In the film *Romeos* (2011), director Sabine Bernardi returns to a topic that she originally explored in her 2005 documentary short film *transfamily*, which featured two transmen discussing their pre- and post-transition biographies and daily lives.¹ In the more recent film, which made its debut before enthusiastically welcoming audiences at the 2011 Berlinale (Schoor),² we meet protagonist Lukas (played by Rick Okon), a 20ish transitioning female-to-male (FTM) transsexual (born Miriam) who is starting his new life on his own in Cologne. Unfortunately, Lukas has been assigned not to a dorm for men completing their *soziales Jahr*, which would apply to his situation, but rather to one for young female nurses, where, as a trans man, he occupies a unique and unsatisfactory position. Through his best friend, Ine (Liv Lisa Fries), Lukas makes a number of new acquaintances, among them Fabio (Maximilian Befort), an Italian-German macho gay man, to whom Lukas is immediately attracted. Other plot elements include Lukas’s struggle, albeit briefly portrayed, against the bureaucracy controlling his dorm room assignment (which is shown as powerful but frustratingly clueless), the difficulties Lukas faces to hide and/or construct his bodily truth, Ine’s frustration with what she perceives as Lukas’s self-centered fixation on his transition and ability to pass, Lukas’s eventual move to the men’s dorm room next door, his interrupted and quarrelsome sexual encounter with Ine’s gay friend Sven, and the on-again/off-again flirtatious and romantic interactions between Lukas and Fabio, who maintains a semi-closeted life. This brief list of major plot points already makes clear some of the generic and customary devices that might be represented in romantic comedies or coming-of-age films. *Romeos* partly depends on the viewer’s feelings about a pairing of Lukas with Fabio, one of the two apparent goals toward which the film’s plot progresses. The other is Lukas’s lasting and successful transition – that is, reaching what we will see is a Foucauldian self-technological goal of happiness – or perhaps the making permanent of his fleeting bodily comfort. I will discuss the corporeal discomfort below. In an examination of the body in *Romeos* and its relation to gender and sexuality, and the particular kinds of masculine and/or feminine presentations we see in the film, I will mention
two types of techniques, some of which overlap in various scenes: first, the film’s depiction of Lukas’s own body; second, the comparison or contrast offered by other figures. The figure of Lukas, both internally in the diegesis and externally in the film production, is a work in progress – a figure who illustrates and literally embodies the need to confess one’s status, especially in the case of one’s presentation of sex or gender. My goal is to elucidate some of the filmic techniques that bring about part of the protagonist’s transition and, simultaneously, participate in a discourse of truth and confession that appears in discussions of mutable gender-sexuality. Moreover, my discussion here aims to add to scholarly examinations that expand understandings of masculinity, which is not exclusively confined to «men» or «male-born people» (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 13). Importantly, however, the film offers stark contrasts in its depictions of gender, particularly versions of masculinity.

I feel compelled to treat the subject somewhat gingerly, not wanting to resort to the kind of supreme arrogance that Foucault called «impos[ing] one’s law on others» («For an Ethics of Discomfort» 137). I am aware of the topic’s sensitivity and appreciate, for example, Dean Spade’s criticism of non-trans scholars writing about trans topics («Mutilating Gender» 316). While this essay will, out of necessity, discuss the motivations that trans-identified individuals have for initiating their transition, it will examine primarily the second-hand or discursive understandings of these processes and then, of course, how these perceptions may emerge in cinematic portrayals. My analysis will exclude or only touch upon a range of topics related to the subject of transsexuality and transgender, including but not limited to the medico-psychological diagnosis of related conditions, the treatment of said medically-diagnosed conditions, legal standing and rights, the prevalence of certain kinds of gender non-conformity, the historical presentation of the phenomenon, a bio-political imperative in the assignment of sex/gender, intersex, and many others. Many of these discursive elements, however, including many trans-identified individuals’ own awareness of their subjectivity and its relationship to gender-sexuality, revolve around ideas of truth and confession. Michel Foucault’s theories can illustrate the by-now – in an age of «outing» and closets – familiar link between confession and gender and sexuality. For Foucault, we live in a world that comprises a steady release of information, especially previously closely-kept knowledge: «[W]e belong to a society which has ordered sex’s difficult knowledge, not according to the transmission of secrets, but around the slow surfacing of confidential statements» (The History of Sexuality 62–63). He posits that confession, having slowly disconnected itself from solely pastoral objectives, calcified follow-
ing the involvement of «medicine, psychiatry, and pedagogy» (The History of Sexuality 63). One had to announce pleasures or behaviors, often renounce them, and then perform acts of penance. Sex (i.e., behaviors and, I would argue, understandings of gender) was increasingly a way of speaking the truth about oneself. «We,» via the post-nineteenth-century explosion of sexual sciences and discourses, «demand that sex speak the truth […] and […] that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness» (The History of Sexuality 69, emphasis added). This method of confession, or speaking our truth, whether aloud or internally to ourselves, seems so natural now, Foucault argues, that «we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth […] demands» only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down» (The History of Sexuality 60, emphasis added). Indeed, this is the thrust behind the pervasive drive (and pressure) to «come out of the closet» in all aspects of our lives (e.g., as gay, as bi, as trans, as conservative, as vegan, as fat, as disabled, etc.), as this metaphor has become wildly pervasive.

