“Based on a True Story: Tracking What is Queer about German Queer Documentary”

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The 2012 documentary *Unter Männern—Schwul in der DDR* (Among Men: Gay in the GDR, 2012, dir. Ringo Rösener and Markus Stein) begins with a kind of cinematic overture.¹ This overture introduces the viewer to three of the film’s interviewees whose comments set the stage for the biographical and documentary nature of what follows as well as the themes that will surface in the subjects’ narratives: the gay experiences of a bygone time and place and under a now-extinct social system. The first man, Jürgen (b. 1932), calls himself old and is amused that his life now involves working in the garden; Christian (b. 1934), the second man, reveals that he long debated whether to participate in the film and to out himself, since he says that part of his life is over; the third, Frank (b. 1959), also reflects on his current situation and ponders the fantastical thought of waking up and no longer being gay.

At this point, the film’s first act begins. Accompanied by music with an electronic feel, the film cuts to establishing shots of Berlin, a tracking shot of a young man on a bicycle (who we come to find out is one of the directors, Ringo Rösener) and a cut to this same man’s entrance into a gay club replete with flashing disco lights and go-go boys. The tracking shot both quotes and foreshadows the use of footage from the landmark film *Coming Out*, the only East German feature film to focus on homosexuality. A voice-over narration by Rösener addresses the viewer, introducing us to his on- and off-screen presence, informing us that he was born in rural East Germany, not long before the fall of the Berlin Wall and Reunification, and dared to be openly gay only after fleeing this more remote part of the country. This first act, in which Rösener positions the film in the present but consciously in juxtaposition to an historical past, gives us a reason for this film: a contemporary German gay man expresses his surprise at what he does and
does not know about the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany), the land in which he was born, and also at how his life would be different if the Berlin Wall had not come down and the GDR had survived. This self-conscious engagement with the topic and the structuring of the film are important to understand since it points to the film’s straddling of time and place in its effort to present the past, almost as a secondary source, but also to represent a component of the past’s ongoing development, as a primary source. In an examination of German queer documentary, I will discuss this film and situate it in the broader context of this genre of nonfiction or documentary cinematic productions. The fate of this film is also a desideratum in its queerness, for, as we will see, it has found different audiences and opportunities in its national and international availability from, for example, a kind of fraternal twin production released the following year, which I discuss in less detail: Out in Ost-Berlin—Lesben und Schwule in der DDR (Out in East Berlin: Lesbians and Gays in the GDR, 2013, dir. Jochen Hick and Andreas Strohfeldt). As we will see, these films engage with—and partly aim to tell—history while also becoming artifacts themselves. In this essay, I will analyze the use of and play with cinematic grammar and describe how the documentary Unter Männern relates to and departs from other examples of documentary and ideas from film theory.

I find the film that I discuss here, Unter Männern, to be queer, indeed, almost overdetermined in its queerness, but not necessarily in ways that one might expect. In subject matter, it focuses on gay men who lived in East Germany, which ventures beyond the heteronormative in the obvious way in that the individuals evince same-sex affections that positioned them as outsiders in Europe more generally but definitely within the GDR. Less obvious, however, is the degree to which an examination of East Germany, and non-heteronormative affections and behaviors in addition, ventures into the realm of the strange and
extraordinary. Studying the GDR requires a sort of time travel to a country that is stuck in time perhaps like few others. Remnants, markers, and reminders of the nation exist, but the GDR remains a remarkable turn of German history—an experiment in socialism, surveillance, and extensive bureaucratic control that has curiously inspired nostalgia and diverse popular and scholarly debates over its legacy. It will become clear that Unter Männern is an apt example of what Elizabeth Freeman describes, interpreting Derrida, as she engages with historiography and history itself: one is bound to what was “impossible in a given historical moment” and “to the other who . . . has priority and thus splits our selfhood, detours our forward-moving agency.”

The unintelligibility and near impossibility of queer GDR moments become clear in the film and appear in my discussion below. Not to be forgotten, the form of and aesthetic decisions made in the film have their own oddities that render the work queer, including with respect to the genre or subgenre into which the film might be placed for classification.

Unter Männern weaves together three threads of, first, historically relevant memory recited by its chosen protagonists; second, some personal history on the part of the primary filmmaker (i.e., director Ringo Rösener); and, third, between and among them, filmic artifacts or evidence of life in the GDR. This documentary presents the aforementioned interviews, but it is intriguing not for this inclusion, but rather for the mobilization of self-reflexivity, autobiography, and self-presentation on the part of the filmmaker as a means of processing and presenting what the interviewees relate. Unter Männern offers a compelling examination of gay individuals who lived in the GDR and who recount and relive diverse experiences with the apparatus of the GDR state. This film is one that does not do purely or customary documentarian work in a way that one might expect of an expository historical narrative. Instead the film points toward discontinuities that mark distinct eras of gay experience and possibility: pre- and post-Wall in the
GDR and post-GDR. Before engaging with the film in more detail, I will work through some contextual considerations of genre and subgenre, as we also explore how Unter Männern, its topic, and its style display and play with their queerness.

<1>Queerness and Queer Cinema

Engaging in such an inquiry—on “things queer”—has customarily required that one assert one’s definition or the scope of one’s understanding of “queer” itself. Generally, the idea of queerness encompasses abrasion and a (usually) sexual quality of exceeding boundaries of identity and behavior, especially with respect to transcending conventional limitations of heteronormative classification. This excessive attribute often accompanies an audacious playfulness, sometimes evoking camp aesthetics, which can irritate the status quo. In an East German context, a notoriously prudish nation in which the expectation for non-heterosexual, unconventional sexuality and gender was inconspicuousness, “queer” becomes even more inclusive. Standards of gender and sexuality in East Germany depended at certain points on the widely shared understanding of a “socialist personality,” which itself relied on supposedly “moral” and “proper” behavior.⁵ Here, then, queerness antagonizes what is allegedly “natural” in unadventurous, reproductive, monogamous heterosexuality.

Given the fertile ground of queer and feminist studies, I will be building on a rich foundation of other scholars’ work in relating my understanding of queerness to cinematic production. Advancing from the understanding of queerness, then, we can comprehend queer film to embody not exclusively the presentation, thematization, or display of sexualities that do not fit in with normative heterosexuality. Cinematic queerness can come in the form of “an authorial voice, a character, a mode of textual production, and/or various types of reception
practice.” Similarly, queer cinema can indicate “alternative cinematic aesthetics organized around non-normative desires.” In The Queer German Cinema, Alice Kuzniar, developing ideas coming out of B. Ruby Rich’s conceptualization of New Queer Cinema, posits that, if we operate on the assumption that sexuality can be expressed or “determined” visually, whether through “word or image,” “the role played by art or experimental cinema is crucial for fantasizing and promoting alternative representations.” The rich cinematic tradition and potential which we certainly see in queer (German) film attests to Kuzniar’s idea that “queer cinema is one of baroque display and theatricality that paradoxically hides as much as it reveals.” This evocative description of what one can potentially find when peering toward, through, or behind queer cinematic images is germane to the examination of Unter Männern; we will see that the film can be simultaneously excessive and miserly with its forms, objectives, and presentation of these as it interacts with our expectations for what will appear on screen.

