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Persistent Ambivalence: Theorizing Queer East German Studies

Kyle Frackman, PhD

Department of Central, Eastern, and Northern European Studies, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

ABSTRACT
The German Democratic Republic (GDR; East Germany) had an ambivalent relationship with homosexuality. Under the principles of socialism, everyone was welcome to contribute to the greater good. The situation for queer people, here lesbians and gay men, was different: one of illegality and invisibility. A difficulty in analyzing these experiences is the theory and methodology necessary to find them and draw them together in a historical narrative. This essay offers a mode of analysis in which theories of affect illustrate long-term trends in East German conceptualizations of same-sex sexuality. By discussing a 1950 court ruling and a 1989 film, the essay demonstrates the persistence of homophobic prejudice and fear of homosexual seduction of young people and the links to historical and legal developments.

KEYWORDS
East Germany; affect; youth; homosexuality; queer; law; literature; film; surveillance; seduction

“The first rule of citizenship is inconspicuousness” (Brühl, 2001, p. 176, original emphasis). Thus artist and gay rights activist Olaf Brühl described the primary duty of the queer citizen of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Reflecting on life in East Germany a decade after reunification, Brühl’s statement was simultaneously defiant and melancholy. The comments of Brühl and other gay rights activists paint a picture of the socialism that existed in East Germany and point to its real limitations. Brühl went on to describe many of his fellow East Germans as narrow-minded and clinging to a prudish morality that belied the lofty principles of the GDR’s mission, which idealistically promised equal treatment of all citizens before the law. Brühl and others like him have made clear that the boundaries of community within socialism as it existed in the GDR stretched only so far. Unfortunately, and for a variety of complex reasons, queerness was mostly invisible in East Germany. Below I will analyze instances in which that invisibility became opacity.

As a means of theorizing queer experiences in East Germany, I will offer that affect is a useful methodological tool. In the history of homosexuality in East Germany, I find a tense assertion of power and a homophobic resistance
of the queer that can be read as an affective response on the part of the East German state apparatus. That is, repeated denials of positive queer existence depend on accumulated and persistent homophobic affect. My argument below will lay out a conceptualization of affect as it relates to the primary texts: a judicial ruling and a film. The judicial ruling (1950) is an example of early GDR policy, whereas the film *Coming Out* (1989) was produced and released in the GDR’s final days and reflects a late East German perception of same-sex sexuality. In the absence of widespread public discourse on homosexuality (e.g., in newspapers, legislative debates), I have selected two differing and complementary cultural artifacts as we think about the functioning of non-normative sexuality in East Germany. As a means of bridging the gap between the two texts, I will discuss sexual education discourse as it relates to homosexuality and youth, themes that link the two cultural products at either end of the GDR’s existence. In selecting these as examples I aim to illustrate a persistent, though not static, regime of homophobic affect. With this, the article aims to add to the small but growing dialog in queer East German studies.

In my approach to sexuality studies of the former East Germany, I am deliberately using *queer* to describe affections, behaviors, groups, and individuals for whom and for which this appellation might at first consideration seem inappropriate.\(^2\) I am fully aware that queer was not a self-appellation in the GDR, neither in the 1980s nor the 1950s. The various classifications for same-sex-desiring men provides evidence, however, that numerous non-heteronormative behaviors and interpretations of them were acknowledged: as examples, words such as “homophile” (*homophil*), “homosexually disposed” (*homosexuell veranlagt*), and “homosexual” (*homosexuell*) point to this. In other words, the concept of (male) homosexuality was not static in the GDR and even by the 1980s had not stabilized into one particular discursive framework. Diverse constituencies, from medical professionals to state security operatives, applied these terms, often overlapping in chronological usage. Lesbian behavior and identity were largely irrelevant in the state’s eyes, based on usage both in public and secret documents, as it historically had been under previous German laws and in other countries. *Queer* also calls attention to the “improper” (or “unnatural”) vis-à-vis the “proper” (or “natural”), which is part of the foundation of the so-called socialist personality and the related social and personal expectations for gender and sexual behavior (further to the socialist personality, see Herzog, 2005, pp. 184–186; Huneke, 2012, pp. 236–237; Evans, 2014, pp. 350–351).

**Queerness in East Germany**

For most of the GDR’s existence (1949–1990), queer people were tolerated and discussed only in limited circumstances. If one were to assess the existence of
queer people and subjects by examining public media, one could draw the conclusion that queers did not exist—which, of course, is arguably what the East German state wanted its citizens (and others) to believe. Although there were limited successes that activists—especially the members of the Homosexual Interest Group Berlin (Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin, HIB)—achieved in the 1970s, queer people sprang into more certain existence, inconveniently for the regime, in the 1980s: first in gatherings facilitated by the Protestant Church, then in print media, then in radio broadcasts, and, finally, in film and television. These appearances were introductory and tentative but had the objective of increasing tolerance of homosexuality among the East German public.

Because of its position as an institution mostly, if not completely, outside state control, the Protestant Church offered a venue in which activists and concerned East Germans could discuss the topic of homosexuality. Starting in 1982 meetings were held in so-called working and discussion groups (Arbeitskreise and Gesprächskreise). (Brühl, 2006, p. 121) Although they were simultaneously social gatherings, these various kinds of meetings provided lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals the opportunity to debate theological issues related to sexuality, also serving as a place to discuss contemporary topics such as environmentalism and human rights (Schmidt, 2009, p. 198).