To make this a little less abstract, we can examine the process involved in the metamorphosis of transgender into transsexuality. More specifically, how can one bring about an external intervention in one’s presentation of sex/gender? How is it possible for one to gain access to the medical or surgical procedures that many transgender individuals seek? In short: through confession. With recourse to what Foucault called «technologies of the self,» individuals must make fundamental, personal disclosures with the goal of convincing empowered authorities of the viability of one’s proposed transformation. The confessional act and its subsequent «penance» effect a kind of destruction or removal of the (one) self that is in the position to make the disclosure, moving on to or releasing another subjective identity. The medical mode of this kind of showing of the self (what Foucault called exomologēsis) required «show[ing] one’s wounds in order to be cured» («Technologies of the Self 42–43). We will see below that Romeos offers the viewer literal examples of this – indeed, ones that point to stages in Lukas’s transitioning life. In other words, the film does not only talk around Lukas’s bodily reality and the alterations being made; it shows Lukas’s transitioning sex characteristics as well as other individuals’ YouTube-style confessinals that reveal medical steps in the process.

Classification becomes a central concern in this discussion, for Lukas and the film as well, as the biological, social, cultural, and individually personal meanings of terms like «sex,» «gender,» and «sexuality» interact in a
sometimes bewildering constellation of divergent and simultaneously inter-dependent definitions. This complexity is especially relevant in the area of transgender and transsexual phenomena, a realm in which individual identification and self-classification are usually of primary importance, leading to a vast array of possible matrices of sexes, genders, affections, and sexual behaviors.

At issue in much of the scholarship and dialogue on these issues is the nature, in multiple senses of the word, of the rubrics that often seem so fundamental to human existence. In her introduction to the influential Transgender Studies Reader, gender theorist Susan Stryker uses three terms that are the most salient. First and foremost is «sex,» which variously refers to «chromosomal sex, anatomical sex, reproductive sex, morphological sex» or the basic «materiality» of the body (9). In other words, «sex» is the supposed biological and physical reality of the body. Second among these rubrics is «gender,» the assembled characteristics that are thought or presumed to reflect that (same) materiality of the body in a social sense. Made more problematic and nuanced (and mutable) in the wake of Second and Third Wave feminist thought, «gender» supposedly communicates – again, to varying individual degrees – the underlying reality of one’s sex. Third among these rubrics is the less frequently used «gender identity,» the subjective and individual identification with some permutation of «gender» and/or «sex.» A normative understanding of the way in which these three would interact is, for example, «a (biological) male is a (social) man who (subjectively) identifies himself as such; a woman is similarly, and circularly, a female who considers herself to be one» (Stryker 9). Thus, Stryker explains, «[t]he relationship[s] between bodily sex, gender role, and subjective gender identity are imagined to be strictly, mechanically, mimetic – a real thing and its reflections» [sic] (9). A fourth rubric (interestingly not mentioned in Stryker’s introduction to transgender studies) could be «sexual identity» or «sexual orientation.»

This last classification concerns itself with how, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s words, «the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another» (Epistemology 8). Even if one conceded a strong or uncontested basis for «sex» (which can no longer be taken for granted), the remaining categories in this gender-sexual matrix make for a large number of possible permutations. In short, given the shifting possibilities of these identificatory categories, another way to observe all of this might be Foucault’s remark that «[i]dentities are defined by trajectories» («For an Ethics of Discomfort» 141).

We enter Bernardi’s film and the protagonist Lukas’s life somewhere around the middle of the character’s identity trajectory in this cinematic
world. We arrive in one of Lukas’s «confessions,» but we proceed to learn where he is on the transitioning continuum. Bernardi begins *Romeos* with a kind of coming out, one that will set the stage for later disclosures and elements in the plot. Evoking real-life shows like MTV’s *True Life*, for instance, the film opens with a close-up shot of Lukas. He is addressing the camera directly, part of a ritual and mode of communication for him that connects him to the wider online community of transitioning individuals. After a few on-screen titles, the film’s first image shows Lukas engaging in one kind of confession that promises access to the personal truth of both himself and others at various points throughout the film. A smaller box within the space of the screen, surrounded by black, encloses Lukas in what we can infer after the first few minutes of the film is his bedroom at his family’s house. Sitting in boxer shorts and two layers of shirts, his face glistening, Lukas directly addresses the camera and holds up a syringe: «This is my T, my testosterone. I’m on 250 milligram [sic] right now. Guys, today, it’s my twenty-fifth shot. Mein Fünfundzwanzigster! That’s why I wanted to share it with you.» He then describes the injection process as he administers the shot. In those first sentences of Lukas’s monologic video, we learn about his status via his dosing of testosterone – although at this moment it is not clear why he is administering this hormone. Because he is addressing a «you,» we do know, however, that he is sharing this experience with someone else, the «guys» of his address; that is, this is not a diary for his own personal recording of his experience, rather part of a conversation with other members of the online community of transitioning FTMs, some of whose videos are excerpted later. The narrative, then, starts after Lukas’s transition has begun, but it is far from his complete and final goal (which would include removal of his breasts and, we can infer, genital surgery).

Following this scene, we see an animated sequence of credits in which the transitory or incomplete quality of Lukas’s current status is disembodied. That is, unlike the subsequent images of other actors with their names, Rick Okon’s name accompanies an image of the actor’s face torn in half. This one bookend of the film eventually pairs with the film’s final images, those that offer a contrast: home-movie-like footage captured by an unknown videographer showing a happy Lukas after apparently having completed his sexual transition, rushing off toward a beach. Still boxed inside the screen’s frame, this latter sequence is visible in a larger widescreen letterbox, however. We partake in Lukas’s ecstasy, as he removes his shirt, showing his breastless chest. His transition is complete, and he has reached the goal of happiness or «purity,» buttressed by his newfound relationship with Fabio – regardless of whether this consists of only the one sexual pairing that occurs near the end
of the film or continues, perhaps making Fabio the unseen cameraperson in the film’s final moments.