German-language cinema has a long history of associations with queerness. With just a few selected examples here, this spans the wide range from the earliest cinematic engagements with gayness in Anders als die Andern (Different from the Others, 1919, dir. Richard Oswald), gender-bending and cross-dressing (Viktor und Viktoria, Viktor and Viktoria, 1933, dir. Reinhold Schünzel), to Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s complicated treatments of transsexuality (In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden, In a Year with 13 Moons, 1978) or gay sexuality (Faustrecht der Freiheit, Fox and His Friends, 1975; Querelle, 1982), from Monika Treut’s exploration of gender identity (Gendernauts, 1999) and Pierre Sanoussi-Bliss’s thematization of race and HIV/AIDS (Zurück auf los, Return to Go, 2000) to Sabine Bernardi’s take on transsexuality in Romeos (2011).

Despite this long and varied tradition, in a 1998 essay on German film from 1970 to 1994, a period in which there were several prominent queer films of note, Les Wright laments a paucity
of scholarship on queer German film, a vexation that was soon to be addressed by Kuzniar’s
study in 2000. Wright’s essay itself, as well as much of the other related scholarship on “queer”
(variously defined) film, devotes the majority of its energy to analyzing feature films, especially
mainstays of gay and lesbian criticism by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Ulrike Ottinger, and
Monika Treut, as examples.

There have been few scholarly treatments of the queer side of German documentary
filmmaking. Kuzniar points out that the genre is underrepresented in scholarship on film. Terri
Ginsberg and Andrea Mensch’s survey of German film, A Companion to German Cinema
(2012), includes essays on depictions of cross-dressing and the (documentary) work of Jochen
Hick. Only one essay in a more recent collection on a related nonfiction subgenre
 autobiographical film) treats a queer topic. Robert M. Gillett, too, has noted the glaring
absence of material on the subspecialty of queer German documentary film. Indeed, he writes
that, given the presence of notable filmmakers in and adjacent to this genre—like the arguably
most prominent Rosa von Praunheim as well as Monika Treut, Elfı Mikesch, Jürgen Brüning,
Jörg Fockele, Claudia Schillinger, and Jochen Hick—“The sheer number and weight of these
names, and the contexts in which they occur, suggest that something important has been
marginalized.” In his examination of Jochen Hick’s work, Gillett has instructively surveyed
German docu-cinematic tendencies and found links to queer German films, a project that I will
not duplicate here. Even analyses of filmmakers whose work is usually included in the queer
cinematic canon, like Ulrike Ottinger, have avoided direct engagement with the “queerness” of
the work. In an essay on biopic documentaries, Rich notes that many of these, affected as they
have been by both the tradition of Holocaust testimonials, coming out narratives, and the
HIV/AIDS epidemic, can strike elegiac tones. Though many related films have appeared since
Rich wrote that essay, one can still find a pervasive or latent melancholy in many queer cinematic works, including those that I discuss below.

<1>Documentary Style

British filmmaker John Grierson (1898–1972), whose work in the 1930s contributed to the understanding of what “documentary” is, gave it an excellent definition, calling it “the creative treatment of actuality.”

Taking a more definitive perspective, Erik Barnouw grants that documentary filmmakers can play a wide range of roles, from “explorer” to “advocate” to “observer,” among others—roles that can and do overlap depending on historical and social context.

Perhaps most influential, judging by the number of other scholars citing it, is Bill Nichols’s *Representing Reality* and his follow-up study *Blurred Boundaries*, which also create a documentary taxonomy of “expository,” “observational,” “interactive,” “reflexive,” and, later, “performative” modes. Much of the definitional theorization is based on the acceptance or rejection of the assumption that nonfiction film, of which documentary is sometimes called a subgenre, has a mandate of objectivity and what Nichols calls “sobriety,” or that nonfiction film ought to be assessed, again at least in part, by the degree to which it remains “authentic” or “true to reality.” That is an assumption that *Unter Männern* and films like it challenge. Given what we know about queer cinema and its tendency and drive toward the theatrical or inexplicable, one can perceive that there may very well be a contradiction brewing here under the surface.

Indeed, this may be one of the reasons for the reticence many scholars have had in trying to understand what queer documentary might be, German or not, particularly since the filmmakers are likely to weave threads of their own sensibility and biography into the fabric of the nonfiction works, which adds yet another complicated layer of what can be critically analyzed.
In New Documentary, Stella Bruzzi criticizes exclusive understandings of what this genre may achieve or how filmmakers are or are not supposed to avail themselves of various stylistic and formal methods in their work. Most important among these are editing and narration, but also other uses of sound, lighting, and mise-en-scène. In other words, the sobriety and objectivity about which so many, including Nichols, have written are naturally challenged by the very medium in which filmmakers employ them, especially as these films are increasingly made in the context of steady self-broadcasting in venues on social media and online video distribution services like YouTube. In Bruzzi’s words, “what else is a documentary but a dialogue between a filmmaker, a crew and a situation that, although in existence prior to their arrival, has irrevocably been changed by that arrival?” Bruzzi writes from the perspective that “documentaries are inevitably the result of the intrusion of the filmmaker onto the situation being filmed, that they are performative because they acknowledge the construction and artificiality of even the non-fiction film and propose . . . the truth that emerges through the encounter between filmmakers, subjects and spectators.” By means of devices like the narration the viewer hears in a film, the “conscious structuring” of the film’s story becomes even more perceptible. These considerations should not be surprising to consumers of documentary films, or even photography, since these debates have persisted for many decades. Indeed, as Elizabeth Cowie notes, “the documentary film nevertheless involves more disreputable features of cinema usually associated with entertainment film, namely, the pleasures and fascination of film as spectacle.” Thus, we can see one of the ongoing debates among film scholars with respect to the authenticity, objectivity, and the nonfiction quality itself of the documentary film. Cowie’s observation also gives us a glimpse of the special queer potential that documentary can and does have as it perversely and equitably satisfies varying desires. Although I will not argue for or
against any genre categorization of Unter Männern, the question of its nonfictional nature and the filmmaker’s “intrusion” into, or presence in, it is a crucial one for my interpretation.