More openness in the media followed these less public activities. By the early 1980s, although same-sex personal ads in the popular Wochenpost were discontinued in 1981, advice columns in various publications featured letters that allowed respondents to address widely held prejudices, including those chronically propagated by the state, such as the pathological nature of homosexuality. (Ganz unter uns gesagt: Gleichgeschlechtliche Liebe, 1986; Wie helfen, ohne zu schaden?, 1984) The youth radio broadcaster DT64 aired programs in 1988 and 1989 aimed at tolerantly educating young people about sexuality and homosexuality in particular (further see Schönebeck, 1989). In televisual media, HIV/AIDS was publicized with a dedicated call-in television show in 1987, and the state-run DEFA film studios released two films in close succession, which were the sole works to feature the gay topic in such a way: The Other Love (1988) and Coming Out (1989). Prior to that, queerness had drifted to the surface of public consciousness in instances of criminal insinuation (e.g., in the newspapers) and medical pathologization (e.g., in counseling literature). Notably, these latter appearances were instances in which queer behavior and identity—though not literally discussed as such—were obstacles to advancing socialism.

In many ways, East German moral structures that would affect how the state and its citizens viewed sexual behavior were holdovers from previous iterations of bourgeois morality. Early on, in its legal foundations as well as with GDR leader Walter Ulbricht’s own “10 Commandments,” for example,
an official East German morality asserted its parameters. Ulbricht’s ninth commandment declared, “You shall live cleanly and modestly and respect your family” (Ulbricht, 1958). Like the biblical commandments or Martin Luther’s Little Catechism, Ulbricht’s moral decrees were printed on placards that could be hung up in the home. This evokes a bourgeois interior with matching morality, corresponding in some ways to East German society. To be sure, there were elements of liberal support for women’s employment and support structures for heterosexual nuclear families. In addition to this, Dagmar Herzog has observed other aspects of liberal rhetoric on gender and sexuality, such as East Germany’s comparative (versus West Germany) greater tolerance for premarital (heterosexual) sex and reduced shaming of “illegitimate” children. Nonetheless, there were continuing biases from previous generations and philosophies (including Nazi ideas) against same-sex dispositions (2008, pp. 76–77). Jennifer V. Evans’s work (2011) has shown that some of these moral concerns, especially in the early years of the GDR, were born partly of postwar precarity and social dissolution. For most of the country’s life, though, East German official and public discourse all but denied the existence of queer people within its borders. When they were acknowledged, homosexuals usually were seen as a pathological or criminal problem, as we will see below.

Affect and queer sexuality in East Germany

A crucial element of the interpretation of historical and social events (and their related cultural products) is how the “state” understood itself in relation to homosexuals at these points in history. The East German state’s self-understanding is an important parallel track to the small-scale events that may seem detached from an official regime. To do this, I will pay special attention to affect. Indeed, I argue that “state affect,” to be differentiated from “state effects,” lurks behind the events I discuss below, to use Keith Woodward’s dual formulation (Woodward, 2014, 2016). Woodward has found state affects to often reside in “confused encounters where thought struggles to make sense of affective relations” (2014, p. 23). In one neuroscientific conceptualization, affects are “diffuse global states,” provoked by deeply set biological and neural operations, playing a distinct role in the actions that one can observe on the surface of a subject’s actions. Put differently, “cognitions are handmaidens to the passions” (Panksepp, 2008, p. 48, original emphasis). In other words, these hidden emotions and emotional responses (on the micro level) provide sometimes unconscious or unacknowledged motivation for actions (on the macro level), which Freud helped us to understand (Freud, 1964). Following Sara Ahmed’s lead in advancing an understanding of emotions “as social and cultural practices,” I maintain that affect can be read in and as a layer of state actions that fit into

To turn to affect is to focus on a hitherto underexamined dimension of East German discourse. One of the objects of this article is to offer an initial sketch of some of the contours of public and private discourses of sexuality and sexual behaviors. Even if we concede that private and public expression were shaped by the possibility—or likelihood—of surveillance and subsequent state action, we must not think that this renders impossible the task of searching for queer history in a notoriously prudish nation. It does, however, necessitate a different tack; part of what we seek is what is left unsaid or even unacknowledged. The consistencies among engagements with sexuality will also be clues for the affective valence of East German discourses of queerness.

In avoiding the public discussion of (queer) sexuality, the state, for instance, is asserting the former’s unacceptability and even impossibility as a topic of certain discourse. In viewing official documents, journalistic accounts in an unfree press, or the occasional surfacing in cultural products, we also witness the construction of queerness in East Germany: the establishment of affective, epistemological, and even legal criteria that will determine and contribute to the understanding of what East German sexuality is. Thus the presentation of sexuality—and in this case the deflection or awkward negotiation of it, which becomes part of its representation—contributes to its discursive adumbration. Teresa de Lauretis observed this about gender: overt presentation of it as well as implicit dismantling (or avoidance) of it accretes to form the public and private conception of what may be said (1989, p. 3). The propositions about gender that de Lauretis offered are useful as we think about sexuality. Briefly, she argued that gender is iterative and representational, is continuously under construction and deconstruction (and has been historically, too), and is happening all around us in myriad contexts (De Lauretis, 1989, p. 3). Similarly, Judith Butler argued that the limits of bodies and their movements can be mapped by the plotting of taboos and acceptable or improper behaviors. Which “bodily orifices” can be a part of which “erotic possibilities” (1999, p. 168)? The geography of discourses can be likewise mapped. My chosen texts below plot some points on a timeline of East German queer discourse, partly to show change, but also partly to illustrate the later points’ indebtedness to earlier points, and especially the ways in which affective baggage, as much as we can track it, accumulates over time.  

