

MALE HOMOSEXUALITY IN GERMAN CINEMA:  
THE LURID RIDE THROUGH THE WEST AND THE DISCRETE CRUISE  
THROUGH THE EAST

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## 1 Introduction and Background

Although the motion picture company UFA (*Universum-Film AG*) was initially formed in late 1917 with the intention of competing with foreign film companies as well as functioning as an arm of propaganda<sup>1</sup>, the postwar UFA productions shifted in direction towards that of popular and public appeal. Kickstarted with the formation of UFA, the rise of German cinema as a modern form of artistic expression paved the way for film to become an outlet for the reflection, discussion, and criticism of German society. The films' thematic content included focusing on the lives of those marginalized in society, and within that small subset, the topic of homosexuality had already started to be directly addressed nearly a hundred years ago. Male homosexuality became criminalized in 1871 under Paragraph 175 of the criminal code following the formation of the German Reich, but the trends of attitudes towards homosexuality were both still followed and reflected in German films produced in the periods spanning the Weimar Republic, to the divide of the two Berlins, until right up to the night the Berlin Wall fell.

Initially, during the Weimar Republic, the films were toned-down and had a cautiously positive depiction. Then, the films progressed to be much more open and contained franker depictions of homosexuality in the 1970s. Briefly put, the trends went from being implicitly homosexual in theme to being explicit<sup>2</sup>. Of the films dealing directly with homosexuality, most were created by artists from West Germany, while in the East, the single film with a central theme of homosexuality, succinctly named *Coming Out* (1989), premiered only right before the

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<sup>1</sup> "UFA Faszination einer grossen Geschichte," *Historie | Company | UFA - INSPIRING ENTERTAINMENT*, accessed May 24, 2016, <http://www.ufa.de/company/historie/>.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dyer, "Less and More than Women and Men: Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar Germany," *New German Critique*, no. 51 (1990): 5-60. doi:10.2307/488171.

end of the German Democratic Republic (also known as East Germany) in 1989, on the night the Berlin Wall was opened.

During the postwar divide of the two Germanys and two Berlins, there was a gradual loosening of adherence to Paragraph 175, in part due to the defeat in World War II and the nation's emasculation following Germany's demilitarization<sup>3</sup>. In 1985, following the success of a special exhibition at Berlin's Märkisches Museum titled "Eldorado," which focused on the lives of homosexual men and women of Berlin from 1850-1950, the exhibition organizers founded the Schwules Museum (The Gay Museum) in the same year in the West Berlin district of Kreuzberg<sup>4</sup> to give homosexuality its own accessible outlet to encourage awareness and education. The museum, then situated in a district described as "bohemian"<sup>5</sup>, was also a response to the silence and the lack of apology or address the (West) German government had with regards to the Nazis' persecution of homosexuals<sup>6</sup>. The societal shift towards tolerance of male homosexuality, reflected in film productions of the 1970s and 1980s from both the East and the West, facilitated the opening of minds and acceptance in both Berlins.

While the penal code existed until 1968 in East Germany<sup>7</sup> and until 1969 in West Germany<sup>8</sup>, "vestiges of Paragraph 175 lingered...until 1994"<sup>9</sup>, and these vestiges manifested in two distinct trajectories between residents of the East and West. Due to both Soviet and Western propaganda, residents living in the East were generally more reserved and traditional, while

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<sup>3</sup> Clayton J. Whisnant, "Styles of Masculinity in the West German Gay Scene, 1950-1965," *Central European History* 39 (2006): 360, 364.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas B. Turnbaugh, "The Schwules Museum," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 2 (May 2000): 48.

<sup>5</sup> Turnbaugh, "Schwules Museum", 48.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Jürgen Lemke, *Gay Voices From East Germany*, trans. Steven Stoltenberg et al. (Indiana University Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Turnbaugh, "Schwules Museum", 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ross, "Berlin Story", 76.

those living in the West were more free and lived for themselves. Undoubtedly, socialist and capitalist ideology had influence on the Eastern and Western attitudes respectively, but these attitudes are nevertheless still a response to the history of Nazi persecution under Paragraph 175, and they are reflected in both East and West German films.

## 2 The German Empire

The criminalization of homosexuality was written into the criminal code as Paragraph 175 in 1871, reproduced below:

“Die widernatürliche Unzucht, welche zwischen Personen männlichen Geschlechts oder von Menschen mit Thieren begangen wird, ist mit Gefängniß zu bestrafen; auch kann auf Verlust der bürgerlichen Ehrenrechte erkannt werden.”