Relating to ideas of confession, transgender and transsexual identity have had to operate within a regime of truth, in which individuals must make expected or prescribed declarations if surgical intervention is desired. Indeed, much medico-psychological discourse following high-profile sex reassignments in the 1950s and ’60s has focused on whether an individual is in the “right” or “wrong” body (Halberstam, Female Masculinity 143). Although the American Psychiatric Association published a new Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 2013, the 1994 version, the now obsolete DSM-IV, includes the diagnosis of “Gender Identity Disorder” (GID). The diagnosis of GID has been required in addition to therapy, counselling, and consultations, in order for individuals to access care and procedures related to transgender. With the new DSM-5, the GID diagnosis will transition to “Gender Dysphoria,” which will be based on an individual’s experienced “distress” and its effects “in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning” (Fraser et al. 83). Thus, the previous classification or diagnosis has now been replaced. In the German context, treatment has been partly defined by the Transsexuellengesetz (1980, revised 2011), which governs the legal ramifications for changing sex. The treatment guidelines (Becker et al.), established by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sexualforschung, were published in 1997, and are in revision with a scheduled publication date of December 2015. The current guidelines, though, as in the American case, call for therapy and medical consultation and raise questions about an individual’s agency in the process. In both of these cases, the German and the (North) American, an individual must declare a particular kind of truth in order to reach the desired result, constituting a complicated relationship between patient and psychiatrist or psychologist, a relationship on which many scholars have remarked.

It is helpful to specify which definitions we are using here to examine this topic. Largely because of their relationship to questions of identity and self-expression, the categories or labels that arise in the context of this essay – i.e., “transsexual,” “transgender,” “transvestism,” and “drag” – often have shifting meanings that vary according to the speakers and audience. In this form, “transsexual” usually refers to “those who have undergone some form of gender-related surgery”; “transvestite” is “an older term for a person who cross-dresses”¹⁰; following calls for social and political organization, “transgender” has been used as an “umbrella term that may be used to describe people whose gender expression does not conform to cultural norms and/or whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth”
(Erickson-Schroth 620). «Drag» turns out to be much more complicated; because it is not crucial for my reading of Bernardi’s film, I will only mention it briefly here. Drag practice involves temporary «role playing,» usually via costume in order to impersonate another or «the other» gender, often as part of a public performance (Erickson-Schroth 613).11

Conceptions of gender, transgender, and transsexuality that concede the multiplicity of genders and their capacity to shift allow us to draw connections between theorizations of masculinity and those of transgender. Judith Kegan Gardiner, for example, has drawn connections between current discussions of masculinity (like the analyses offered by influential scholar Michael Kimmel) and earlier (outmoded) psychoanalytic beliefs about the psychological foundations of familial behavior, for example, that persist (113). Newer (including queer) theories of masculinity, and gender more broadly, reject the pathologizing model that nonetheless continues to define sex-gender change because of its dependence ipso facto on empowered medical practitioners. Debates and discussions across disciplinary boundaries – expanding among cultural, psychoanalytic or psychological, medical, and sociological theories – frequently continue to revolve around the issue of «nature versus nurture,» that is, whether gender identity and/or sexual orientation are innate. The conclusions drawn remain contradictory, which supports the focus on transience seen in many portrayals. Lukas remains an exemplar of this transition and «work in progress» as he sees himself.

Films that deal with themes and topics related to transsexuality and transgender typically rely on certain discourses, sometimes on a particular filmic vocabulary.12 Thus, even the disclosure of truths, the confessional technique, with which Bernardi’s film begins, operates within this cinematic idiom. The gender-sexual transitions that are explicitly or implicitly involved in these narratives usually make obvious appeals to interpretation, utilizing a number of metaphorical devices of widely varying complexity and subtlety; these devices often heavy-handedly cross borders and illustrate transition after obvious transition (Kraus, «Screening the Borderland» 17). One common approach is to involve relevant characters in some sort of journey, often a road trip which frequently includes characteristics of the road movie; examples include The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (1994) and Transamerica (2005).13 While they fall in line with respect to certain questions of genre or subgenre and may accomplish some didactic or empathic work, these films will rarely problematize the dimorphic system of gender and sexuality that actually constructs each film’s meta-universe (Kraus, «Screening the Borderland» 18). «If films flush out new ideas lurking in the cultural underbrush,» film scholar Carolyn Kraus observes, «they
also reveal what we’re stuck on: they provide a mechanism for working out acceptable explanations for the inexplicable» («Screening the Borderland» 19). Judith Jack Halberstam has also discussed the three main conventions of (non-transgender) depictions of transgender phenomena: «stabilization,» «rationalization,» and «trivialization» (In a Queer Time and Place 54–55). In these approaches, the transgender narrative, that is, a challenge to «gender normativity,» is made less offensive to gender hegemony in that the provocation becomes, respectively, highly unusual or pathological, temporary, or inconsequential (In a Queer Time and Place 55). In his book Transgressive Bodies, Niall Richardson discusses two other stereotypical portrayals: the «pathetic» and «deceiving» transsexuals (128–29).

While there have been many English-language films that have addressed the transsexual (and/or transgender) topic (the two most frequently cited being The Crying Game [1992] and Boys Don’t Cry [1999]), the German-language context is more sparsely populated. In contrast, cinematic and scholarly treatments of drag and transvestism have been far more numerous. Transsexuality as a primary theme, however, occurs in at most seven German feature films (depending on one’s definition of «German» and «primary»), as far as I have been able to determine. The appearances in these films range from the essential to the incidental, and from the tragic to the comedic. In Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden (1978), transsexual Elvira (Volker Spengler) is a tragic character who changes sexes not because of the individual’s inner truth, but rather in order to further a romantic relationship – a choice which turns out to be an unfortunate mistake. By contrast, in Kutluğ Ataman’s Lola und Bilidikid (1999), aspiring transsexual Kalipso (Mesut Özdemir) is looking for a sugar daddy who will pay for the operation she desires. Ataman’s film also features the two title characters’ conflict over Lola’s potential willing or unwilling sex change. Like Sabine Bernardi’s film Roméo (2011), both of these films include certain kinds of confessions about personal history, wishes and desire, designed to explain the complete or developing transition. Bernardi’s film, however, differs from many of these other portrayals in that we meet a stable character whose transition is arguably more normalized within the filmic world.