In using affect in my approach, I refer to what Clare Hemmings has called “states of being, rather than […] their manifestation or interpretation as emotions” (2005, p. 551). Hemmings maintained that affects, unlike drives, may be adapted; indeed, they can be transferred to a variety of objects instead of being oriented toward or fixated on one goal. Affect allows for an analysis
of a text’s provoked responses rather than one of specific individuals’ targeted emotional responses. Indeed, as Ahmed has clarified in her phenomenological approach, affect is inherently orientational, in the sense that it is a response to other objects (people, actions, things) with which one comes into contact (2006, pp. 2–3). While there is a literal element to the contact (the proximal residue I discuss below), here Ahmed did not necessarily mean objects that one literally touches.

Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg sketched the boundaries of affect as an area that is at least partly phenomenological and intangible. They wrote,

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. (original emphasis; 2010, p. 1)

Affect, in this mode of understanding, is an emotion-like force that works to shape—unconsciously to the subject involved—the parameters of engagements with other subjects and objects. “[P]assages of affect persist in immediate adjacency to the movements of thought: close enough that sensate tendrils constantly extend between unconscious (or, better, non-conscious) affect and conscious thought” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2). This helps us to understand the symbiotic or parasitic relationship of affective impulses with conscious thoughts and action. It also hints at the hidden motivations that may lie beneath a subject’s or body’s actions.

Ahmed elucidated how affect and feelings can come into play in questions of society and social hierarchy, which directly relate to the workings of queerness, including in East Germany. “Those who are ‘other’ to me or us, or those that threaten to make us other, remain the source of bad feeling in this model of emotional intelligence. It is not difficult to see how emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy: emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ into bodily traits” (2004, pp. 3–4). Another way of describing this is through relationships of power, Ahmed argued: “emotionality as a claim about a subject or a collective is clearly dependent on relations of power, which endow ‘others’ with a meaning and value” (original emphasis; 2004, p. 4). Ahmed’s work illuminates how emotions or affective forces are active and do work to shape discourses and even bodies in the private and public consciousness. An extension of the reasoning with respect to power relations is that social majorities will be able to play a role in determining the affective valence of social minorities. This becomes clear when a discourse-steering authority casts the minority in a certain light (as in a legal maneuver or
ruling) or does not let them come to light at all (as in the withheld approval of a film about homosexuality). Taking an approach informed by Ahmed’s work, this article moves beyond the idea that affect, emotions, and feelings might be purely interior or only “psychological states” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 9). Rather, they become active or interactive forces that have exterior or social effects. In other words, emotions are not only ephemeral possessions that emanate from a subject; they are like waves that reverberate and then “stick” to the (discursive) objects that had a hand in producing them. That adhesion to the object contributes to the definition of the parameters of discourse and will be to some extent observable in cultural productions.

One of the most useful ingenuities of Ahmed’s work, and one that applies to the interrelatedness of the texts I analyze here, is the characterization of this affective “stickiness.” This effect, Ahmed wrote, is what happens when “objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (2004, p. 11). The stickiness is what causes and further contributes to affective adhesion as it accumulates, which I argue pertains to East German appearances of queerness. It is instructive to ask why queer individuals, groups, and themes met with such resistance and intransigence in East Germany. As we chart examples of agitation and systemic reaction, the difficulty of breaking the GDR’s bureaucratic and political inertia, faced by everyday citizens as well as would-be activists, becomes apparent. But we must also look for reminders of historical ideas that will inflect the cultural products in question. When we examine the court ruling of 1950 or the 1989 film, for instance, what has “stuck” to the idea of queerness so as to influence how that particular present viewed it?

Ahmed argued that getting to the bottom of this stickiness is crucial in an understanding of how this certain form of affect works. Importantly, she wrote, “Rather than using stickiness to describe an object’s surface, we can think of stickiness […] as an effect of the histories of contacts between bodies, objects, and signs” (original italics; 2004, p. 90). In other words, the extent and kind of stickiness will depend on the “bodies, objects, and signs” that have come into contact with the body, object, or sign in question. An effect of the sticky residue that objects can carry is the accumulation of other things and signs or symbols that then stick to the original object. It is important to reiterate that “object” here can refer to the signs, as Ahmed wrote, or symbols, themes, and topics that gain affective attributes through repetition (2004, p. 91); the metaphorical sticking activity must enter into our consideration of the ways in which discourses of queerness moved within East Germany.