An interaction between the two sides of the camera, like we see in Unter Männern (I described one example above), is not a new phenomenon, neither for nonfiction film in general nor for documentary film that focuses on lesbian and gay subjects. Nonetheless, scholarship on the subject multiplied in the first decade of the 2000s; one could argue that the increasing availability of digital methods in filmic production has fostered burgeoning possibilities for experimentation in form, style, and genre.²⁸ Alisa Lebow, in her study of Jewish autobiographical documentary, identifies two primary features of what she calls first-person documentary: “subjectivity and relationality.” The former, as I discussed above, had been supposedly eschewed—or at least critically debated—in documentary film; the latter will usually require the involvement of others (e.g., crew, acquaintances, interviewees) in order to “construct[] the self on screen.”²⁹ Robin Curtis and Angelica Fenner and the contributors to their anthology on the subject have observed that the trend toward autobiography has expanded or made its way to German-language film if sometimes in ways that deviate from the styles of other geographic and national areas.³⁰ Frequently appearing in films that Curtis and Fenner mention are the drive toward intergenerational exchange and topics that have hints of Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past), if not explicitly with the German national past—particularly the Holocaust—then with the filmmaker’s own personal past, including one’s place within a changing (“transnational”) Germany and Europe. Unter Männern is an example of this broader trend, combining as it does the autobiographical and biographical with a retrospective examination of East German history and the development, however stunted, of LGBTQ rights
and public consciousness. This is another of the ways in which the film is both a primary and secondary source of historical assessment.

A willingness to experiment with media and genre is also present, often leading to difficulties with straightforward categorization and analysis of the work in question.\textsuperscript{31} It must be noted that the majority of the scholarship either ignores or only cursorily treats the subject of queer documentary. Indeed, it is striking how infrequently the subject of documentary (and nonfiction film more broadly) appears in research on queer cinema and queer German cinema, especially since there is no shortage of relevant works to analyze. A possible explanation is that these works may either purposely aim to subvert the categorization or blend genres in a way that resists customary classification—often one of the first steps of critical analysis. Another practical consideration, and one that affects \textit{Unter Männern} itself as we will see below, is that of distribution; these films often have difficulty finding viewers when it can be a tremendous challenge for them to locate companies or infrastructure for distribution, especially internationally. One could also deem this a paradoxical problem in an age in which there have never been so many opportunities and venues for online, digital publication.

One of these characteristics of categorization, an awareness of the filmmakers’ presence (or interjection) in the subject matter their works are addressing, will be crucial for understanding the interpretation I offer. As I noted above, \textit{Unter Männern} is enacting and becoming a part of the history it is also reporting. Appropriately, theories of performative documentary will be useful for this discussion. Performative documentary, as theorized by Nichols (in \textit{Blurred Boundaries}) and Bruzzi, offers approaches and filmic styles that were either unavailable to many earlier filmmakers—newly possible with different equipment and editing software, for example—or were undesirable as inappropriate for the documentary form.
According to Nichols, performative documentary can “suspend[] realist representation” and “put[] the referential aspect of the message in brackets, under suspension. . . . These films make the proposition that it is possible to know difference differently.” Bruzzi argues that these documentaries “use[] performance within a non-fiction context to draw attention to the impossibilities of authentic documentary representation,” more in the sense of Judith Butler’s mobilization of J.L. Austin.

Unlike examples of the New Queer Cinema as theorized by B. Ruby Rich, the queer works I mention here are less technically or thematically exuberant in their abrasion as well as sometimes more conventional in their form. Nonetheless, these films, especially *Unter Männern*, create different frames for the narratives they deliver and make use of unexpected on-screen visual techniques that mark the works with non-realistic or stylized features. Although documentary, as Stella Bruzzi has argued, is often seen as a purely “cerebral, intellectual genre . . . ; quite often it is virtually the opposite: emotion-driven, sensual and . . . primal in its appeal.” There is definitely an overlap between these approaches (intellectual and emotional); indeed, as Michael Renov writes, fiction and documentary “inhabit one another.” This overlap, or even a creative tension, is visible especially in *Unter Männern*. We can see that the film at least hints at the multitude of routes toward queer experience. The film illustrates a diversity of queer experience during and after East Germany’s existence, which is another of its goals.

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<1>Documentary within LGBTQ Cinema

A crucial question involves the parameters of an examination of “queer documentary.” Several of the filmmakers discussed in this essay have moved into and out of the generic field of “documentary,” often forcing the viewer and critic to ponder where to place the work in relation
to the artist’s oeuvre or even in relation to other filmic texts. To provide a fuller view of Unter Männern, it can be useful to understand how it does or does not fit into trends in queer (German) documentary filmmaking. The film features primarily interviewees’ own individual, first-person accounts of topics that are often included in gay and lesbian documentary and personal history. The various interviewees recount experiences related to childhood, growing up, the realization of gayness, searching for other gay contacts, cruising, coming out, and fear of discovery. In many respects, these accounts resemble what one finds in other documentaries on related topics, like Portrait of Jason (1967), Word is Out (1977, dir. Mariposa Film Group), Gay USA (1977, dir. Arthur J. Bressan, Jr.), Before Stonewall (1984, dir. Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg), The Times of Harvey Milk (1984, dir. Rob Epstein), Tongues Untied (1989, dir. Marlon Riggs), The Celluloid Closet (1995, dir. Rob Epstein), and Paragraph 175 (1999, dir. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman). Like Paragraph 175, which presents experiences of men persecuted under the Nazis, and, indeed, like these other American “gay films,” Unter Männern is doing important documentarian work, in that it is cataloguing the fading memories of people who lived under now-extinct social systems. It thus creates what Bruzzi has called “film as record,” which also becomes archaeological in Foucault’s sense. The inclusion of autobiographical elements is not uncommon to queer documentary film, as Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin have observed; these films often complement conventional autobiographical details with additions like “fictional vignettes, found footage, and activist video.” The emergence and surge of the HIV/AIDS epidemic inevitably colored much of the cinematic work of this period, producing a preponderance of narratives reflecting grief, loss, and mourning. A recent and popular example is How to Survive a Plague (2012, dir. David France), a compilation of interviews juxtaposed with contemporarily-collected footage in the founding and active years
of ACT UP, the activist organization formed to advocate and fight for HIV/AIDS funding and education in the most devastating times of the epidemic in the United States.

