for difference may exist in the contemporary media environment, audience members may still find representations of difference bothersome, particularly those of marginalized groups with whom the audience members have little or no direct personal contact. Transgender representations produce distancing effects between the transgender characters and the audience because of this lack of ability to identify with the characters. Identification becomes tenuous when the representation is so far removed from its referent, as literary theorist Edward Said argues in his landmark analysis of Western perceptions of the Orient. "The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made super-erogatory any such *real thing* as 'the Orient.'"[37] Since representations themselves have no necessary connection to their subject, it is not surprising that audience members may not feel a connection with the representations. Transgender films support the distancing of the characters from the audience, and this distancing effect is rooted in a lack of legitimacy ascribed to the transgender identities of the characters. The narrative conventions and visual codes of the films do not help audience members look past the perceived differences between themselves and the transgender characters, and the distance that results from the cisgender audience's identification with the films' authors risks leading to a lack of engagement or interest with the film. Emotion provides a means of addressing this lack of engagement.

According to Aristotle, emotions shape how the audience responds to persuasion.[38] Affect theory provides a useful means of understanding how emotions and feelings shape the audience's responses to a film. Affect is the primary motivator of human beings, shaping even our processing of basic drives like hunger and sexual desire.[39] Affect consists of unconscious, physical reactions to stimuli, such as jumping at a loud noise or gagging when smelling milk that has gone bad. The affect system provides a great degree of freedom in shaping our

identities since a wide variety of stimuli can produce different affects that persist for varying amounts of time for different people.[40] Films are constructed to evoke a specific affective response, and the experience of watching a film, from the construction of the theater itself to the passive engagement encouraged by the film, enhances the feelings experienced by audience members.[41] Individual audience members, though, may respond differently to the narrative and visuals found in a film that were intended to prompt a specific affective response. I am interested in this book in analyzing how transgender films are narratively and visually constructed to prompt affective and emotional responses that support a cisnormative ideology, not in determining if every audience member responded to the films in the ways intended by the author.

Affect shapes the audience's initial response to what is seen on screen. When audience members jump in fright after a monster pops out from behind a door to menace a stranded sorority girl or when they laugh at a nerdy hero's bumbling pratfalls as he tries to match his debonair rival in wooing the attractive woman who moved in next door, affect is at work, but there is more to affect than just the basic reactions to such events. Affect also shapes how people see themselves and are seen by others through their affective responses, thus shaping who we are and how we understand our identities by anticipating and expecting certain responses to specific events in particular contexts. We understand ourselves better through seeing what makes us laugh, cry, and scream, and others come to understand us more deeply based on our reactions to different stimuli. How we are prompted to feel about those we see on screen also helps the audience to move beyond representation's call to see and recognize others toward a deeper knowing of their lived experience.[42] How affect shapes the self is not unique to us as people but reflects existing cultural ideologies.

According to feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, emotions function as a "form of cultural politics or world making."[43] Through contact with others, the "surfaces and boundaries" of our bodies take shape.[44] We come to understand who we are and who others are through the impressions left behind through our contact with them, so the emotions we experience and expect are shaped by dominant ideologies that regulate this contact. Even in projects intended to try to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ people from a variety of cultural contexts, for example, the feelings of White people are privileged

over the experiences of people of color as reflective of the systemic Whiteness of the culture in the United States.[45] If affect is a person's immediate, bodily response to stimuli that is interpreted through cultural ideologies, our affective responses are transformed into emotion through rhetoric. As with our affective responses, our emotions are best understood in relation to others. Our affective responses form the foundation and are only understood as emotions when we communicate to and with others about our responses to different stimuli.[46] Rhetoric provides a means for analyzing these roles as reflective of both cultural ideologies and relationships among people and groups. I differentiate in this book between affective responses (the physical, immediate responses an audience member has to a stimulus seen in the film) and emotional responses (the cultural meaning applied to those physical responses once they are consciously processed) in order to reflect these differences.

A useful method of analyzing the ideological dimension of affect and emotion can be found in Brigitte Bargetz's concept of a "political grammar of feelings" in which she distinguishes between "*feeling politics*" and "a politics *of* feelings."[47] By feeling politics, Bargetz is interested in the historical, hierarchical power relations that are reflected in our affective responses.[48] The panic a young woman feels when a man, whether her father, a romantic partner, or a stranger, raises his voice in anger and a Black man's anger as a result of constant surveillance by others while in public can be understood as feeling politics, since both reflect long histories and cultural hierarchies that shape what feelings they are supposed to express and what feelings they should expect from others. Both people must contend with the weight of the expected feelings as they move through their everyday lives. A politics of feelings, on the other hand, emphasizes "that power and politics work through feelings" by focusing on how feelings "are produced within specific normative frames."[49] When taking a politics of feelings approach to the previous examples, the young woman's panic arises because society has given more attention to teaching young women how to protect themselves from acts of aggression and violence instead of teaching young men to not be violent, and the Black man's anger is the result of centuries of systemic racism that treats Black lives as less valuable and more suspicious than White lives. In terms of an analysis of affect and emotion in film, feeling politics enables, for example, an analysis of how transgender people can feel angry or

depressed at constantly being presented in film and other media as people to be laughed at or scared of while a politics of feelings enables an analysis of how transgender people are constructed as objects of ridicule, fear, disgust, and sympathy in the film texts in line with the dominant views of a cisnormative society.