As with newly painted lines on a street or with wet cement, we can observe or are reminded of the remains of what has come into contact with these objects. “Stickiness then is about what objects do to other objects—it involves a transference of affect—but it is a relation of ‘doing’
in which there is not a distinction between passive or active, even though the stickiness of one object might come before the stickiness of the other, such that the other seems to cling to it” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 91). A monumental version of this might be the affective recall one may have in response to the invocation of September 11, 2001, or Ground Zero in New York: the idea is affectively sticky and has past recollections and associations in its connected residue, such as fear, disgust, or grief. For means of illustration, we could also use another metaphor: as Friedrich Nietzsche described the functionings of history, bodies and things are written on and accumulate the past scribblings of real events, like a piece of scratch paper that gradually acquires more and more inscriptions from different moments in time (further see Butler, 1989; Frackman, 2015, pp. 25–29). I maintain that queerness and especially male queerness are intimately connected to this re-inscription or sticky accumulation. Lurking behind the ignorance or denial of queerness is the bugbear of homophobic affective accretion. As I illustrate, the genealogy of East German heterosexism provides evidence, for example, of the long-lasting homophobic concern about the seduction of youth by homosexuals.

Finally, these affective theories and my analysis build on the approach offered by Ann Cvetkovich in An Archive of Feelings. Cvetkovich sought evidence of trauma in a wide array of materials in order to document and explore cultural memory and the ways in which cultural products can reflect diverse forms of pain. She wrote, “cultural texts [are] repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). Like Ahmed, who sees cultural artifacts, like the ones I discuss here, and the archive they comprise as “contact zones,” Cvetkovich’s approach allows for the use of a wide-angle lens, as it were, in order to find evidence of affective interaction or contact (Ahmed, 2004, p. 14). In order to illustrate the long trajectory of homophobia in the GDR, I will first turn to the legal situation.

Sexuality and the law

Sodomy laws—including §175 and §175a, which were in effect in the GDR until 1968—aim to stigmatize and prevent nonreproductive sexuality. Here, “nonreproductive” encompasses heterosexual as well as homosexual sexual behavior. Certain laws in Europe and the United States, for example, have criminalized oral sex, regardless of whether men or women are engaged in it. Other laws have explicitly targeted sexual acts between men as a particular area of concern. Still other laws prohibited acts that might imitate sexual intercourse, regardless of the partners involved. As far as we can tell, modern
British and German lawmakers, for instance, never cared about lesbian sex, or at least never went to the trouble to criminalize it in a law.

From the GDR’s birth until 1968, male homosexual acts were illegal. This criminalization, a holdover from the Nazi period and still earlier laws, was submerged, I argue, in a homophobic fear for children and youth more broadly and, arguably, a disgust for (male) homosexual behavior. Following German imperial unification in 1871, the Prussian law (§175) took precedence for the entire territory. The paragraph read: “The unnatural vice, which is committed between persons of the male sex or by men with animals, is to be punished with imprisonment; loss of citizenship rights can also be adjudicated.” The “unnatural vice” is itself an appeal to an older theory of the “natural,” as John Boswell as shown (1980, pp. 303–304, 333). Such vice laws or, specifically in this case, sodomy laws operate in part, to think with Foucault, by “constituting [acts] as secrets,” “forcing them into hiding so as to make possible their discovery” (1990, p. 42). We can wonder whether the GDR was in effect doing the reverse in its odd approach to criminal (and later merely unwanted) sexuality: in other words, discovering, cataloging, and archiving them—especially through surveillance—to then make and keep them secret, undiscussed, or otherwise unacknowledged.

To most people nowadays, at least in the West, these laws seem amazingly impertinent, pushing as they do a public means of enforcement into a private domain. Indeed, the majority of such laws do not focus on sexual conduct in public, which could otherwise be considered a nuisance; instead, these laws assert the right and need to confirm whether one’s sexual interactions behind closed doors in one’s own home, for example, pose a danger to public morality and sensibility (further see Nussbaum, 2010, pp. 171–182). The assumption behind many of the governmental actions related to such laws, including in the GDR, is that the existence of homosexual behavior itself is an offense or injury to public sensibility or to segments of the public; therefore, one must not discuss it, as it is improper as a topic of discussion. This would justify censorship, circumlocution, and denial. Further, engaging in the acts specified in the relevant laws, as dangerous as it allegedly may be even to imagine their possibility, offends the collective to a sufficient degree that punishment is required and surveillance is necessary to prevent such things.

In 1935 the Nazi government did not only revise the text and scope of §175; rather, it also promulgated the new extensions §175a and §175b. The original Prussian text of §175 had persisted for 64 years, despite calls to revise or abolish it. Coming alongside increasing authority of the police in the Nazi state, the new version of the law intensified the persecution and added dimensions to it (Pretzel, 2002b, p. 27). Whereas the previous version of §175 focused on acts that resembled or imitated sexual intercourse (beischlafsähnlich), the 1935 incarnation opened the gates to other acts and
the possibility of acts. “(1) A man, who commits lewd acts or allows himself to be used for lewd acts, will be punished with imprisonment.” A second section allowed for leniency in “especially minor cases” if one of the participants happened to be under 21 years of age at the time of infraction. It should be clear that the clause “or allows himself to be used for lewd acts” has diverse possibilities for interpretation. How does one allow oneself to be used for lewd acts? On its face, the law criminalizes the “perpetrators” of homosexual activities and whoever agrees to participate in those activities. This changes the idea of whether there are victims of homosexual offenses and under what conditions that victimhood might appear by effectively ruling out the possibility of adult victims; anyone involved becomes a perpetrator.