Nonetheless, Lukas is formed and presented as an individual who views himself as incomplete or unfinished in both a corporeal and a psychic sense. The journey that Lukas makes in the film comes across as healthy, natural, and possible, as opposed to the other characters mentioned above. If we did not already know, one of the observations we can make or the conclusions we can draw from viewing a film like Roméo is that perceptions within, through, and of the body are crucial for subjective identity development and
presentation, especially since the characters at hand will embody the need to depict this status of (a lack of) finality. Anticipating this, in his essay «Das Ich und das Es» (1923), Freud explained, «Das Ich ist vor allem ein körperliches, es ist nicht nur ein Oberflächenwesen, sondern selbst die Projektion einer Oberfläche» (253). Indeed, continues Freud, «Der eigene Körper und vor allem die Oberfläche desselben ist ein Ort, von dem gleichzeitig äußere und innere Wahrnehmungen ausgehen können» (253). As it exists within the world of the film, main character Lukas’s identity – and, by extension, his body (or vice versa) – must interact with, respond to, and internalize representations of identities and bodies around him. The confession of his personal truth is requisite, has already begun, and leads to what Foucault would see as the goal of these techniques, namely to «reach a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power» («Subjectivity and Truth» 180–81).

The film is possessed of a vigorous corporeal awareness that commences in its first frames and is evinced through its steady focus on and consumption of characters’ bodies, all of which contributes to the film’s presentation of gender, often via direct contrasting juxtapositions. Repeatedly in the film, Lukas is shown in his dorm room lifting weights and then measuring his body, keeping track in a logbook how much his muscles have grown. Quick cuts alternate between medium close-ups of Lukas and close-ups of the book, in a sequence that becomes familiar to the viewer. Lukas talks about his success to Ine, who also expresses surprise at how much Lukas has changed in appearance and personality since his existence as Miriam. Fabio, whom we first meet when he drives Lukas, Ine, and others to a party, becomes a scopophilic object within the first fifteen minutes of the film. In one of numerous scenes with music and dancing, a shirtless Fabio with low-riding pants changes the party’s stereo to play a thumping song before moving out to the center to dance with a few men. Ine sees Lukas watching Fabio and says sarcastically, «Ein Platzhirsch. … Was du an Männlichkeit zu wenig hast, das hat er zu viel, nicht?» In medium range, the camera pans up and down Fabio’s body, showing us what Lukas is admiring for the dual reasons of attraction and admiration. A rather contrasting scene happens in the nightclub that appears multiple times in the film, following spats between Lukas and Fabio and between Ine and a girlfriend. Instead of concentrating on dancing, half-naked bodies, the film delivers a melancholy scene in which the main lights go down, the dancers stop, and the club is bathed in surreal blue light. A performer, either a drag queen or a trans woman, lip-syncs a haunting rendition of «I Am A Poor Wayfaring Stranger» by countertenor Andreas Scholl. With their backs to the camera and shown mostly in shad-
owy silhouette, the formerly-dancing clubgoers are silent and transfixed by the performance. Close-ups show Lukas also pensively fixated on the performer, before he glances to Fabio, and the image cuts to Lukas in bed, still immersed in the blue light and still accompanied by the wistful music. With little on-screen action, the scene highlights the trope of the difficult corporeal journey in the folksong’s lyrics and comes at another stage in Lukas’s cinematic transition, right before his move to the men’s dorm.

Indeed, bodily presentation is one of the ways in which Bernardi’s film moves in a different direction from Fassbinder’s, for example. In the catalogue for the Berlinale film festival, Bernardi says of the film:


Bernardi’s concern for these elements of reality thus becomes visible in the film’s narrative, much of it relying on a communication of Lukas’s desire for social recognition of what has been called «cultural genitals» (Kessler and McKenna 173). The viewer perceives Lukas’s wish through the repeated emphasis on the character’s physical transition as well as his confessional videos, which reveal his understanding of his own progress and challenges along the way.

In the case of these non-biological or «attributed» genitals, a viewer or other individual assumes the existence of either a penis or a vagina, depending upon the outward, bodily presentation of the person in question. Therefore, this is not based «on actual knowledge of a person’s physical equipment» (Plis and Blackwood 187). Interestingly, especially in the case of transsexual and/or transgender persons, cultural genitals show that the attributed or perceived gender and sexuality – i.e., what has *not* been confessed or disclosed – are crucial in our understanding of the ways in which sex works. Kessler and McKenna are in line with other gender theories and build on Harold Garfinkel’s work on «passing,» when they maintain that a genital organ – primarily the penis – can be culturally, even if not physically, present «if the person feels entitled to it and/or is assumed to have it» (173). Secondary and tertiary (including nonverbal) sexual and gender characteristics play a role in the successful attribution or reading of gender (174–75). In these cases, the success of a gender presentation stems from the receiver’s ability to understand denotations and connotations of sex and gender in a flexible process of give and take, but with the result that doubt about the perceived/presenting person’s gender disappears (176). In using
social and cultural rules for distinguishing sexual and gender traits, Kessler and McKenna argue, individuals must negotiate a significant number of variables, adjusting for context and taking into account the relevant rules. In their research, Kessler and McKenna offer an organizational schema in an attempt to explain how people are categorized according to sex and gender in Western society. They maintain that someone must be seen «as female only when you cannot see them as male» (176). In other words, only an absence of «male» characteristics can warrant a «female» categorization. «The relative ease with which female-to-male transsexuals «pass» as compared to male-to-female transsexuals underscores this point» (176). This understanding of how one reads (and «writes») gender provokes a certain critique of Romeos, especially of Rick Okon’s presentation of Lukas. One can also then evaluate Lukas’s success and attainment of the goal based on these criteria.