(“The unnatural fornication committed between male persons, or between humans and animals, is punishable by imprisonment; punishment can also be realized in a loss of civil rights or civil liberties.”)

-§175, from the German Criminal Code, effective May 1871<sup>10</sup>

At the time of German unification and the formation of the German Empire, the law compared and likened sex between two men with bestiality and describes homosexuality as “perverse” and “unnatural”. The associated punishment, in the form of imprisonment and/or the loss of civil liberties, is also forebodingly severe.

Due to Prussia being the biggest and most powerful state in the newly united Germany in 1871, the rest of Germany adopted this law, which criminalized sexual relations between men<sup>11</sup>. Ever since the Prussian Minister of the Interior adopted Paragraph 175 into the German criminal

<sup>10</sup> § 175 StGB, § 175 StGB, accessed June 06, 2016, <http://lexetius.com/StGB/175,7>.

<sup>11</sup> Robert G. Moeller, “The Regulation of Male Homosexuality in Postwar East and West Germany: An Introduction,” *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 521.

code, there has been opposition to it, particularly in the medical field, and by extension, from a researched, credible medical standpoint. In fact, medical researcher Rudolf Virchow and the Prussian medical commission recommended against its adoption<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, sex researcher *cum* activist Magnus Hirschfeld made it his aim<sup>13</sup>, with the founding of the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* (SHC, Scientific-Humanitarian Committee), to abolish Paragraph 175<sup>14</sup>. He had visible support, especially in the metropolis Berlin during the Weimar Republic<sup>15</sup>: members of the SHC “were encouraged to leave copies [of pamphlets] on Berlin trams, in train stations, and in bars and restaurants. This pamphlet literature was a critical element in the SHC’s petition drive to reform Paragraph 175.”<sup>16</sup>

However, it was not the case that gay individuals were so harshly oppressed to the point that homosexuality was *not* a part of the societal salience. In fact, it was the opposite. Some of the officials closest to Kaiser Wilhelm II, Prince Philipp zu Eulenburg-Hertefeld and Berlin’s military commander of Berlin Kuno von Moltke in particular, both personally appointed by the Kaiser to the privileged positions they held, were involved in a homosexual scandal in 1906. Eulenburg was known to have been addressed as “Phili” or “Philine”, and Moltke “Tutu”<sup>17</sup> within their circle of associates. While these forms of address are obviously a private matter and largely contained within the group of associates, the journalist-incited scandal came to also involve the Kaiser. The journalist, Maximilian Harden, implied that throughout the course of

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Beachy, *Gay Berlin: Birthplace of a Modern Identity*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 8.

<sup>13</sup> Alex Ross, “Berlin Story: How the Germans Invented Gay Rights—More than a Century Ago,” *The New Yorker*, (Jan 26, 2015): 73.

<sup>14</sup> Jason Crouthamel, “‘Comradeship’ and ‘Friendship’: Masculinity and Militarisation in Germany’s Homosexual Emancipation Movement after the First World War,” *Gender & History* 23, no. 1 (April 2011): 111.

<sup>15</sup> Moeller, “Regulation of Male Homosexuality,” 522.

<sup>16</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

seven months in 1906-1907, Wilhelm II affiliated himself with a bunch of homosexuals who were not “hard” enough to be effective politicians. The Kaiser demanded that Eulenburg and Moltke respond to Harden’s accusations, which in turn forced the scandal even more into the public eye. Succinctly put, “the Eulenburg scandal broadcast and popularized the notion of a homosexual identity.”<sup>18</sup>

### 3 The Weimar Republic

After witnessing the destruction of World War I and humanity’s weakness against war, there came a surge in tolerance towards sexuality, which also extended to homosexuals,<sup>19</sup> and this culminated as a sort of well-documented, “homosexual Eden” in Berlin<sup>20</sup>. Photographs<sup>21,22</sup> taken in 1926 of various newspaper stands in central Berlin clearly show gay-interest newspapers and publications available and being sold. Worth noting in particular is the casual placement of Communist newspaper *Die rote Fahne* and Social Democrat newspaper *Vorwärts* below and to the left of the gay newspaper *Die Freundschaft* and the lesbian journal *Frauen Liebe*, showing the equal relevance and consideration of both interest groups during Weimar Germany:

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<sup>18</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 123.

<sup>19</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 364.

<sup>20</sup> Dennis Harvey, “Paragraph 175,” *Variety* 377, no. 12 (Feb. 7, 2000): 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> *Newsstand at Potsdamerplatz*, 1926, Landesarchiv Berlin, Berlin, In *Gay Berlin*, New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> *Newsstand at Friedrichstraße Train Station*. 1926. Landesarchiv Berlin, Berlin. In *Gay Berlin*.