One can observe that the roles played by, and the presentation or composition of, lesbian and gay film, documentary film, and documentary impulses shifted in the post-Stonewall era and again in the 1980s in the face of HIV/AIDS. Films from these eras presented—though not strictly sequentially—tales of the outcast queer or the vampiric lesbian or the “sexual intermediate” in the German tradition, eventually followed by histories, coming out narratives, activist campaigns, and sometimes elegiac confrontation with the realities of HIV/AIDS.42 Dealing specifically with lesbian and gay film, Richard Dyer defined the “affirmation film” (e.g., Word is Out and Gay USA, both 1977), which contributed to consciousness-raising efforts and utilized typical narrative devices like stories of coming out, first gay experiences of sex and community, and early pride parades.43 The goals of the films were often twofold: first, the affirmational aim of giving LGBTQ individuals a forum in which to write their own history and hear others’ stories, and second, to do “outreach” of a sort to the (heterosexual) community beyond. They usually failed in the latter as their audiences consisted mostly of gay viewers.44 In the (West) German case, without doubt films with this topic mostly follow the decriminalization of male homosexual acts in the late 1960s and subsequent social visibility; they include the work of filmmakers like Rosa von Praunheim, Monika Treut, and Frank Ripploh, for example, often with the effect of making LGBTQ narratives more visible if not more palatable, while transcending the earlier drive toward advocacy and activism that had characterized much of LGBT (and later queer) cinema.45 The work of Jochen Hick, one of the directors of Out in Ost-Berlin, a film related to Unter Männern, ought also to be mentioned. Hick’s films usually go in a more audacious direction than Out in Ost-Berlin does, seemingly being directed toward a broader
public and possibly with a television viewership in mind. The directors of Unter Männern faced decisions about how to present supposed reality by using an aesthetic and stylized method, again in a genre in which the viewer often expects, rightly or wrongly, the objective absence of any auteur.

Unter Männern

Responding to my interview question of why he and Stein wanted to create a film on this subject, Rösener, born in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania in 1983, illustrates the central dilemma or structuring issue for this genre and this film in particular:

Der Antrieb für mich war herauszufinden, wie man als Schwuler in der DDR leben musste. Da ich noch in der DDR geboren bin, habe ich mich irgendwann gefragt, wie es denn wäre, wenn es die Mauer noch geben würde. . . . Was wir letztlich . . . zeigen wollten, war, wie die Schwulen sich selbst verstanden haben.

[The impetus for me was to find out how one had to live as a gay man in the GDR. Since I was actually born in the GDR, I asked myself at one point what it would be like if the Wall still existed. . . . In the end what we wanted to show was how gay men understood themselves.] Rösener’s present experience (at the time of the film production) as a 29-year-old gay man living in what used to be East Germany, presented autobiographically albeit selectively, thus becomes the connective tissue that draws the other disparate experiences of the film’s interview subjects together. He is placed literally in the footsteps and positions of other protagonists. Within this framework, then, the filmmakers’ goal in presenting these men’s self-understanding was to reach
contemporary young people in a different historical and social context. This educational, quasi-activist, and historical impetus aimed to create a history-telling text that would illustrate how these East German men lived out their gayness often in secret, meeting in public toilets or using surreptitious means to find sexual, erotic, or social contact. Discussions of sex in Klappen (public toilets), for example, mark a difference between the narrator (Rösener) and the protagonists, one that is both generational and contextual. It is one marker of the post-1980s developments in gay culture on both sides of the Wall and Wende. While this covert behavior also occurred in the West, these men in the GDR lived in a state that, while at times legally and sometimes superficially more liberal or leftist, embodied myriad contradictions—a daily world that will seem far removed from most (western European and North American) younger viewers today. This was a context in which primarily male same-sex sexual activity, while legal in the GDR after 1968, was the target of massive state surveillance and manipulation, a consequence that could not be rivaled by anything in the West.49

To present and interact with this context one can say that Unter Männern has two main parallel tracks which interweave in its narrative arc: the first one, which is primarily biographical and consists mostly of interviews, and the second and smaller one, which is autobiographical, more stylized, and in a different sense historical. The film begins and ends with its focus on the six interviewees, its so-called protagonists.50 It does not construct a revelatory narrative path; with these protagonists we know what their sexuality is—or we can claim to know it or at least why they are in the film, although their experiences with sexuality were not always directly linear. For my examination of this film I focus on two aspects of the film’s two tracks: first, sequences that relate directly to Rösener’s experience and the construction of the interactive quality of the film, and second, subjects’ interviews which testify to the strange nature of East
German gay experiences. I have chosen these interviewees from the film on the one hand for the uniqueness of their experience among the other protagonists and the insights they provide into East German gay history, and on the other hand for the filmic and narrative devices that become apparent in their segments.

Above I described what I called the film’s first act, which followed the introductory overture of three interviewees’ appearances. After director Rösener’s self-placement within the narration, a cut takes us to a stationary medium shot of Rösener in front of a TV and VCR into which he inserts a cassette with a clip from Heiner Carow’s 1989 East German film, Coming Out. The narrator reveals a degree of surprise: “Das gab es wirklich: einen Film über Schwule in der DDR” (There was such a thing: a film about gays in the GDR). Largely because of the complicated and thorny discourses surrounding same-sex sexuality in East Germany, one has relatively few filmic artifacts to which we can refer, especially if we contrast this legacy with that of West Germany. The final years of the GDR’s life, indeed the day the Berlin Wall fell (November 9, 1989), saw the release of Coming Out, a bold and intriguing film from one of East Germany’s most popular and celebrated directors. Unlike in West Germany, the GDR’s gay movement, as Bert Thinius writes, got its cinematic debut at the end of its existence. Unter Männern absorbs this historic film and uses it as a means with which to engage the viewer and to provide an initial conduit to connect to East German gay history.

The method, used multiple times in the film, allows whatever sequence might be playing on the VCR to transition from being framed by our screen to occupying our screen itself. We then partake of what Thomas Waugh calls an “interactive realism” in which the viewer is introduced to the informants, in this case also generically, without their names appearing on screen. Waugh has summarized the conventional approach as a “formulaic mix of interviews
and archival footage joined by a mortar of observational vérité and musical interludes.” The narrator’s persona is not the common documentarian “voice of God,” nameless and faceless while providing contextual information or interpretation with apparent generic and omniscient authority; instead, we hear Rösener himself, a gay man taking a kind of ownership of history and identity: he is professing to be a “verhinderner Ossi” (stunted Easterner), a man born late into the GDR (in 1983) but lacking a knowledge of the social and cultural history of his community of gay men within that country.