The viewer’s reception of this film and the director’s construction of it are partly dependent upon, in this case, the deployment of a male («cisgender») actor to play the FTM character, Lukas. As Michele Aaron has shown in her discussion of the popular Boys Don’t Cry (1999, dir. Kimberly Peirce), the focus on the actor playing the transgender or transsexual character in question can contribute significantly to the reception of the film as a whole and how the film is discursively treated (189–90). Bernardi has spoken about this, somewhat contradictorily, in interviews, stating that it was more important to her and for the film to select a talented actor, regardless of that person’s gender-sexual reality; moreover, showing «a male actor was the only really honest way to portray the character in the film. I didn’t want a female actor because then it is all about gender swapping and I really wanted to tell a story about a trans guy who isn’t transitioning. I wanted someone who was male and with a male body» (Waygood). In effect, Bernardi’s choice represents the end result of the gender-sexual transition; the other directors chose the starting point of it. Regardless of her intention, however, the film’s construction of the character and the cinematic devices’ delivery of the plot nonetheless depict a gender-sexual transition that is gradually disclosed.

The film’s depiction of the protagonist’s body displays pre- and post-transition characteristics that show Lukas’s body as a site of contestation and development. Other films, like Boys Don’t Cry, have offered reminders that original bodies can persist and that gender is not coterminous with anatomy – that these sites are «(contested) arbiters of identity» (Aaron 190). In that film, Brandon Teena’s genetic body persisted in the form of his breasts as well as menstruation. In Romeos, the viewer is not explicitly told or shown the status of Lukas’s genitals and Bernardi does not engage that usual source
of preoccupation («What exactly is down there?»). Showing his own fascination, however, Fabio eventually asks the question («Was hast du denn eigentlich da unten?») shortly after his unexpected discovery of Lukas’s identity when the latter’s little sister blurts it out in a fit of petulant anger. The film offers other sights that allow us to suspect and then know what Lukas’s truth entails, that is, a process that is, from his own perspective, incomplete.¹⁶

To turn Rick Okon into Miri/Lukas, the figure we see on screen, the actor had to don body suit components and false breasts, all of which were supposed to contour his body («Medien»). The former’s height vis-à-vis Liv Lisa Fries, who plays Ine, led to the latter’s needing to stand on a platform when they were filmed next to each other, thereby avoiding the concern that Lukas might seem too masculine by contrast of height. The body suit adjusted the appearance of his hips, shoulders, and waist, while prosthetic breasts shaped his chest and made selected appearances in a couple of scenes. This transition as a part of the film’s production augments one of the contradictory elements of the film, namely Bernardi’s selection of Okon to play Lukas and her understanding of how Okon needed to be shot in these scenes with Fries. The film, which otherwise frequently engages in a sophisticated way with expectations of gender and sex, remobilizes standard expectations in its manipulation of certain realities. Instead of relying on the narrative and the actors’ portrayals to create a world of diverse and multiple possibilities that contravene gender stereotypes, the film at least in part makes use of those stereotypes, ostensibly in this case to avoid confusing the viewer.

In one instance of the appearance of the prosthesis, we see Lukas examining his progress and simultaneous stasis. Sitting topless in front of a fan below his window in the women’s dorm, Lukas uses a mirror to examine the hair growing on his chin and then fingers the hair on his stomach before prodding his still-present breasts. Again, truth – here, Lukas’s bodily truth – is complicated, as he embodies his transition. Although the film does not reveal Lukas’s genital status, this scene in which Rick Okon’s convincing breast prosthesis makes an appearance is surprising to the viewer. In one of the two instances of nudity (the other mentioned in the next paragraph), Lukas’s body – or one of the future sites of desired surgical intervention – appears uncovered and is visually connected with Ine’s femaleness, which appears in the next scene. Echoing the confessional videos that Lukas watches online that show transitioning/post-operative transmen, Lukas’s appearance makes a bodily confession to the viewer of the kind that he does not make to the online FTM community. At certain points, however, Lukas does confess facts related to the effects of his testosterone and steroid injections, namely disturbing dreams and periods of constant sexual arousal.
Following the scene of self-examination under the windowsill, the group of friends (Lukas, Ine, Fabio, Sven, and Sven’s boyfriend) make their way to the beach. Lukas stands out in his refusal to remove his clothing, appearing uncomfortably warm in the juxtaposition to Fabio, who wears only shorts. The shots emphasize their different states of dress as the two wrestle on the grass. Again, Fabio’s toned body, which continues to be a focus of the film’s gaze, particularly as a counterpoint to Lukas’s, captures the camera’s attention. Highlighting more similarities and differences, Ine sits next to Lukas and takes off her bikini top. They watch the others swimming while Lukas hides his chest by holding his jacket close to him, resuming his regular posture from most of the film. The conspicuous display of Ine’s breasts next to Lukas, all of which we see in a medium shot, provokes him to say disgustingly, “Noch elf Wochen. Dann kommen die Dinge endlich ab!” The dialogue adds to the explanation for Lukas’s attire and behavior; components of his original female, feminine body persist, much to his disgust.