Newsstand at Potsdamerplatz, displaying prominently the gay newspapers (center of photo) *Die Insel*, *Die Freundschaft*, *Freundschaftsblatt*, and *Eros* (1926)  
Landesarchiv Berlin, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030, No. 16935-1



Newsstand at Friedrichstraße Train Station with the gay newspaper *Die Freundschaft* and the lesbian journal *Frauen Liebe* displayed openly for sale (1926)  
Landesarchiv Berlin, A. Pr. Br. Rep. 030, No. 16935-2

Despite the violence the Weimar Republic weathered from both the political left and right, the Republic still saw progressive elements—in part allowed by the liberal constitution, and sexual reform and freedom for a more modern, humane society was extended to gay individuals as well as heterosexuals<sup>23</sup>. These qualities came to define homosexuality in Weimar Germany.

An example in particular of attempts at legal reform revolves around the surprising fifteen-to-thirteen 1929 decision of the Reichstag committee formed to revise Paragraph 175<sup>24</sup>. The composition of the committee, for which researcher and activist Magnus Hirschfeld served as advisor, comprised of fourteen members who supported the abolishment of Paragraph 175. These fourteen consisted of two representatives of the center-liberal *Deutsche Demokratische Partei* (DDP, German Democratic Party), nine Social Democrats (SPD, *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*), and three Communists (KPD, *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*)<sup>25</sup>. The remaining fourteen representatives were conservatives, but the committee chair, Dr. Wilhelm Kahl of the center-right *Deutsche Volkspartei* (DVP, German People's Party) voted in favor of

<sup>23</sup> Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 303.

<sup>24</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 220.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

the reform because he believed that the blackmail that comes with the enforcement of Paragraph 175 was a more severe crime and more unjust than the act of homosexuality<sup>26</sup>. However, due to unfortunate timing of the decision occurring right before the US's Great Depression, which also severely affected German unemployment, Paragraph 175 was never able to be revised or abolished.

Homosexuality came to be represented in and by film immediately after the end of World War I, and the first came in the form of *Anders als die Andern* (Different Than the Others) (1919), an independent Weimar-era film that portrayed homosexuals in a sympathetic light. *Anders als die Andern*'s frame narrative heavily underscores the hardships brought on by Paragraph 175, and the appearances by scientist-activist Magnus Hirschfeld in the film as a doctor lends a compelling sense of credibility to the message that homosexuals are unjustly criminalized for a trait that is innate rather than an affliction. Indeed, the issue of Paragraph 175 is addressed with a "head-on commitment"<sup>27</sup>, and its portrayal "outrage at political and social injustice is as confrontational and as compassionate as anything produced on film in the intervening decades."<sup>28</sup> However, beneath these surface-level observations lies still the issue of why gay individuals are victims of blackmail. The narration of the film answers this question, but perhaps not in a way that brings positive opinions to homosexuals.

The film begins with obituaries that lend just enough information for the viewer to infer that for the blackmailed, persecution under Paragraph 175 has the power to drive them to death

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<sup>26</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 221.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew Kennedy, "Queer Silents: Different from the Others, Michael, and Sex in Chains on DVD," *Bright Lights Film Journal*, April 30, 2005, accessed April 27, 2016, <http://brightlightsfilm.com/queer-silents-different-from-the-others-michael-and-sex-in-chains-on-dvd/#.VyDvspMrJE4>.

<sup>28</sup> Kennedy, "Different from the Others".

and suicide. The viewer soon learns the story of the main character, the violinist Paul Körner who ultimately fell victim to this underlying threat of blackmail because of his “lust”. Although Paul is shown to briefly caress the chest of Franz, the character who turned out to be his blackmailer, that is the extent of the explicitness depicted on-screen, at least from the surviving copies of *Anders als die Andern*. Despite the acceptability of exploring homosexuality in a medical context, the more implicit and brief cinematic depictions of homosexuality reflects the lurking danger of blackmail as the damning consequence of gay desire during the Weimar Republic. The fear of blackmail and its consequences was not just restricted to the Weimar era, however.

