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Representation and Reality

Along with advances in surgical interventions, transsexuals have largely taken the place of cross-dressers in film dramas and documentaries. This is not the case with the comedies we have considered. As befitting its ludic aims, the comic genre inclines more to the portrayal of cross-dressing as a temporary disguise rather than as symptom of a more permanent and profound gender identity crisis. However, none of these is recent, the latest, *Mrs Doubtfire*, having appeared in the early 1990s. There have been no mainstream film comedies featuring cross-dressers since *Mrs Doubtfire*. In contrast, filmic, DVD and Internet portrayals of transsexuals who have undergone or would like to undergo a degree of surgical reassignment have increased, a fact that both reflects the higher profile of transsexuals in the media generally, and is evidence of a continuing fascination and anxiety which are focused more and more on the ever greater scientific possibilities and permutations of physical transformation. Other representations occupy the entirely negative vehicle of the thriller, or else find expression in the uneasy mix of comedy and drama, manifestation of the ambivalent reactions to transgender that we have identified throughout history.\(^1\)

Overall, we have seen how the dominant filmic images of transgender from the 1950s to the end of the 1990s have in the end tended to reinforce stereotypical thinking on the subject. The intelligently written comedies of this period have been shown to contain a residual normativity that neutralised their more progressive features. The mixed-genre productions exhibit a greater ambivalence: ostensibly aiming to educate their audience into adopting more tolerant attitudes to transgender, these films have nevertheless been shown to reinforce
the same stereotypes at unconscious levels, while the thriller genre has found an easy scapegoat in the ostensible strangeness of the transgenders.

On the other hand, despite the problems of objectification and of a phallicism inherent in the images of pre-op male-to-female transsexuals, Internet shemale pornography has paradoxically been shown to help liberate conventional notions of sexuality and gender, trapped within the artificial boundaries constructed by the binary system. It is ironic, although perhaps not entirely surprising, that pornography should prove more progressive than mainstream cinema, although the Internet is admittedly a very recent phenomenon, existing only since the early 1990s, while the majority of the films we have considered here were made in earlier, less enlightened times. Assuming that Internet pornography is a first primitive step in the positive direction of a virtual reality, we shall examine two related perspectives in this brief concluding chapter: the impact of the representation of transgender on concepts of gender and sexuality in the ‘real’, and what this implies for the future of desire. In other words, how does erotic fascination with transgender impact on our definitions and perceptions of sexual positioning and sexual desire?

**Baudrillard and the dissolution of the real**

So-called ‘reality’ TV shows take ‘real’ people as their subject in a variety of different situations, though the activities and situations they engage in are far from real. On UK television, soap-operas like *Coronation Street* and *Eastenders* which are set in working-class communities pride themselves on their gritty realism, and yet the tightly-knit communities they depict ceased to exist long ago. Significant sections of their viewers, on the other hand, believe in their reality to the point of sending wreaths to the studios when characters die, and to an even greater extent, the behaviours they represent have a demonstrable influence on the behaviour of viewers. Moreover, social pedagogy has increasingly dictated storylines in recent years. The sympathetic depiction of gays and, in the case of *Coronation Street*, of a transsexual character, best exemplify this level of interaction between television fiction and the reality it both reflects and impacts upon (see Chapter 1). As artists and poets have always known, representation influences how we see reality. In a sea of images, representation has in so many respects