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“The Other Love in the Other Germany: East German Film, Media, and Social Change for Gay Rights”

Presented at the Canadian Association of University Teachers of German annual conference on 30 May 2016 in Calgary, Alberta.

On November 2, 1988, the short documentary *Die andere Liebe* had its premiere in the Filmtheater Babylon in Berlin.<sup>1</sup> This historical event demonstrated simultaneously and paradoxically the monumental progress that had been made in the area of East German gay rights—though not necessarily on purpose—while also illustrating the tragic backwardness of this country that was and is, in so many ways, stuck in time. Unlike Heiner Carow's feature *Coming Out*, the more popular film that arrived the following year, *Die andere Liebe* is often either left out of historical narratives or only briefly mentioned. Both have been neglected except when offered as a footnote on GDR history given that *Coming Out's* premiere shared a date with the unexpected opening of the GDR's borders in November 1989. The first East German film to focus on the experiences of lesbians and gay men, *Die andere Liebe* is a complicated and contradictory entry in the European, German, and specifically East German chronology of so-called “gay rights.”

This panel's theme (“Film and Consciousness-Raising: Energizing Communities in Socialist East Germany”) was created to complement the broader Congress theme of “Energizing

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<sup>1</sup> Kyle Frackman. “Shame and Love: East German Homosexuality Goes to the Movies.” In *Gender and Sexuality in East German Film: Intimacy and Alienation*, edited by Kyle Frackman and Faye Stewart, 225–48. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2018. Part of this essay is used in this cited article.

Communities.”<sup>2</sup> Corresponding to this, my paper deals with some elements of a particular community in the East German context, specifically and especially varying forms of activism, agitation, reaction, and response among lesbians and gay men. *Die andere Liebe* can probably not be called “activist,” but it played an *energized* and perhaps *energizing* role—it’s difficult to tell—in the history of lesbian and gay rights and emancipation in East Germany.

What was a contradictory and confounding situation for East German lesbians and particularly gay men arose early. In 1946 physician and agitator for gay rights Rudolf Klimmer (1905-1977) appealed to have homosexuals officially accepted as victims of Nazi persecution. The response: only if the individual in question had mounted some other kind of resistance and *that* had been the cause of persecution—if they were *true* antifascists—would they be eligible.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the 1940s saw the beginning of the East German discursive construction of homosexuals as shameful, inadequate members of the socialist world.<sup>4</sup>

The release of the new *Strafgesetzbuch* in 1968, with the elimination of §175, decriminalized consensual male-male sex acts between individuals over 18 years of age. A new law, however, §151, now made these relations, this time also for women for the first time in German history, between adults (over 18) and minors (between 16 and 18) a crime.<sup>5</sup> As Klimmer reported in 1969, “Trotz dieser fortschrittlichen Gesetzgebung hat sich das homosexuelle Leben in der DDR

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<sup>2</sup> <http://congress2016.ca/about/theme>

<sup>3</sup> Karl-Heinz Steinle, “Homophiles Deutschland – West und Ost,” in *Goodbye to Berlin? 100 Jahre Schwulenbewegung - Eine Ausstellung des Schwulen Museums und der Akademie der Künste*, ed. Schwules Museum and Akademie der Künste (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1997), 200.

<sup>4</sup> See Kyle Frackman. “Persistent Ambivalence: Theorizing Queer East German Studies.” *Journal of Homosexuality*, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1423220>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

nicht geändert.”<sup>6</sup> Gay groups and publications remained banned. The justification given was that, since sexuality is a private affair, there is no widespread social need for clubs or gatherings for people with certain inclinations.<sup>7</sup> Thus, as Klimmer confirmed, the gay life that existed in the GDR played out almost exclusively in private, as he said, “in der Stille.”<sup>8</sup>

On January 15, 1973, Rosa von Praunheim’s film *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt* (originally released in the West in 1971) was broadcast on West German television station ARD, which most East Germans were able to view. The film, an odd, campy examination of contemporary gay men’s life, is partly the story of a naïve gay man from the *Provinz* who comes to the big city and is gradually initiated into the gay scene. The film’s frank depiction of gay sexuality and its implicit and overt criticism of elements of this subculture were sources of controversy after its original release in the West. The resounding call at the end of the film, “Raus aus den Toiletten, rein in die Straßen! Freiheit für die Schwulen!” to move beyond a superficial focus on sexual relationships and to identify on the basis of a collective identity, was intended as a rallying cry for organization, political activism and agitation, and collaborative work toward gay emancipation. The film’s controversy was documented in West German media, including an issue of the bimonthly gay magazine *him*,

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<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Klimmer, “Die Situation in der DDR,” in *Weder Krankheit noch Verbrechen: Plädoyer für eine Minderheit*, ed. Rolf Italiaander (Hamburg: Gala Verlag, 1969), 275.