By contrast, §175a had four sections. Section one covered the use of force to compel another person to engage in lewd acts. Section two addressed other coercion in which subordinate relationships are used to bring about lewd acts. Section three criminalized age differences, setting the age of consent at 21 and prohibiting relationships between individuals across that line. Section four barred male prostitution. These sections made the entire criminalization of male-male sexual activities broader and more applicable; the wording also made these crimes easier to prosecute. In the year following the legal changes, the Nazi government created an office partly charged with the enforcement of the new provisions: the Reich Office for Homosexuality and Abortion. The much shorter §175b referred to bestiality and called for imprisonment and possible loss of civil rights. I have gone into this detail about the Nazi permutation of the homosexuality laws because it has direct relevance for the legal position of the criminalized acts within the GDR, acts that supposedly offended the moral sensibilities of—or disgusted—the majority.

Although she focused primarily on American law and society, Martha C. Nussbaum’s assertion that “there is no doubt that the body of the gay man has been a central locus of disgust-anxiety—above all, for other men” could most certainly apply more broadly and be applicable to the continuation of sodomy laws in the (East) German context (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 18). Lawmakers in a variety of countries have had very specific concerns about male same-sex sexual acts. It is no coincidence that historically—and still today—the overwhelming majority of lawmakers have been men, which points to the reflection of a certain gendered sexual prejudice in the law. Nussbaum encapsulated well the gender-based perception of homosexual eroticism, too, articulating the disparity between social condemnations of male and female homosexuality. “Female homosexuals may be objects of fear, of moral indignation, or generalized anxiety; but they have less often been objects of disgust” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 18). Nussbaum argued that the person alleged to be protected by such a law in this case, the heterosexual to whom such a description would not apply, “is revolted, but at the same
time comforted: I am nothing like this, nor does my sex life have any connection to this” (2010, p. 5).

Such a presentation of “disgusting” material (i.e., which ostensibly brings about a reaction of disgust) reminds the audience of what they are not while also forcing them to imagine the activity, substance, or actors in question, and possibly the action involving themselves. That is, how much more disgusting would this be if I were (forced to be) involved? Part of the disgust and disapproval that arise specifically in moments like these are a result of a preference and preferment of heterosexuality. Heterosexual eroticism and behavior are the default—the norm that one is expected to follow, the “taste” that one is supposed to have. “Disgust,” denoting the negation (dis-) of taste (gusto), refers to things that one not only does not savor, but rather one finds to be of poor taste in mild cases and repulsive in more extreme instances. The heterosexual is the only erotic taste that is intelligible in a heterosexist, homophobic context; the homosexual is, then, disgusting, “loathsome or offensive, as a foul smell, disagreeable person or action” (“disgust, n.”, 2017). Indeed, what does not fall into one’s particular, preferred section of the heterosexual can become disgusting, provoking a facial reaction, scrunching the nose, contorting the lips, as if one had been assaulted by the smell of sewage or rotting garbage.

In a different mobilization of disgust, the Nazi government had intensified §175, but that did not negatively affect its fate in socialist East Germany. Taking their cue from the Nazi laws, which in turn borrowed from the previous Prussian laws, the courts of East (and West) Germany propagated a homophobic, heterosexist respectability that would putatively protect society and German youth. In these early years of the GDR, one sees symptoms of Lee Edelman’s reproductive futurism:

[En]joiement of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child [sic] whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters, with an ‘otherness’ of which its parents, its church, or the state do not approve, uncompromised by any possible access to what is painted as alien desire, terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up. (Edelman, 2004, p. 21)

In the defining legal opinion that upheld the Nazi version of the law, we find anxiety about the fragility of not only young people, but also the new country—East Germany—they will be working to construct. Upon its founding, East Germany had adopted most of the Nazi-written law against male homosexual activity (§175 and §175a), which the Nazis had expanded to criminalize a wider range of behaviors and motives. Based in part on an understanding of the law as a protective measure that shielded younger men, the GDR court advised that §175 helped to avoid deleterious
influences from older homosexual men. The latter were commonly understood to engage in seduction of the former, leading them into an appropriate lifestyle and a lifetime of unhappiness—not to mention criminally deviant behavior.

In its 1950 ruling, the highest regional court in Berlin (*Kammergericht*) found that §175 and its refinement in §175a in particular did not evince an especially Nazi orientation and could stand. The court came to this conclusion after charting the trajectory of increasing social concerns with and prohibitions against (male) homosexual acts. “§175(a) implements an idea in the advancing line of legal development toward a necessary protection of society against socially damaging homosexual acts of the qualified kind and thus has no typical Nazi content” (*Kammergericht Berlin, 1950*, p. 129). Reflecting an amnesia or ignorance of concentration camp internment and brutal treatment of men wearing the so-called pink triangle, the court uses prior evidence and precedent of homophobic and heterosexist legal maneuvers and social discrimination as justification and excuse for §175a, the law the Nazi government enacted with murderous effect and intent. (On the postwar attempts to remove the law, see Pretzel, 2002a.) As in other documents of this period and context, the delicate tiptoeing around the facts and memories of Nazi persecution is startling. The opinion notes distinctions, also reflected in the laws that it is allowing into the GDR’s nascent legal consciousness, between what we can call “simple” (*einfach*) and “qualified” (*qualifiziert*) homosexuality, the latter relating to behavior addressed by the law. The court’s reasoning betrays homophobic anxieties about manipulation, seduction, and abuse, especially directed at individuals who are insufficiently able to protect themselves from these attacks, such as children and people in positions subordinate to the homosexual perpetrator. The court justifies section three of §175a, which set the age of consent for homosexual acts at 21, with a moral need to protect “young people” from “corruptive influences” (*Kammergericht Berlin, 1950*, p. 130).