Further, through the re-enactment of certain scenes or actions, the film draws repeated links between Rösener and Philipp, the main protagonist in Coming Out (played by Matthias Freihof) and the other informants. Quoting the 1989 film, shots of Rösener on a bicycle mimic those of Philipp in the earlier film, as mentioned above: long and medium tracking shots show the cyclists and what lies behind them, as usually the camera is moving in front of the bicycles. Rösener indicated to me that the filmmakers aimed to make the narrator more naïve than Rösener himself—thus providing a means by which the film could again enact the performative history it hopes to present. This doubling of Rösener and Philipp gives the former, our guide through the interviews and stories of the film, any necessary credentials to participate in this historical quest for comprehension. Not anonymous yet uninitiated in the topic as a generic narrator could be, Rösener instead assumes the position of a simultaneously naïve and knowing fellow traveler, who aims to stand in for viewers who are otherwise ignorant of any related background and context. This stepping back and forth between the worlds of Unter Männern and Coming Out thus serves these two purposes: to link the narrator with Philipp and to allow for the viewer’s empathetic identification with the narrator.
Unter Männern demonstrates its playful self-awareness as a documentary bridging eras with another unexpected tactic. A visual effect that imitates graffiti or a highlighter pen appears at numerous points in the film to mark (or “out”) the locations and individuals on which it alights. We first see it as the director-narrator Rösener cycles past Dmitri Vrubel’s Berlin Wall painting My God! Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love (Господи! Помоги мне выжить среди этой смертной любви) at Berlin’s East Side Gallery. The most recognizable of the 1990-era Wall art, Vrubel’s painting inspired confusion and surprise among many who viewed it, the artist’s attempt to render what he saw in the original inspirational photo from 1979, “a repulsive, revolting thing that almost made me throw up.” That photo illustrates part of the 1979 meeting in which Soviet Union General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev and East German General Secretary Erich Honecker kiss during the former’s visit to the GDR, a visit partly to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the GDR’s founding and also to seal an economic deal between the two countries. After Rösener has exited the frame to the right, the palimpsestic highlighting colors in Honecker pink in his brotherly kiss with Brezhnev. This stylized effect emphasizes the artificial nature of the medium, as well as the film’s understanding of itself as a creative exponent of the documentary genre, while also communicating or giving a clue to the viewer that the graffiti will focus on same-sex intimacies, erotic or not. Moreover, this first and trendsetting use of the onscreen intervention throws into relief the contradictory and occasionally grotesque quality of East German gender and sexual discourse.

At another point in the film, archival footage of a gathering of the Freie Deutsche Jugend (Free German Youth) freezes, and two young men who had glanced back toward the camera are colored in. This latter example—and there are more in the film—also illustrates one of the main critical concerns about where the boundaries at the edge of the documentary genre might lie.
Either of the examples I have discussed could be potentially problematic or odd, given the possibilities for interpretation. In Bruzzi’s critique, she notes that the acknowledged presence of the filmmaker has customarily been seen as a problem for this genre, since it would call into question the authentic nature of what is supposed to be nonfiction.56 For some, the former example could push the film out of the purely documentary genre into the realm of autobiographical or, more likely, essay films; the latter provides a stylistic alienation that creates a different kind of playful artwork, though one with the implication that locations and individuals thus marked are, for the viewers, proof of the existence of gay people in the GDR and, for the East Germans in the pre-1989 reality discussed in the film, potentially vulnerable targets.

Further, this film’s occasional use of archival material, like the FDJ footage, in its bare format recalls other documentaries (including Out in Ost-Berlin), but Unter Männern instead edits, develops, or tweaks the material in a mode that is differently historical.57

On the heels of this example of its own kind of deviation, I will proceed to examine the kind of documentary approach that Unter Männern takes in its portrayal of gay men’s lives in the GDR. The experiences of one of the film’s subjects, Eduard “Eddy” Stapel (b. 1953), an important figure in the East German gay movement, illustrate the wide historical and contextual gap between contemporary German gayness and the East German gayness of the 1970s and 1980s. Although he provides insider information about gay life in the GDR, as he does when he leads Rösener into an abandoned underground public bathroom in Leipzig, the so-called “Bürgermeister” (mayor) pissoir (named for its proximity to the city hall), Stapel’s function in the film primarily relates to his status as an activist and organizer working toward gay liberation and equal rights. Stapel had been active in his church community and planned to become a pastor before eventually being denied his ordination because of his sexuality. Ironically, it was under
the auspices of the Protestant Church that Stapel, along with a few other interested men and women, brought together interested individuals in a discussion group and later working groups in Leipzig in the early months of 1982. This initiative spread, partly through Stapel’s efforts, to a number of other cities and towns like Berlin, Magdeburg, Aschersleben, Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz), Halle, Dresden, and others. Groups involved included at different times the Arbeitskreis Homosexualität (Homosexuality Working Group), Homosexuelle Selbsthilfe (Homosexual Self-Help), and later the twin groups Schwule in der Kirche (Gays in the Church) and Lesben in der Kirche (Lesbians in the Church). During one interview segment with Stapel filmed in a train compartment, the film cuts to an animated map of East Germany. The aforementioned graffiti or highlighting appears again, this time to mark the names of cities and towns that Stapel mentions and others where there were organized meetings of gay and lesbian groups.

The Stasi took notice of Stapel because of his active involvement with these consciousness-raising groups, an undertaking that required him to travel around the GDR to encourage lesbians and gay men to organize and work toward achieving equal rights—what Stapel calls a “schwule Volkshochschule” (gay college). One of the film’s uses of private and public archival material is the inclusion of photos of these educational gatherings which document Stapel’s and others’ efforts to raise awareness of issues affecting gay men and lesbians in the GDR. These occasional glimpses at photos and some of the precious few publicity materials that still exist in various collections are relatively rare in examinations of this movement, for, as Stapel himself has noted, the participants in such gatherings and in the movement more broadly tried to produce as little written material as was necessary and to discuss much only verbally. The challenges that organizers faced are exemplified in a later
sequence when another of the film’s interviewees, Helwin (b. 1934), remarks that he had had no idea these “gay college” gatherings were taking place. Thus, the film illustrates quite well the variability and degree to which personal contact as well as geographic location could determine one’s ability to connect to the nascent gay rights movement.

We see the result of the state surveillance of Stapel when he leads Rösener into a room in his home, handheld camera following them, and shows the young filmmaker, our guide, the many volumes of his Stasi files that line the shelves of multiple bookcases. Through his files, Stapel confirmed what he had suspected: that the Stasi, in what was officially called “Operativer Vorgang Aftershave” (Operation After Shave), had pursued one of its detailed surveillance plans to investigate him fully. This included the use of four operatives (called “Romeos”) to initiate sexual relationships with him in order to put him under even more, and more revealing, scrutiny; other operatives tried to sow discord with his actual boyfriends. This moment in the film is another in which the differing contextual codes and historical discourses become apparent, as Stapel laughingly says in response to Rösener’s question about why the Stasi went to such trouble, “Wir waren Staatsfeinde. Das könnt ihr euch heute nicht mehr vorstellen!” (We were enemies of the state. Today you can’t really imagine it!). The state’s efforts to surveil Stapel and other homosexuals are rendered in their absurdity. The lengths to which the Stasi—an astonishingly bureaucratic and far-reaching agency with hundreds of thousands of unofficial collaborators among the East German citizenry—went to observe these individuals remain perplexing and disconcerting, to say the least. The Stasi’s preposterous and sometimes farcical techniques would be laughable if they had not also had serious consequences. Untermännern in no way trivializes surveillance or the threat of surveillance, but it interestingly renders it queerly,
prompting the viewer to consider the contemporary intelligibility of GDR experiences in their relative strangeness.