The viewer is aware throughout the film that the story takes place during a warm Cologne summer. Sunshine and wide-open windows combined with scantily clad characters, tightly occupied spaces (like packed gay clubs), glistening skin, and visits to the beach foster such recognition. In fact, one of our first glimpses of Lukas shows his entry into his room in the women’s dorm carrying a duffle bag and an oscillating fan. Lukas’s body exudes the warmth of the summer in that he is almost constantly shown to be sweating, including in these early shots. Regularly covering himself in deodorant spray, Lukas gleefully replies at one point to his friend Ine’s observation that he reeks of sweat by exclaiming affirmatively, “Männer-schweiß!”

The summery scene at the beach purposefully lays bare many of the characters’ corporeal qualities and simultaneously presents uncovered glimpses of part of each individual’s body. Lukas remains isolated yet also in contact with all of the characters around him. The film accentuates the presence of his hidden truth, continuing to make him a contrasting figure in that, in this moment like others, the confession and display of his own corporeality must be deferred to another filmic moment. This scene makes clear the various juxtapositions among Lukas’s relationships that remind the viewer of his own reality. In a way, the other displayed bodies provide a glimpse of the continuum on which Lukas and his gender-sexual presentation are placed. A masculine exemplar is Fabio; a feminine one is Ine. Even more than Ine, we the viewers are aware of Lukas’s vulnerability and the deeper aspects of his true reality, having been present for his online confessions as well as his private moments alone.
Not only did the actor playing Lukas require tools in the execution of this role, but the character Miri/Lukas himself also uses common products that help individuals to be «read» as men. As one of the most common sites of technological and surgical intervention, breasts remain «a site of deep bodily discomfort for most transmen, making the use of breast binders a key aspect of helping them craft a masculine identity» (Plis and Blackwood 197). Transmen’s methods of concealing breasts include wrapping themselves in some sort of elastic bandage that makes their chests look flatter and wearing a tight spandex undershirt with layers that de-emphasize the breast area (Plis and Blackwood 197). Lukas uses the latter technique, supplementing it by adopting a hunched-over posture, crossing his arms, or holding things in front of his chest. Lukas’s presentation of himself in this way is a steady reminder of his bodily discomfort, reiterating his current transitory status. Some other trans tools include devices for sexual acts or for urinating while standing (Plis and Blackwood 189–97).18 Early in the film, Lukas enters a bathroom at a party in someone’s apartment and proceeds to remove a prosthetic penis from his pants, before placing it next to him on the bathtub and sitting on the toilet. The device is almost immediately discovered, much to Lukas’s initial horror, although this part of his own truth is not yet revealed. (Someone who had been in the bathtub behind the shower curtain the whole time finds the device and takes it into the apartment’s main room.) This scene has a tragicomic quality that reminds the viewer of Lukas’s status in his transition. The laying bare of this small yet important aspect of gender-sexual presentation serves the purpose of connecting us to transmen’s experiences while also providing an instance in which Lukas’s truth, what he has been gradually revealing, is momentarily exposed to an uninitiated audience – although, in this case, when the prosthesis is paraded around in the party for everyone’s amusement, it is not linked to Lukas himself, thus allowing his hidden reality to remain intact and undisclosed.

At three points in the film, the viewer sees a recurring motif, a number of video confessionals or diaries that point to developments in Lukas’s transition and in the narrative. Each instance includes a sequence that features Lukas alone, and each also marks a momentary diversion in the film’s style. These segments take the film back to a smaller field, boxed in on the screen. Both Lukas and the other subjects address the camera directly. Only the last sequence differs. In the first sequence, Lukas confesses briefly in a close-up that he has been having strange dreams, which he attributes to his hormone injections. Appearing after Lukas’s failed meeting with a bureaucratese-speaking administrator (a recurring motif in trans-film narratives), the sec-
ond sequence expands to include intercut clips that Lukas is viewing online and in which post-operative transmen speak and/or display their bodies for the camera.\textsuperscript{19} Evoking Foucault’s aforementioned idea about «showing one’s wounds,» one clip shows the surgical drains connected to the person’s body; another features a man showing the viewer the surgical scars remaining after his double mastectomy; yet another shows a man who takes his shirt off, revealing a developing muscular physique. Lukas completes that sequence in his own online post, speaking to the FTM community about the sexual effects of his hormones. The third and final sequence is different in that we see via a medium long shot Lukas lying on his bed and staring at his computer. A transman with a black eye addresses the camera in the by now familiar style. He says «they» found out about him, about his «situation.» Gesturing to his bruised face, he says, «So now I will look like this.» His despair is palpable as he expresses his desire to get away from all of this trouble, saying, «I don’t want to go on like this. I just want to make a break. Just want to be free.» At this point, Lukas engages with the online community differently from earlier, in that he offers encouragement to the struggling man in a positive response. This scene precedes Lukas’s reconciliation with Ine and, eventually, his first sexual encounter with Fabio, the depiction of which takes place in the last five minutes of the film.

Film scholar Patricia Erens has examined the use of imitation «home movie footage» in narrative films, arguing that these excerpts serve an important purpose as «bearer[s] of truth» (99). The confessional clips included in \textit{Romeos} are not typical home movies but they do deliver certain truths. That is, they are neither third-person depictions of domestic events nor do they serve a nostalgic goal of pointing to a character’s pre-diegetic life or evoking some kind of loss.\textsuperscript{20} The confessional videos do, however, present a reverse departure in style and form, as they show the confessing individual in a stationary shot; the rest of \textit{Romeos} is filmed with a handheld camera. Home movies would usually offer what the final sequence of \textit{Romeos} does, specifically the feel of improvised, amateur footage. In \textit{Romeos} these confessionals resemble «vlogging,» the kind of video-blogging that became popular after the late 1990s and allowed interaction with a wider community via amateur documentation of reality and personal «journeys.»\textsuperscript{21} Laura Horak has argued that these vlogs, many of which are posted on YouTube, have been phenomenally important for acknowledging transitioning individuals’ personal truths and the vicissitudes of their changing bodies, especially in the absence of physical, «real-life» support networks (572–73). Beemyn and Rankin’s extensive and pioneering sociological gender-related survey of trans people also confirmed the importance of the Internet for, first, knowing what they might
be experiencing and, further, allowing them to connect to new friends and supporters (57–59).