**Sexuality and the “seduction” of youth**

The “seduction” hypothesis, which appears in the court ruling, persisted and remained vital throughout the GDR years. These discussions came amid a bevy of publications about sexuality, sex education, and youth, which debated when and how society ought to introduce adolescents to the facts of life and what the implications of these decisions were for gender and sexual behavior. Most of these books, which were part of a first wave of sexual discourse in postwar Germany and which would be followed by different discussions in the 1960s, appeared around the mid-1950s. Evans has shown that many East Germans in the 1950s sought to cling to what they saw as “traditional values” with respect to gender and sexual behavior in a time that was otherwise
extremely disruptive. This was a period in which, according to Evans, “heteronormative sexual ideals [were linked] to healthy and active citizenship” (2010, p. 559). According to the Dictionary of Sexology, homosexuals experienced early sexual awakening and possessed “unstable affect”; homosexuality can lead to isolation or—in an astonishing ascription of power to queer people—group formation that can form a “state within a state” (Staat im Staate) (Dietz & Hesse, 1964, p. 138). Although there were differences of opinion in how homosexuality appeared in the first place (many variations of the nature versus nurture debate), both prominent scientists and party-minded officials tended to believe that homosexuality could spread, whether by seduction or like some kind of contagion (Dietz & Hesse, 1964, pp. 136–140; Evans, 2010, pp. 559–560). The seduction question was still being debated by the time a later volume on sexology was published (Hesse & Tembrock, 1974, pp. 468–469, 474). Late in the GDR, Reiner Werner contended what many had long maintained—that such seduction hypotheses were not scientifically verifiable (1987, p. 66).

A number of authors published books in the early postwar years that focused on identifying and exemplifying proper gender and sexual behavior, clearly a topic of great concern. That is, it was a priority for a number of scientists to diagnose potential problems among young Germans as well as possible social remedies. One of the authors, Karl Saller, who wrote Civilization and Sexuality (1956), helps us to understand why so many of these books may have appeared around the same time. After presenting an exhaustive list of contemporary conditions such as “the alienation from the original life on the land and from the rhythm of nature,” “the liberation and mobility, at the same time also the isolation and desertion of the person in the large city,” and “the emancipation of the woman and of love and their increasing economification [Verökonomisierung],” Saller explained, “All of this has created special social conditions for sexuality within civilization” (1956, p. 33). People found themselves in a society and environment in which “drives can be satisfied all the more cavalierly and without limits” (Saller, 1956, p. 34). Changes brought by modernity, social progress, and even the end of the war and the start of postwar recovery supposedly destabilized human sexuality and gender norms. Without the kind of anchors and guides Saller mentioned, humanity found itself adrift in a critical time. In times like these there was a great need for “sexual enlightenment,” Saller maintained (1956, p. 34). Indeed, “The modern conditions of civilization have apparently made this question [how the individual today becomes sexually educated] into a problem” (Saller, 1956, p. 35).

Saller and others were worried that these social changes following the war were having a negative impact on sexual behavior, which led to criminal activity. Although Saller argued that the circumstances of wartime changed moral and sexual behavior, he was of the opinion that the effects
were not permanent (1956, pp. 56–57). Nonetheless, Saller was concerned that a dependency on sex was looming in contemporary society; indeed, in Saller’s opinion the situation facing postwar Germany was unique and a potential crisis (1956, p. 75). As evidence, he referred to the number of events such as abortions and rapes, especially in the aftermath of the war, and dived deeper specifically into data about illegal sexual behavior among young people. In general, the latter outlook was not positive for Saller, who saw in the data increased sexually improper or illegal acts among young people. One of Saller’s explanations is biological: the onset of puberty came earlier than in previous decades; thus these young people were sexually mature at a previously incomprehensible age. Although he cited the work of researchers such as Alfred Kinsey and the Kinsey Reports (1948, 1953), which pointed to the wider fluidity and diversity of sexual desires among the population, Saller did not explicitly point to homosexuality as a present hindrance to the actual goal of sexuality, namely procreation or propagation (1956, p. 63). Instead, Saller found problems in, for example, the mixing of the sexes in the workplace and delay of marriage (1956, p. 71).

Although Saller’s book was published in West Germany, its concerns also appeared in the GDR. East Germans could purchase Saller’s book and others, while anxieties about sexuality made their way into popular culture. Fears about youth behavior also surfaced in Gerhard Klein’s popular East German film, Berlin – Schönhauser Corner (1957, Berlin – Ecke Schönhauser), for example, which showed young people beyond the immediate control of parental authority. The postwar trauma and its effects on childrearing and adolescence were clearly on the minds of adults in both Germanys. This fear of seduction and various responses to that affect must be a part of how we understand queerness in the GDR. It begins immediately in the rubble of World War II and continues through the subsequent decades until the door is unexpectedly closed on East German history and society with the country’s collapse.