Contextually far removed from Stapel’s activism and organization, and geographically distant from the “headquarters” of the eventually nascent gay movement in Berlin and Leipzig, were the experiences of the gay men and women who lived in rural communities, small towns, and farming villages scattered around East Germany. These individuals surely embodied some of the strangeness, deviation, and difference of queer GDR experience in their social, cultural, and communal isolation. The film engages with these experiences in one of its more compelling interviews, with John (b. 1968) from Lauscha, a Thuringian town today of approximately 3,500 inhabitants long known for its glassblowing industry. In his interview segments John, whose narrative becomes conclusive for the film as I will discuss below, tells of growing up gay, his intense feelings of horror at the potential discovery by his parents, falling in love with a straight friend, an aborted attempt to flee East Germany, and his eventual coming out and acceptance in his local community. Following a long shot of John walking through the woods, we also see him in medium close-up in the forest explaining his plan to escape to the West, pointing out his route through the woods and his view of the border. The film follows this with a sequence of Rösener along the same path through the woods, placing himself in John’s footsteps, with plentiful sylvan sounds accompanying his walk. Indeed, as Rösener’s narration early in the film would indicate, this kind of rural, provincial experience evokes the director’s own, though for him in the different context and time of northeastern Germany (Mecklenburg-West Pomerania), the former GDR, in the mid- to late 1990s.

*Unter Männern* resides simultaneously in the related subfields of documentary, gay/queer documentary, and autobiographical or first-person documentary. Some of these films, like
Hollywood to Dollywood (2011, dir. John Lavin), Der Kreis (The Circle, 2014, dir. Stefan Haupt), and Re:Orientations (2016, dir. Richard Fung)—and Unter Männern can be counted among them—increasingly raise genre questions or make categorization difficult, which is a trend in contemporary filmmaking, as it depends less on, for example, studio backing. This becomes relevant especially when one attempts to chart the trends in a particular field or topic—in this case, the small area of queer German documentary or nonfiction film. John’s story certainly stands out among available materials in this subject area. Time after time, the majority of narratives delivered in documentarian texts, both literary and filmic, describe lesbians’ and gay men’s searches for and usually discoveries of urban networks of likeminded individuals and groups as well as the limited success in locating bars, cafés, and dancing venues in which their social contacts and displays of affection might be welcome (or even ignored).

Instead, in these glimpses of John’s life we see a small-town gay man, a talented glassblower who also uses his skill to make risqué creations, in a picturesque village; these sequences vividly convey an impression of another queer reality, one faced by countless unnamed individuals and one that could be translated mutatis mutandis to other national and cultural contexts.

A further way in which Unter Männern’s extraordinariness comes to light is in its availability, or lack thereof, especially if we consider the fate of its twin, the following year’s Out in Ost-Berlin. Both films had premieres at the Berlinale International Film Festival in the Panorama section. Both films have also had screenings at other international film festivals and have been broadcast on German television. The latter film had the good fortune of finding a North American distributor, an event that can play a key role in determining a film’s wider success. Unter Männern’s experimentation with the documentary genre and its presentation of the subject matter are arguably queerer in comparison to Out in Ost-Berlin, of the two the more
conventional film made by a much more experienced filmmaking team. Issues with copyright
and distribution have also left the former more difficult to view outside of Europe.

In an annotated filmography, Lynda McAfee observed in 1997 that the realities of
distribution, a large aspect of the economics of global cinema, “exclude[] many historical queer
documentaries that have fallen out of distribution, international documentaries that do not have a
US distributor, and documentaries and home movies that were never picked up for distribution.
These harder-to-find documentaries may be found at libraries, archives, public and private film
collections, community and art house screenings, and film and video festivals.”66 The volume in
which McAfee’s contribution appears—one of the few scholarly treatments of queer
documentary—focuses on American films and obviously appeared at a very different time for
global film distribution (and production) than the present. The internet and easier shareability of
digital media have removed some obstacles to the wider viewing of filmic works.67 Gillett has
observed that Hick has repeatedly had difficulty obtaining sufficient funding for his projects, so
it is in a way ironic that Out in Ost-Berlin is the more conventional in appearance (likely, in part,
due to available resources and filmmaker experience) and has, as is clear, been the one of the two
I have discussed here to find wider acknowledgment, screening, and distribution.68

<1>Conclusion

By the end of Unter Männern we have received a set of different reflections on gay GDR history.
The protagonists illustrate the truism of the variability of LGBTQ (or any group’s) experience.
The film shows that this is also the case under a totalitarian system, in various ways repressive
and restrictive of its citizens’ behavior. These men come from different beginnings and levels of
comfort with what they may or may not have seen as a distinguishing part of themselves, namely
their sexuality, because of which they were targets of prohibitive power, whether individually or collectively.

Stapel, one of the crucial figures in the history of the East German gay movement, has been reduced from his earlier importance in light of the difficulties and outright prohibition he faced in trying to pursue his chosen vocation as a pastor. Although one can see him occasionally in various media today to give interviews on this subject, including around the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, our final view of him in the film is his exit from a church—one of his interview locations in the film—and the closing door.

Although Christian’s interviews—including those in which he appears with his friend and fellow interviewee Helwin—and old photos of his illustrate that Christian, who appears in the film’s opening overture and whom I mentioned above, the most reticent of the interviewees, was not a loner, he concludes with regret that he was “zu feige” (too cowardly) unable to assert himself more publicly. Christian’s interviews, the most uncomfortable in the film for their long silences and his taciturnity, illustrate his struggles with his own tolerance, not to speak of acceptance, of his sexuality. He remained closeted for most of his life, maintained a limited social circle in connection to gayness (including visits to the Klappen), and went so far as seeing a psychologist to try to treat and “cure” his homosexuality. For his part, Helwin has a different recollection of the gay experience in the GDR—or perhaps a conflicted or contradictory one. Born in Chile, he has narrated personal history including intense homophobia from his parents (to whom he never came out), a relationship with a teacher, and a certain perceived tolerance on the part of other coworkers and acquaintances. It is not stated clearly when Helwin became friends with Christian, but they have a rapport on camera that makes their pair-interviews entertaining. In one of these, Christian chides Helwin for describing gay life in the GDR as if it
were a paradise. Up to then Helwin had stood out among the interviewees in the film for his intriguing refutation of the common assertion that gay life under socialism and totalitarianism was overly difficult.

Artist Jürgen (b. 1932) and hairstylist Frank (b. 1959), both of whom appear in the film’s overture mentioned at the start of my essay, also provide insight into different facets of a gay GDR memory. Although Christian was born only two years later, Jürgen is unique for his mentioning the Nazis and the Hitler Youth. He also recounts how he was able to gain a degree of erotic satisfaction by persuading straight male acquaintances to pose nude for him. Frank’s experience is unique among the interviewees because of his success in leaving East Germany for Munich, even though he had not originally planned on fleeing the country by staying in the West.