Interestingly for an interpretation of Lukas’s development, these videos deliver a truth as they point the way toward Lukas’s future, and give him an idea of where he might be headed in his transition. Unlike the (pseudo) home movies included in other films, which may elicit associations with the past that are often manipulated through the use of music/soundtrack, these confessions offer stark breaks with the third-person realism that, along with Lukas’s own confessions, disconnect from the narrative on either side, both allowing the viewer to eavesdrop on Lukas’s dialogue with the online community and putting the viewer in the position of the second-person addressee. Moreover, it is possible to include them in an overall assessment of the film’s narrative, seeing them as «confessional markers» of Lukas’s progress or transition. In the first, Lukas is alone, presenting fleeting observations of his dreams. In the second, post-operative transmen present themselves followed by Lukas’s presentation of his aroused state – both of which point to transition per se. In the third sequence, Lukas offers encouragement to a struggling transman, shortly before reconciliation with Ine, the romantic encounter with Fabio, and Lukas’s contented appearance at the end of the film.

Foucault writes early in one of his examinations of «truth» and its relationship to the «hermeneutics of the self» («Subjectivity and Truth» 184), that «one of the main moral obligations for any subject is to know oneself, and to constitute oneself as an object of knowledge both for other people and for oneself» (177). Thus, descending genealogically from the well-known ancient directive to «know thyself,» self-understanding and self-presentation become necessary in the drive to make bodies and selves intelligible and legible within wider social relations. Butler, in her analysis of processes of body materialization, has argued that a kind of bodily «reiteration,» like what we see in *Romeos*, also demonstrates «that bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled» (*Bodies That Matter* 2). In other words, repeated reiteration and renegotiation will be necessary, especially in the case of a «truth» that requires technical strategies of compliance.

Combining an examination of these confessional videos with the other displays in the film, we can make out more clearly what some effects of the film’s techniques might be. As the narrative progresses, we witness Lukas’s development as a result of his confessional behaviors: to his friend Ine, to love interest Fabio, and to the video diary community on the Internet. Insecure uncertainty and discomfort become assured encouragement and contentment through reinforcing revelation, a process which at least approximates
the Foucauldian goal described above. Responding to an interviewer’s question about the film’s material, Bernardi corrects him, saying «[E]s ist nicht so, dass ein Mädchen beschließt, ein Junge zu werden. Sondern es geht um einen Jungen, dessen Geschlechtsmerkmale noch weiblich sind, und die er deshalb angleichen muss. Man spricht heute nicht mehr von Geschlechtsumwandlung, sondern von -angleichung» (Schmidt).24 For a number of reasons, we can see Bernardi’s film as a presentation of this need for Angleichung. The film presents not only this «alignment,» but also demonstrates the «power of self-definition» and what it means for the creation and transmission of «truth.»

In Romeos, Lukas’s conception and exhibition of his developing maleness and masculinity are reactive, active, and proactive – broadly speaking, dynamic. His case is an example of the ways in which sex and gender presentation may be conceived internally and how they do not exist in a vacuum. The character’s physical transformation accompanies the simultaneous psychic one, making visible and also more cumbersome the same kinds of personal development that everyone experiences. In his interactions with Ine, Fabio, and the institutional bureaucracy, Lukas manages his gendered expectations and gendered behavior partly based on the situations he encounters. Again, this is part of regular interpersonal communication, but Lukas’s transformations are then productive for the revelations in the video diaries.

There are many more potential moments in this and other related films that can be revelatory for this topic, but from this discussion we can see that presentations of transsexuality in film have implications for our perceptions of gendered «truths.» Just as other narratives problematize and question our understandings of gender and sexuality, Romeos explores the shifting nature of these conceptions. Indeed, external expectations can also dominate that flexibility, as do the kinds of demands of masculinity or gay sexuality. Radical reworkings of gender and sexuality, like those that would point to the impossibility of absoluteness within that system, can leave us with residue – or even reinforcement – of the fixed qualities they had the potential to subvert.

Notes

1 I thank director Sabine Bernardi for her assistance in my research and the issue’s editors for their helpful feedback.

2 While Romeos was positively received by critics, it faced an obstacle in its early age rating of 16+ by the FSK (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle), later surmounted with a lowering to 12+ (Wrusch; Sandmann). Indeed, according to the FSK, «Die Schil-
The Reality of the Body

derung einer völlig einseitigen Welt von Homosexualität im Film könnte zu einer Desorientierung in der sexuellen Selbstfindung führen» (qtd. in Wrusch).

Examples of useful sources related to discussions of these topics include Beger et al.; Billings and Urban; Bland and Doan; Bockting, Benner, and Coleman; Büchler and Cottier; Fausto-Sterling; Fraser et al.; Hausman; Klöppel; Kolbe; Loeb; Sigusch.

Björn Krondorfer, arguing that confession is a gendered activity per se (because of, for example, decisions of what to reveal and under what circumstances), has made an intriguing study of the relationship between masculinity and acts of confession. These acts can render the speaker/writer vulnerable, but they also grant that confessant the power of what to disclose and what to hold back. Moreover, the privilege required to deliver one’s «confession» in certain media – be they autobiographies or vlogs – often remains overlooked.