In what we have seen so far, we find a number of important points related to my argument. The early GDR treatment of queerness, in the form of the legal reckoning with a sodomy law of mixed Prussian and Nazi provenance, demonstrated ignorance of the conditions of queer people under the Nazis. Further, it asserted a need to protect—a powerful reasoning for a law—and linked this to the fragility of the nation and the susceptibility of the young people, who would bear the responsibility of bolstering the new nation’s legitimacy. Saller and others similarly signaled the need to protect and guide young people because of the dangerous consequences of failed gender and sexual development. By the 1970s, some more permissive portrayals appeared, such as Hermann Zschoche’s popular GDR film Seven Freckles (1978, Sieben Sommersprossen) about love and sexual awakening at summer
camp. Into the 1980s, the GDR state continued to refuse the memorialization of gay victims of the Holocaust as “victims of fascism” because of the technical illegality of male homosexuality (further see Bryant, 2009).

**Coming out on film**

Following slow and limited political gains in gay rights by the mid-1980s, a few directors were already thinking about how to bring this topical theme into the cinematic format. The first to see the light of the projector was *The Other Love* (Kißling & Otten, 1988, *Die andere Liebe*), the first and only documentary about homosexuality to appear in the GDR (further see Frackman, 2018; Roberts, 2007). *The Other Love* showed interviews with lesbians and gay men, who talked about their experiences living in East Germany, as well as parents and high school students, all of whom illustrated that the image of queerness had complicated in the decades since the court ruling and decriminalization, but the issue remained one of concern and great social discomfort. The sole feature film to focus on a gay theme, director Heiner Carow’s *Coming Out* (1989) comes, then, as the perfect and ironic resolution to the long line of phobic anxieties about queer people (especially men) and their interactions with young people, which I have charted thus far in this article. Like *The Other Love*, *Coming Out* had languished for some time before it was allowed to be made. But unlike the former, the latter is frequently a part of histories of gay rights in the GDR and in the Eastern bloc. *Coming Out* had its premiere on November 9, 1989, the same day the Berlin Wall fell; unfortunately, this coincidence likely diminished the publicity the film might otherwise have received. The social “coming out” that the film delivered, however, became symbolically linked with the GDR’s own version, opening its borders and eventually disappearing into a united Germany (Dennis, 2012).

As only Nixon could go to China, somehow only a gay teacher could be the protagonist in the GDR’s first gay-themed feature film. In light of the background above, the plot is brazen. *Coming Out* introduces Philipp (played by Matthias Freihof), a young teacher in his 20s who slowly comes to grips with his homosexuality. Earlier in the film, Philipp had received help, support, and affection in his coming out from Matthias (Dirk Kummer), a younger man Philipp met by accident. Philipp hurts Matthias when the former returns to his previous girlfriend, Tanja (Dagmar Manzel), who is now pregnant. In two adjoining scenes near the end of the film, Philipp searches for Matthias, eventually finding him in the arms of one of Philipp’s own students (Lutz, played by Robert Hummel). Rejected by Matthias, Philipp retreats to the gay bar where he originally met Matthias (filmed in the well-known Schoppenstube) and proceeds to get drunk and obnoxiously make a scene. As Philipp is on the verge of being ejected from the bar, a
clarifying (and didactic) moment in the film comes when Walter, an older man in his 60s or 70s (Werner Dissel, born 1912), sits Philipp down and delivers sage words. At first, Philipp drunkenly mistakes Walter’s assistance for a pass and pushes him away.

Sobbing and barely able to speak through his tears, Philipp reveals the horror of his gayness, that he is terrified at the prospect of being alone and lonely, and more so of being a gay teacher. “Don’t you know what that means?” Philipp cries. Walter begins his response by offering dryly, “It could be worse.” But could it? We find out that Walter is alluding to his own horrific experience in the 1930s, which he elaborates on; in the world of the GDR, however, Philipp does represent the nadir of sexual propriety in the long discursive line running from the Nazi era to the film’s production. By this point in the film, Coming Out has successfully shown the overbearing nature of supervision (and arguably, by extension, surveillance) in the form of Philipp’s school administration, enough to allow us to sympathize with a justifiable fear of scrutiny. He has experienced various forms of rejection from his former girlfriend, his mother, his employer, and Matthias. His social isolation is shown as nearly absolute, disconnecting him from friends, family, the state apparatus, and the socialist community itself. Freihof, who played Philipp, has confirmed that the choices for this character, even in their extreme, were crucial for the narrative success of the film. In a way, it necessarily had to be a gay teacher, coaching high school students in their individuality, that would push the boundaries past their breaking point in order to make an impact (Freihof, 2017).

In vivid contrast, Walter describes his life as a gay man of an earlier generation, living under the Nazis, and being imprisoned in a concentration camp. Walter’s monologue illustrates a connected community as well as a grim, melancholic picture of reality for the inhabitants of the world inside the bar. He can take insults, Walter says, but not violence. In this moment, Walter, the oldest person in the bar, establishes his credentials as one who has suffered because of his sexuality. “I’ve paid my dues to be able to sit here and drink schnapps and wait. Wait like everyone here. For a man who smiles at me.” The true didactic moment comes when Walter says he became a member of the Communist Party: “The comrades saved me,” he says. We worked to stop humans’ exploitation of each other, so that now it doesn’t matter if one is a Jew or whatever, he says, slightly slurring his words. “Except for the gays. We forgot them,” Walter says before he rises from the table and walks out of the shot. The music stops with ringing guitars, dissolving into the sound of loud conversation in the bar, as we see Philipp sitting alone at a table, about 20 glasses of brandy littering the tabletop.