The viewer can gather that John, the interviewee with whom the film ends, has achieved a striking degree of personal acceptance and social integration in his small Thuringian community. He describes the “bunte Truppe” (motley crew) of friends, including other gays, who eventually coalesced after John’s coming out. John did come out to his father, who responded that it did not matter to him, if he was a good worker—a perfect, if stereotypical, East German response. The final sequence we see in the film shows John in drag in long shot, in the attire of a Glasprinzessin, the annually crowned “glass princess” of the Christmas season, walking through Lauscha waving to passersby, while Puccini’s “O mio babbino caro” is heard non-diegetically. As mentioned above, his interview stands out for its highlighting of the rural and urban divide within East German society, especially in the lives of gay individuals. It is also clearly distinct among the men’s interviews here for the kind of unabashed integration of the protagonist into his surrounding environment. John is unique among the other interviewees in that he planned to flee the GDR and turned back, unlike another interviewee, hairstylist Frank (b. 1959), who was
allowed to travel to the West for a short trip and never returned. John, on the other hand, glimpsed the border crossing but returned, later to come out and find his own measure of success in his rural milieu.

While the film began by using the director’s personal biography to connect the interviews to each other and to engage the viewer with the coming recollections of the interviewees, Rösener’s role has changed by the end of Unter Männern. In one of the final sequences, we see him determinedly bicycling, as before, mimicking Coming Out’s Philipp, as the former rides by the Kino International cinema where the film premiered in 1989. This is followed by clips from the premiere of Carow’s film as well as short excerpts that seem to point to the communal feeling among many gay East Germans where there were enough to congregate, like in Berlin. Rösener’s own story has lost prominence and faded into the background by the end of the film, which, as described above, leaves the viewer with another individual, one who managed to find his way to personal fulfillment—at least as shown by the film—through an integration into what had been earlier a hostile or at least less tolerant environment. In that the film does not make the purely contemporary (i.e., post-GDR) biography the lasting impression of the film, the interviewees’ biographical-historical narratives are given a relevance that links them to Germany’s present and the situation of gay rights today. Further, the change in emphasis by the end of the film stresses the diversity of experience in this group of interview subjects, creating its own “bunte Truppe,” and allowing for the insertion of the viewer’s individuality and strangeness in the reception of the film. This does not supersede or overshadow the narrative we have received in the film; on the contrary, it becomes adjunct, like a foreign-language dictionary or glossary, which the reader can use to compare the interviewees’ stories and historically-contextual and visual display.
The interviews in *Unter Männern* further connect us to the world that *Coming Out* inhabited. As with other similar documentaries—that is, in which interviews comprise the primary material—the diversity or rather the uniqueness of the informants’ experiences is one of the structuring unities of the film. History in this case comprises diachronic conceptualizations of coming out, hiding, public and private sex, joy and fear, and often eventual blending in. These mark especially the post-1980s developments in Western gay culture that illustrate generational and geographic differences. In these segments we do see how these men understood and understand themselves, an offering-up of biographical history that provides a complementary counterpoint to the receptive historical discovery of the narrator’s persona. *Unter Männern* enacts the being of GDR gayness through a combination of private and public history with a distinct emphasis on the former. This documentary of being “among these men” becomes a monument in Foucault’s sense, not just a reference to something that existed, but also what he called “its own volume.”

Notes

1 For helpful feedback on earlier versions of parts of this essay, I gratefully acknowledge input from Katherine Bowers, Ilinca Iurașcu, Gregory Mackie, and Vin Nardizzi.
4 Although the film was co-directed by Ringo Rösener and Markus Stein, I will focus on Rösener’s activity in this essay, since he was primarily responsible for the conceptualization of the film as well as the interactive, reflexive nature of the elements I discuss below, while also appearing in the film.


9 Kuzniar, The Queer German Cinema, 5.


11 Kuzniar, The Queer German Cinema, 15.


15 Ibid., 319.


23 Bruzzi argues that especially recent documentaries, in which the intervention or even appearance of the filmmaker has become more common, demonstrate that the _document_ in the _documentary_ is crucially important. See, for example, Frederik Dhaenens, “Queer Cuttings on Youtube: Re-Editing Soap Operas as a Form of Fan-Produced Queer Resistance,” _European Journal of Cultural Studies_ 15, no. 4 (August 1, 2012): 442–56. On a recent integration of this form of self-broadcasting, transgender video diaries, into a feature film, see Kyle Frackman, “The Reality of the Body: Transgender, Transsexuality, and Truth in _Romeos_,” _Colloquia Germanica_ 46, no. 1 (2013): 64–87.
25 Ibid., 11.
26 See, e.g., ibid., 13, 186.
27 Elizabeth Cowie, _Recording Reality, Desiring the Real_ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 2.
29 Alisa Lebow, _First Person Jewish_ (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xi.
31 Ibid., 10; Bruzzi, _New Documentary_, 15.
32 Nichols, _Blurred Boundaries_, 96–97.
33 Bruzzi, _New Documentary_, 185–86.
34 When thinking of abrasive potential, one can contrast these more recent works with ones that Rich wrote about earlier, works with “few aesthetic or narrative strategies in common, but what they seemed to share was an attitude. [Rich] found them ‘irreverent’ and ‘energetic’.” Michele Aaron, “New Queer Cinema: An Introduction,” in _New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader_, ed. Michele Aaron (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 3.
35 Bruzzi, _New Documentary_, 248.
37 Because of space constraints for this essay, I cannot offer a satisfying contextualization of these German documentaries within the field of also non-German documentary films beyond the text in this section. For more information on documentary film, including outside of the German-language context, the reader is directed to the following, for example: Alter, _Projecting History_; Thomas Austin and Wilma De Jong, eds., _Rethinking Documentary: New Perspectives, New Practices_ (NY: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press, 2008); Jim Lane, _The Autobiographical Documentary in America_ (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002); Brian Winston,
Claiming the Real: The Griersonian Documentary and Its Legitimations (London: British Film Institute, 1995); Brian Winston, Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond (London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan/British Film Institute, 2008).


40 Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 214. They also list a number of selected queer documentaries with some annotation (276–277). A recent film that blends some of these genre characteristics is the Swiss Der Kreis (The Circle, 2014, dir. Stefan Haupt), a docudrama with third- and first-person narrative elements in interviews as well as re-enacted and fictional scenes. For more on Der Kreis and its approach to docudrama, see Kyle Frackman, “To Be Gay in 1950s Zurich,” kultur360, May 27, 2016, http://www.kultur360.com/to-be-gay-in-1950s-zurich/.

41 Mennel, Queer Cinema, 51; see also Thomas Waugh, The Fruit Machine Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

42 Thomas Waugh, “Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post-Stonewall Period 1969–1984,” in The Fruit Machine: Twenty Years of Writings on Queer Cinema (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 246–71; Mennel, Queer Cinema, 51; Benshoff and Griffin, Queer Images. Much of what arose out of these “events” or periods, it should be noted, evinced a male-centric attention that many will have recognized.