Rasmussen, for example, offers one examination of the «coming out imperative.» See Sedgwick on the drive toward «knowingness,» especially about sexuality (Tendencies 222–24). For more on the idea of revelation and proclamation as it relates to trans identity, including with respect to a normative gender system, see Gagné, Tewksbury, and McGaughey. Eribon’s fascinating study of creating the self also connects the idea of affirmation to transsexuality (e.g., 126).

I am unable to engage with them sufficiently here, but Butler (Giving an Account of Oneself) and de Villiers offer fascinating analyses of (sometimes gradual) revelations of the self both in terms (in varying ways) of a subject’s «opacity.»

First-hand accounts offer illuminating details on the intrusive and sometimes absurd nature of prescribed declarations (see Prosser).


See Billings and Urban; Burke 60–66; Butler, «Doing Justice to Someone» 191; Butler, Undoing Gender 79ff.; Spade, «Mutilating Gender.» Sohn and Exner, for instance, offer a medical perspective and include historical background on the diagnostical and surgical procedures, including European examples. Jay Prosser has introduced a critique of some of these discussions, arguing that they can reduce transsexual subjects to pure products of the medical establishment’s power (7). Garrels et al. have examined the historical prevalence of FTM and MTF transsexuals in Germany. Becker details evolutions in the clinical conception of transsexuality. See also Weitze and Osburg as well as Büchler and Cottier 118–21.

The definition continues, «Has fallen out of favor and been replaced by the term cross-dresser, though some people continue to use it as a derogatory term for transgender people» (620).

Reading Esther Newton’s pioneering study of the US drag scene, Mother Camp, is instructive for an understanding of the term’s historical development (esp. 1–19, 97–110). Constantina Papoulias offers a general and more recent introduction. Because drag concepts are most often theorized in their relationship to gay men, see also Halberstam for an analysis of these concepts and the difference appearance/use of drag in lesbian communities (Female Masculinity 236ff.). This relates to, but is different from, the «ethnic drag» theorized by Katrin Sieg.

An incomplete list of related films would include Glen or Glenda (1953), The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975), In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden (1978), Des-

13 Romeo, too, approximates this trope at two points in the film: first, following the title sequence, Lukas is riding in a car to his new home at the school; second, Lukas is shown in a handheld-filmed “home movie” at the beach in the film’s final scene.

14 See, for example, Benbow; Berghahn; Clark; Frackman; Giersdorf; Kılıçbay; Kuzniar, “Zarah Leander and Transgender Specularity”; Mennel; Prosser. In these subjects the reader is also well served by consulting Kuzniar’s The Queer German Cinema. Benshoff and Griffin engage questions of labeling and categorization in the section “What is Queer Film?” (9–12).


16 B. Ruby Rich discusses one of the more famous revealing trans “money shots” (in The Crying Game, 1992), a cinematic device that aimed to “contravene (heterosexual) audience expectation (272–73).

17 There are numerous depictions of self-hatred, disgust, or anathema. Indeed, this topic often appears in scholarly analyses of transgender and transsexuality. Examples include Meyerowitz’s historical study of the transsexual movement and its connection to medical procedures (and agency) (see, e.g., 130–67), and, for another aspect of the discussion, Nataf’s examination of the fraught relationship between lesbians and transsexuals (36–47). Some of this also emerges in Billings and Urban’s discussions of the early treatment of individuals wishing to alter their sex/gender. The chapters in Kane-Demaios and Bullough’s and Nestle, Howell, and Wilchins’s collections, for example, also include many instances of the desire to change oneself as a result of self-dissatisfaction. See Hausman’s discussion of transsexual autobiographies (141–74) as well as Judith Halberstam’s observations, including a critique of Hausman (Female Masculinity 154–56, 168–72). See also Prosser. Von Mahlsdorf’s autobiography offers a narrative with a different kind of emotional trajectory than many of these others.

18 A scene in Bernardi’s short documentary transfamily also and more explicitly focuses on the kinds of technical devices that transmen can use to simulate male genitalia.

19 According to Bernardi, these clips are based on, and made to resemble, original documentary material, but were acted out by transmen whom Bernardi met as part of her 2005 project, the documentary short film transfamily, with the excep-
tion of one clip, which came from YouTube and was included with the poster’s permission (Bernardi). It is interesting that these segments are the only ones in the film, to my knowledge, featuring trans-identified individuals.

For a discussion of the nostalgic use of these videos, see Hallas, for example.

Birchall has discussed the main characteristics of what he calls online documentary, two of which are for community and for diaristic access into people’s private lives (esp. 279, 281–82). Young and Burrows have conducted an intriguing study, relevant for this discussion, of women’s vlogged experiences following weight loss surgery. Holliday’s study connects video diaries to understandings and explorations of sexuality in particular.

See also Beemyn’s chapter (esp. 528–29) in the landmark resource guide Trans Bodies, Trans Selves (ed. Erickson-Schroth). Another study of strategies of resilience in trans adults found that online communities were important for «identity formation and support systems» (Singh, Meng, and Hansen 217).

On the use of home movie footage, see Erens (100).

The German usage here mirrors, too, the change in standard English terminology for sympathetic speakers, that is, from «sex change» operation/surgery to sex/gender «reassignment» or «realignment.»

Works Cited


Berghahn, Daniela. «From Turkish Greengrocer to Drag Queen: Reassessing Patriarchy in Recent Turkish-German Coming-of-Age Films.» New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film 7.1 (2009): 55–69.

Bernardi, Sabine, dir. Romeos... anders als du denkst! Media Luna New Films, 2011.