<sup>7</sup> Karl-Heinz Steinle, “DDR und UdSSR,” in *Goodbye to Berlin? 100 Jahre Schwulenbewegung - Eine Ausstellung des Schwulen Museums und der Akademie der Künste*, ed. Schwules Museum and Akademie der Künste (Berlin: Verlag rosa Winkel, 1997), 294.

<sup>8</sup> Klimmer, “Die Situation in der DDR,” 275.

which some would-be gay activists in East Berlin were able to read. Word of the ARD broadcast came from West German gay activists visiting East Berlin on a one-day pass.<sup>9</sup>

For gay people, especially gay men, living in the GDR, Praunheim's film had an inspirational and catalytic effect even in advance of its first viewing. The occasion was a foundation stone for what is recognized as the first gay organization in the East, the *Homosexuelleninitiative Berlin*, or HIB. This group, in existence since 1973 to its disruption and prohibition by GDR authorities in 1978-79, played a number of roles. Unlike groups in the West<sup>10</sup>, the HIB was not in a position to advocate or agitate too conspicuously; surveillance and official hindrances to political organization limited the members' reach. The HIB became primarily a self-help and social organization; its objectives included the creation of safe meeting places and advising or counselling centres that could tend to the many people who could not seek or find any assistance elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

While the HIB played an important role, only in the 1980s did the large array of "firsts" in gay rights occur in the East: the first meetings of a church-sponsored "working group" focused on homosexuality (*Arbeitskreis Homosexualität* in Leipzig, 1982); the first laying of wreaths to commemorate homosexual victims of the Holocaust at Buchenwald, Ravensbrück, and Sachsenhausen (1984); the first radio program about homosexuality within a context of "normal" human sexuality (the youth radio DT 64's *Mensch, Du* 1987 broadcast, "Ich bin homosexuell –

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<sup>9</sup> Josie McLellan, "Glad to Be Gay Behind the Wall: Gay and Lesbian Activism in 1970s East Germany," *History Workshop Journal* 74, no. 1 (2012): 4–5.

<sup>10</sup>e.g., *Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin*, HAW

<sup>11</sup> Steinle, "DDR und UdSSR," 294.

was nun?"); the first documentary about East German lesbians and gay men (*Die andere Liebe*, 1988); the first officially-permitted meetings of a gay-oriented organization (the Sonntags-Club in December 1988 after the abolishment of §151); the first “demand letter” to the GDR government on behalf of organized lesbian and gay rights organizations (June 1989);<sup>12</sup> the first collection of *Protokollliteratur* about gay experiences (Jürgen Lemke’s *Ganz normal anders*, 1989); and the first feature film specifically about a gay topic (*Coming Out*, 1989, which premiered the day the Wall fell). We can notice immediately the weight of the dates at the end of the GDR's existence.

That *Die andere Liebe* was produced at all is probably a bit of an accident. The film did not take the customary route through the machinery of DEFA, the state-run studios. Instead, *Die andere Liebe* appeared under the auspices of the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden, which produced a wide range of educational materials, including short films on subjects like men’s smoking, breastfeeding, genetic counselling for families, sexually transmitted diseases, and teenage pregnancy. While this institution enabled the existence of *Die andere Liebe*, homosexuality’s presence in its line-up of topics raises questions while also illustrating one way same-sex affections have been understood and (by association) pathologized—this, of course, not only in the GDR.

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<sup>12</sup> Memorandum “Für Anerkennung und Gleichberechtigung von Lesben und Schwulen: Grundsätze und Maßnahmen.” *Ibid.*, 296.

One of the film's directors, Helmut Kießling, had made other short films about romantic relationships for the Hygiene Museum.<sup>13</sup> Kießling ended up fleeing the GDR before *Die andere Liebe* was completed, and co-director Axel Otten completed the project. In 1986, two years before *Die andere Liebe*'s release, Kießling laments in an interview that it would not be possible to screen such a film, since it would only elicit a derisive response from the audience<sup>14</sup>. This was an obstacle he must have felt that the GDR had overcome by the following year.