In *Distancing Representations in Transgender Film*, I use a politics of feelings to analyze how an ideology of cisnormativity shapes the narrative and visual constructions of transgender films and the affective and emotional responses by the audience to transgender films. Transgender films are made by a cisgender author for a cisgender audience.[50] Being transgender is not the point of identification in these films; being cisgender is the point of identification. Even though transgender characters feature prominently in these films, they are not who the audience identifies with. Instead, identification for the audience lies with a cisnormative understanding of gender identity shared with the implied cisgender author. The affective and emotional responses by the audience to transgender films is then shaped by the decisions made by the cisgender author in constructing the narrative conventions and visual codes of the films, further reinforcing a cisnormative ideology.

Gender studies scholar Elspeth Probyn, in her study of shame, reminds scholars that "different affects make us feel, write, think, and act in different ways."[51] It is not enough to refer to "general Affect"[52]; instead, scholars must be specific about the effects specific affects and emotions have on people. In this book, I aim to take Probyn's admonishment seriously by analyzing how different affective and emotional responses are generated by different narrative and visual constructions and how these different affects and emotions reflect differing components of cisnormativity. The specific affects and emotions I analyze in transgender films are ridicule, fear, disgust, and sympathy. Rather than analyzing a specific text to represent each affect and emotion, I instead analyze narrative conventions and visual codes across a variety of texts.

My argument is that because popular transgender films are made for a cisgender audience by cisgender authors, the films support a cisnormative ideology that views transgender and gender nonconforming people as existing outside the norms of a binary gender system. Being cisgender serves as the point of identification between the audience and authors, so the transgender characters are distanced from the audience

because they do not fit within this point of identification. The specific affective and emotional responses of ridicule, fear, disgust, and sympathy are prompted by the narratives and visuals in the films as a means of keeping the audience engaged even though they do not identify with the transgender characters. These affective and emotional responses are also in line with a cisnormative ideology as they encourage negative feelings toward the transgender characters specifically and transgender people in general.

Narrative Conventions and Visual Codes

To analyze the narrative conventions and visual codes of the films under study, I use an approach to textual analysis guided by the work of Alan McKee. McKee's poststructuralist approach to textual analysis "seeks to understand the ways in which these forms of representation take place, the assumptions behind them and the kinds of sense-making about the world that they reveal."[53] Unlike the form of textual analysis found often in rhetoric and film scholarship, I analyze groups of texts in this book as guided by what literary historian Franco Moretti calls "distant reading," which he argues constitutes "*a specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection."[54] While I do not engage in the analysis of hundreds, if not thousands, of texts as Moretti does, I agree with his argument that taking a wider view of a group of texts can reveal information about them that is not available through the detailed analysis of individual works. The detailed reading of individual texts is still a highly valuable form of analysis, but it is not the goal of the current project.

In *Distancing Representations in Transgender Film*, I analyze narrative conventions and visual codes as constructed meanings that an audience decodes from a film text. Meaning can be understood from a cultural studies perspective as encoded into a text to be decoded by audience members. Stuart Hall defines encoding as "selecting the codes which assign meaning to events" while decoding assigns meaning to the message that may or may not agree with the intended meaning that was encoded into the message.[55] Meaning in film can also be understood as the "*construction* of meaning out of textual cues."[56] For Hall, meaning is created by audience members from the information

available in the film text but may differ greatly from the meaning encoded into the text by the director or performers. The meaning decoded by the audience from the information available to them is not inferior to the "preferred reading" encoded into a text.[57] My approach in this book seeks to recognize strong textual cues in a film that lead the audience toward a particular reading while still acknowledging that it is the audience's prerogative to decode meaning from the text either in line with this reading or in opposition to it. This approach allows for the focus of analysis to be on the meanings found within the text while still being aware that individual audience members have the freedom to read the text as they choose. Narrative conventions and visual codes are the strong textual cues that I analyze in this book.

Narrative conventions consist of the unfolding of story elements relative to similar film texts, including everything from significant plot events to the dialogue and interactions between characters. Examples of narrative conventions in transgender films include a character deciding to cross-dress in order to win a school contest, a character bloodily getting revenge on her earlier attackers, or a character taking a classmate's place in a school play in order to kiss the boy she likes. Visual codes are divided among three different gazes (discussed in more detail below) and consist primarily of mise-en-scène. I am concerned with what the audience sees on screen, how the characters are presented including costuming, facial expressions, and body movements. References to camera movements (such as a slow tilt up a character's body from feet to head), transitions (such as cuts between scenes), and camera positioning (such as an overhead shot of a couple in bed together) are used when necessary to understand how the characters are visually presented to the audience, but the focus of my analysis of visual codes is on the information presented on screen rather than on the ways the camera was manipulated to capture that information. Narrative is discussed when necessary to place the visual information in context. Recognizing the way narrative conventions and visual codes work together furthers our understanding of how media texts construct representations of marginalized groups. When conducting a textual analysis, the texts should always be considered within the social and cultural context in which they are produced and consumed.

The broad range of research about minority stereotypes, which includes transgender representations, provides a means of understanding the narrative construction of marginalized groups. Communication