Philipp’s encounter with Walter reveals and recalls a number of aspects of the development of gay rights and the visibility of queerness in East Germany. The inclusion and presentation of Walter’s biography...
accomplished a few goals: reminding the viewer (and the hierarchy of the state-owned studios) of the Nazis’ treatment of homosexuals, challenging the GDR’s status quo in its inequitable treatment of queer people, and placating socialist orthodoxy in its praise for the communists. Director Carow was open about how he wanted to take advantage of what was perceived to be a strong solidarity among communists and homosexuals in the concentration camps (Poss & Warnecke, 2006, p. 453). Implicitly, Walter also evokes the genealogy of the GDR’s own understanding of sexuality—that is, that both supposedly positive and negative treatments of queer people in the GDR had related predecessors in the Nazi state. Moreover, Philipp’s horrified exclamation about being a gay teacher links the film to the earlier artifacts on our charted trajectory of East German affective responses to homosexuality.

Conclusion

Coming Out is a late point on the line this article has charted, bringing into being a greater public consciousness of a certain kind of queerness while also demonstrating the resilience of the affective responses to queerness and the stickiness of the subject. That is, the 1950 court ruling linked the GDR’s conceptualization of homosexuality to the concerns about predatory behavior that had been used as grounds for the Nazi intensification of the law; that understanding of homosexuality persisted and remained a ubiquitous concern on the part of agents of the state as well as scientists and educators.

We can say with certainty that homosexuality was a taboo in the GDR, that is, as Adam James Tebble defined a taboo, “considered not only to be unacceptable, forbidden and hidden from view, but also to be undiscussable in the vast majority of circumstances” (2011, p. 921). The open discussion of homosexuality has usually taken place in specific contexts, often as part of efforts to prohibit its existence through criminal legislation. Historically, and still today, substantive debates about advancing or protecting the rights of queer people devolve into peculiar arguments about undeserved protections or religious freedom to discriminate (further see Dernbach, 2017). The judicial ruling that upheld the criminalization of male homosexual activity in the GDR, which I discussed above, is another odd example of an obtuseness with respect to the implications of classifying such behavior as illegal. As Tebble noted, issues of importance to queer people (e.g., marriage rights, tax benefits) are “systematically omitted from political debate and decision making, because the majority would feel repulsed at discussing them and the minority too afraid or ashamed to bring them up” (2011, p. 925). Tebble’s invocation of these emotional responses here is appropriate; it is an illustration of the affective saturation of discourses on queerness, activating responses of shame, disgust, and fear, to name but a few. Both a cause and effect of this way of (not) approaching a topic is that it remains cyclically
sequestered: out of place because it is improper, and improper because it is out of place.

Not writing specifically about East Germany, Tebble connected the phenomenon of unacknowledgability to affect, especially guilt and shame: “Far from being merely private in nature, these [feelings] are ultimately part of a process in which gays and lesbians are held individually responsible for actions that are sourced in society’s attitude towards them, and to which they are merely trying to respond” (original emphasis; 2011, p. 933). These seem to be natural responses to social, political, and cultural impulses and trends that tacitly hold queers responsible for some “crime,” whether against morality or against the law. In other words, queers are blamed for concealing something that the society never wanted them to reveal or even possess.

The East German context offers examples of how queerness, in various forms, did not belong anywhere and could not be acknowledged without consequence. When it did arise as a subject of debate or education, it was often through the lens of homophobic anxiety. The state’s surveillance and suspicion of anyone who might be suspected of being homosexual as well as anyone who might be acquainted with homosexuals is undeniable (further see Stedefeldt, 2006). In spite of what some may see as more favorable conditions vis-à-vis the West or other Eastern bloc countries with respect to decriminalization in 1968, for example, the covert targeting of queers by the Stasi (the state security service) undermines the idea of a better, more liberal place while also bolstering the idea that the GDR remained ambivalent about its queer citizens.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the German are by the author. I wish to acknowledge the support provided by the Dean of Arts Faculty Research Award at the University of British Columbia. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful comments.

2. I use queer in this essay for two reasons. First, I am engaging in taxonomic shorthand to be inclusive of the many identity configurations this rubric can subsume—not always comfortably. This relates to the second reason, which is to highlight in this analysis not only lesbian and gay sexuality, the non-heteronormative identities for which queer is most commonly a synonym, but also other sexually different identities and behaviors. I do not wish to do injury to the identity formulations I emphasize or the behaviors that extend from those identities; rather, using queer highlights the sexually extraordinary and unusual and could include sexual expressions—such as the production, consumption, and distribution of pornography—which were not for the most part publicly visible or acknowledged in the GDR.

3. Because this article is focused on the scope of discourse primarily during the GDR’s existence, I only take into limited consideration the post-1990 remembrances of queer activists. Personal histories form another part of post-GDR analysis and remain invaluable. Readers are directed to texts such as Grau (1990), Lemke (1989), Silge (1991), Setz (2006), and Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Sachsen-Anhalt et al. (2008).
References


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