The film grew somewhat organically, in large part thanks to the appearance, cooperation, and collaboration of a young university graduate in theatre studies. This inside informant helped identify interviewees and navigate the lesbian and gay scene in East Berlin, the film's setting.<sup>15</sup> The directors actually knew very little about the community they were setting out to introduce to the uninitiated East German public. Because practically no literature on the subject was available in the GDR, the directors had to arrange for access to topical materials from the West.<sup>16</sup> The actual filming process was hardly intimate in its execution. Because of the East German ORWO film stock used and its low sensitivity to light, locations always needed a great deal of additional lighting, which required more crew members.<sup>17</sup> One can imagine that this must have made

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<sup>13</sup> For more on these kinds of films, see Betheny Moore Roberts, "Heikle Fragen: DDR-Sexualpädagogik und der DEFA-Aufklärungsfilm," in *Die imaginierte Nation: Identität, Körper und Geschlecht in DEFA-Filmen*, ed. Bettina Mathes (Berlin: DEFA-Stiftung, 2007), 110–43. Kießling's other films include *Ist das denn schon Liebe?* (1983), *Schon fast wie Mann und Frau – Erfahrungen mit dem ersten Geschlechtsverkehr* (1984), *Ich will mit dir leben* (1985), and *Die Eltern und der erste Freund* (1987).

<sup>14</sup> Norbert Tolsdorf, "Unter vier Augen mit Dokumentarfilmregisseur Helmut Kießling," *Film Spiegel*, no. 22 (1986): 7.

<sup>15</sup> Helmut Kießling, "'Die andere Liebe': Erfahrungen eines Dokumentarfilmers," in *Kamera! Licht! Aktion! Filme über Körper und Gesundheit 1915 bis 1990*, ed. Susanne Roefiger and Uta Schwarz (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2011), 87.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.92.

aspects of participating in the film all the more difficult for some of the interviewees, all of whom (except for one mother who has her back to the camera) would be “outed” in some way before the film's release.

*Die andere Liebe* presents several interviews with lesbians, gay men, two young men's mothers, and a class of students in order to offer a snapshot of who East German “homosexuals” are, how people see them, and why they ought not be viewed with any kind of contempt. In its compilation format and interactive mode,<sup>18</sup> this film is not revolutionary in its structure, only in the appearance of its content. Most of the film's interviews are presented in the same way. The interviewees are initially seen in medium-long—usually handheld—shots, often interacting with other members of the cast, or going about their daily business on gloomy Berlin days. These sequences are “establishing” in that they introduce the “who?” and “where?” of the moment but also in that they are seemingly supposed to establish that these are *normal* people out among “us” and also in their own habitats. Most of the time in this candid footage, interviewees are conspicuously and slightly awkwardly aware that they are being filmed.

In one of the more compelling interviews, two gay men, one of whom, Andreas, has already recounted the difficulties he experienced coming out to his parents, are in a living room with Andreas' mother. The director, Kießling, prompts her, whose back remains toward the camera, to discuss her son's fear of loss of her affection that she perceived in him and the negative comments she hears about gays from her co-workers, to whom she has not disclosed that her son

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<sup>18</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 44.

is gay. As she replies, talking about how she has chosen not to describe this part of her family's reality, the camera slowly zooms in on Andreas and lingers on his face, which reveals a quiet and downcast discomfort and, possibly, shame.

Introduced by Andreas' mother's observation that younger generations are more open to such things, an interview with the classmates of one of the other interviewees (apparently Andreas' boyfriend) reveals mixed attitudes and forms of tolerance. It's a very contrived situation in which these teenagers express some of the many reactions to gay people. One boy reluctantly admits the whole thing makes him a bit afraid; another points to the embarrassment—or shame—of other people when they encounter an effeminate gay man. One girl bashfully says she was surprised, since the gay youth is good-looking and could have any girl he wants; another says it's no big deal, and everyone is just different. Meanwhile, their gay classmate sits atop one of the classroom tables near the back of the group, indirectly the subject of the discussion while passively waiting for the judgments of his peers. This scene is unsurprisingly awkward and slightly uncomfortable to watch. The students, who likely don't want to talk about any of this with adults, let alone be filmed while doing so, are candid in their answers to Kießling's questions, illustrating the cavernous divide between many East Germans and the bureaucratic, repressive structures that had long limited any such public discussion or display of it.

*Die andere Liebe* succeeds in its depiction of lesbians and gay men as a kind of “normal,” not alarmingly different from the average East German, which is definitely one of its goals. The interviewees are articulate and frank, though they become *abnormal* in their very exhibition in



the scope of the film. In some moments like those I have described, the gay interviewees' functions shift, unintentionally positioning them as fluctuating subjects and objects of shame.