44 Levy, Cinema of Outsiders, 447.

45 This could also partly have to do with changing funding structures for filmic work, depending as they more frequently do at present on the collaboration with television studios. Past queer films have received funding from German public television; one notable example is Rosa von Praunheim’s Nicht der Homosexuelle. The film’s funders and broadcasters changed because of controversies surrounding the project, but it was variously supported by ARD and the Cologne station WDR. See Kuzniar, The Queer German Cinema, 93–94.

This is a pre-typeset version of

49 The respective enforcement of §175 in the FRG and GDR differed, in that there were more arrests and public activities in the FRG than in the GDR. Josie McLellan has called the “story of East German homosexuality . . . one of failed liberalisation” (114), since the eventual decriminalization did not have the effect of increased tolerance; instead, it led to queer invisibility (118). See Josie McLellan, Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 114–18; Jennifer V. Evans, “Decriminalization, Seduction, and ‘Unnatural Desire’ in East Germany,” Feminist Studies 36, no. 3 (2010): 553–77; W. Jake Newsome, “Homosexuals After the Holocaust: Sexual Citizenship and the Politics of Memory in Germany and the United States, 1945-2008” (PhD Dissertation, University at Buffalo, State University of New York, 2016), 68. For GDR enforcement statistics up to 1959 (others have not been published), see Klaus Berdl and Vera Kruber, “Zur Statistik der Strafverfolgung homosexueller Männer in der SBZ und DDR bis 1959,” Invertito—Jahrbuch für die Geschichte der Homosexualitäten, no. 12 (2010): 58–124.
50 There is an additional interview with Jürgen Lemke (b. 1943), a psychotherapist who published an important contribution to (East German) so-called Protokollliteratur (transcript literature), a blend of authentic interviews and authorial reshaping into novel-like prose. See Jürgen Lemke, Ganz normal anders: Auskünfte schwuler Männer (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1989). I do not count Lemke as one of the protagonists, because of the different style in which he is depicted, including the use of on-screen text to identify him, which does not occur for the other interviewees.
51 See Bert Thinius, “Vom grauen Versteck ins bunte Ghetto: Ansichten zur Geschichte ostdeutscher Schwuler,” in Schwuler Osten: Homosexuelle Männer in der DDR, by Kurt Starke (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1994), 11–90. Coming Out was the GDR’s first feature film showcasing homosexuality. In the year prior (1988), the GDR’s first and only documentary, Die andere Liebe (The Other Love), a short film directed by Helmut Kißling and Axel Otten, premiered in theaters and circulation. For more on Die andere Liebe, see Kyle Frackman, “Shame and Love: East German Homosexuality Goes to the Movies,” in Gender and Sexuality in East German Film: Intimacy and Alienation, ed. Kyle Frackman and Faye Stewart (Rochester, NY: Camden House, forthcoming).
53 Ibid.
54 Andrey Borzenko, “Brotherly Love: 25 Years On, the Artist Behind the Iconic Berlin Wall Mural Tells His Story,” The Calvert Journal, November 11, 2014, http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3356/Dmitri-Vrubel-Berlin-Wall-Brezhnev-Honecker-Kiss. The work was originally painted in 1990 and then repainted in 2009 after the city’s erasure of it and much of the other art on the remaining Wall segments in order to save the remnants themselves from the twenty years of covering graffiti, environmental pollution, and deterioration. 55 The photo does not often appear in scholarly discussions, though it does show up in media treatments of the Wall, as it did in articles surrounding the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Wall or reports about the 2009 repaintings, including in one piece on the National Public Radio website which found it necessary to call the action in the mural a seemingly alleged
“‘kiss’.” See, e.g., Irene Noguchi, “Historic Art, Luxury Apartments Battle Over Berlin’s Famous Wall,” NPR.org, accessed October 9, 2015, http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/10/03/445583612/historic-art-luxury-apartments-battle-over-berlins-famous-wall. The painting came back into public discourse because of a 2016 Lithuanian homage to the painting by artist Mindaugas Bonanu in which Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump are in the positions of Brezhnev and Honecker, respectively.

56 Bruzzi, New Documentary, 197.


58 For many today it is a surprising aspect of the development of East German gay rights that it blossomed under the umbrella of the Lutheran Church—an association that made the secularist GDR government doubly suspicious of the potential discord that the gay activists would represent. For more on this, see, e.g., Kurt Starke and Eduard Stapel, “Vom Arbeitskreis ‘Homosexualität’ der Evangelischen Studentengemeinde in Leipzig zum Schwulenverband in Deutschland: Interview von Kurt Starke mit Eduard Stapel am 19. April 1994,” in Schwuler Osten: Homosexuelle Männer in der DDR, by Kurt Starke (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 1994), 91–110; and Bert Thinius, “Erfahrungen schwuler Männer in der DDR und in Deutschland Ost,” in Homosexualität in der DDR: Materialien und Meinungen, ed. Wolfram Setz (Hamburg: Männerschwarm, 2006), 37–44.


60 Eduard Stapel, Warme Brüder gegen Kalte Krieger: Schwulenbewegung in der DDR im Visier der Staatssicherheit (Magdeburg: Landesbeauftragte für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der ehemaligen DDR Sachsen-Anhalt, 1999), 99.


62 On considerations of the strange and aberrant, see Jennifer V. Evans, “Introduction: Why Queer German History?,” German History 34, no. 3 (2016): esp. 371-372 and its special issue on queer German history.


64 One late-GDR exception is the aforementioned collection of interviews: Lemke, Ganz normal anders: Auskünfte schwuler Männer. A volume of interviews with lesbians appeared after the Wende: Kerstin Gutsche, Ich ahnungsloser Engel: Lesbenprotokolle (Berlin: Reiher, 1991). While the rural/urban divide is not unique or new to discussions of queer cultural production more broadly, including in films like Jochen Hick’s Ich kenn keinen—Allein unter Heteros (2003), this depiction in Unter Männern of the GDR divide is remarkable, because nearly all previous depictions of East German LGBTQ life focus on the metropolis. An exception is the
1999 short documentary piece “Ein homosexuelles Pärchen in Cottbus,” which aired on the ZDF program Blickpunkt.

65 Originally the “Info-Schau,” Panorama is a part of the Berlinale program each year showcasing mainly new (and usually singular) independent films. Since 1992, the section’s curator is Wieland Speck, a German director and actor who himself has a place in the history of queer film related to the GDR. Speck directed Westler (1985), a feature film about two gay men, one from East Berlin and one from West Berlin, who fall in love. The outdoor sequences in East Berlin were shot surreptitiously without official permission.


67 For more on methods, forms, and implications of nonfiction filmmaking in recent years with newer media, see Maxine Baker, Documentary in the Digital Age (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2006).


69 Foucault, Archaeology, 139.