Although the ruling SED's newspaper, *Neues Deutschland*, remained silent on the film, mutely acquiescing to its existence, a slightly contradictory review in the CDU-aligned newspaper *Neue Zeit* praised the film. The reviewer calls it variously "frisch," "natürlich," and "kein Lehrstück," while also calling it "geschönt" and remarking that anything disturbing ("was abstößt") was missing, including the (apparently expected) "schrille Töne," "effeminiertes Wesen" and "alt[e] Schwul[e]." Co-director Axel Otten responded, "Wir wollten erreichen, daß die Leute die Schwulen lieben, daß sie sie mögen," to make them tolerant.<sup>19</sup>

A study of the film by the *Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung* in Leipzig revealed significant audience divisions with regard to viewer reception.<sup>20</sup> We must keep in mind that any survey or opinion data generated in the GDR must be analyzed cautiously, but a large majority of the viewers, both gay and straight, reacted favourably to *Die andere Liebe*. These respondents found the film comprehensible, informative, and "ganz und gar nicht langweilig."<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, those who were more informed about homosexuality and relevant topics pointed to deficits in the film's execution, including what they saw as a superficial treatment of the coming out process, the non-representative sample of interviewees, and an absence of topics like non-monogamy.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Arnold, "Eine Andere Liebe: Zu Einem Dokumentarfilm Der DEFA," *Neue Zeit*, March 9, 1989.

<sup>20</sup> Konrad Weller, "'Die Andere Liebe': Untersuchung Zum Film" (Leipzig: Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung, 1990), [http://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/40380/ssoar-1990-weller-Die\\_andere\\_Liebe\\_\\_Untersuchung.pdf?sequence=1](http://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/40380/ssoar-1990-weller-Die_andere_Liebe__Untersuchung.pdf?sequence=1). The associated film screenings and surveys took place September to December, 1989. I am aware that data generated during the GDR must be considered with caution, since we know that many East Germans would not have revealed their opinions openly or completely when asked.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 17–18.

Summing up the study, its author (Konrad Weller) writes, “Die Erkenntnis der Wesensgleichheit verschiedener Erscheinungsformen der Sexualität (heterosexueller und homosexueller) ist noch nicht Gemeingut.”<sup>23</sup> Large questions remain on the periphery, for example, about the relationship of same-sex eroticism to trendiness and whether it is or can be the result of seduction (a common idea). Weller acknowledges the difficult educational work that must be done and points to the need for a more complex engagement with all aspects of lesbians' and gay men's experiences.

Janice Irvine has argued that shame can entertain, sell, and engage in politics.<sup>24</sup> Here, *Die andere Liebe* seems to be also telling us *sotto voce* that shame can also educate. In this paper and in my larger research project, I wanted to trace part of the trajectory of East Germany's collective disavowal of a component of the socialist human landscape. I have described some of the developments (since the 1940s) that preceded this final filmic coming out, which was curtailed in its usefulness, as we can gather from the slowing rentals of the film following the turmoil of November 9, 1989. Beyond the film's purely historical or documentary role as an artifact, it is fascinating because of its potential to reveal some of the contours of gay and straight experiences while also posing some questions about how individuals' affective lives can be viewed and how they may have helped to shape events. One of the things we witness is the playing out of the affective life of media, making clear the entangled relationships among director, interviewee, viewer, researcher, and others. The parameters of what the film could discuss are delimited by individual and collective shame. There is no mention of legal, political, social, or historical

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>24</sup> Irvine, “Shame Comes Out of the Closet.”

background with regard to the GDR situation of lesbians and gay men. Although the director (Kißling) attested to the free hand he was given in the film, the reality of the GDR, even the late GDR, circumscribed the intelligibilities of the film's structure and content.

In the year following *Die andere Liebe's* release, the feature film *Coming Out* had its gala premiere as the Wall fell. A review in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* managed to place the latter film in some context and to illustrate how it comes monumentally at the end and beginning of something. (Not so surprisingly, *Die andere Liebe* disappears in these discussions.) At a time when it was completely uncertain what the structure of rights and protections in a newly unified Germany would be, the reviewer observed that the statement “Ich bin schwul” had waited a long time to be uttered publicly in East Germany; then the “Bekenntnis eines einzelnen” “geht fast in dem Bekenntnis der Massen unter: 'Wir sind das Volk!'” (Zimmermann). In this understanding, a crucial question about the film and its society, “Schwul sein und Lehrer, weißt du, was das heißt?,” also becomes a kind of synecdoche for the larger experience of East Germans in a penultimate “coming out” and blending (and erasure) of minor/ity existence.