#### **4 National Socialist Germany and World War II**

Unfortunately, despite Magnus Hirschfeld’s efforts at reform and abolition, Paragraph 175 was a judicial mainstay throughout the eras of modern Germany, including Nazi Germany, during which Paragraph 175 was revised and became more harsh and severe. This was largely due to the collapse of the Weimar Republic, as shortly after the committee voted in 1929 in favor of reform, the Republic was faced with more pressing issues brought forth by the American stock market crash, fueling the crippling economic depression and unemployment in Germany<sup>29</sup>. Due to this change in economic and political climate, the 1930 elections saw a surge in votes for conservative and right-wing parties, and this included the Nazis experiencing rising popularity. This meant that it became much more difficult for any reform of Paragraph 175, or progress for minorities’ social rights, to proceed at all.

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<sup>29</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 239

In May 1933, the Nazis raided Hirschfeld's residence and the SHC institute as part of their agenda to purge German society of all things deemed "un-German."<sup>30</sup> Hitler's targeting and murder of Nazi militia *Sturmabteilung* leader Ernst Röhm during the Night of the Long Knives (*Nacht der langen Messer*) in July 1934 also served as a clear indicator of the attitude reversal towards homosexuality in the mid-1930s, as Röhm was formerly held in good regard in Hitler's eyes: In 1930, Röhm was promoted to the leader of the SA, and although he was caught up in scandals involving male prostitutes the following year in 1931, Hitler simply remarked then that Röhm's private life was precisely that, and nothing more of his concern<sup>31</sup>. While Hitler's change of attitude may have had motives of appeasement of the military or consolidation of his own power as a part of the *Gleichschaltung*, to the homosexual layperson, the Weimar tolerance was shifting towards targeting instead, and those who lived through the Republic and Nazi seizure of power felt the horror of the change towards active persecution acutely<sup>32</sup>. In the 1980s, interviewees from East Berlin recounted the hardships of persecution, detainment, isolation, and the survival of imprisonment in concentration camps such as Sachsenhausen as a wearer of the humiliating pink triangle<sup>33</sup>. According to a prisoner, "I experienced the prison world in which we ranked second from the bottom. Below us came only the child molesters."<sup>34</sup>

After the Nazi seizure of power, homosexual individuals were aggressively prosecuted for violating Paragraph 175. Heinrich Himmler spearheaded a revision to Paragraph 175 that "criminalized all erotic contact between men."<sup>35</sup> The revised statute is reproduced below:

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<sup>30</sup> Dyer, "Lesbian and Gay Cinema in Weimar", 10.

<sup>31</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 244

<sup>32</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 11-27.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

<sup>35</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 245.

(1) Ein Mann, der mit einem anderen Mann Unzucht treibt oder sich von ihm zur Unzucht mißbrauchen läßt, wird mit Gefängnis bestraft.

(A man that fornicates with another man or allows himself to be abused as such will be punished with imprisonment.)

(2) Bei einem Beteiligten, der zur Zeit der Tat noch nicht einundzwanzig Jahre alt war, kann das Gericht in besonders leichten Fällen von Strafe absehen.

(If one of the party involved is not yet 21 years old, in mild cases, the law can not apply to them.)

-§ 175, effective September 1935<sup>36</sup>

Eventually it came to be that even non-explicit sexual activity was evidence enough for the Nazis to incriminate someone, as they did for Karl, the interviewee of East German gay rights activist Jürgen Lemke. Karl was a druggist by trade and born in Berlin in 1907, well before the outbreak of World War II. During the war, Karl was wounded near Smolensk, Russia, and eventually transferred with the rest of his troop division to Breslau, then in Germany and today in Poland. While in recovery in Breslau, he was targeted by a plainclothes SS sergeant for “brush[ing] against him lightly”<sup>37</sup> and arrested for violation of Paragraph 175. Although Karl survived internment during World War II in a military prison and went on to live in the GDR, he was one of the few, and he attributed his survival to his being “outwardly so difficult to identify. A wolf in sheep’s clothing.”<sup>38</sup> This shows that it worked to Karl’s immense advantage to be able to “blend in” as a survival tactic during the brutal persecutions that occurred during World War II.

As the documentary *Paragraph 175* (2000) recounts, there were not many survivors of persecution at all, and even after five decades had passed, survivors were still hesitant to tell their

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<sup>36</sup> § 175 StGB, § 175 StGB, accessed June 06, 2016, <http://lexetius.com/StGB/175,6>.

<sup>37</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 33.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

story for fear of a repeat of history<sup>39</sup>. In general, this attitude was seen in the older gay individuals. Erich, a blue collar worker from Berlin who lived from 1900-1986, echoes this sentiment:

“It's quite possible that many were afraid in the postwar years that the whole horror story could be repeated.”<sup>40</sup>

-Erich, 1984, then aged 84

Lothar, better known as Charlotte “Lotte” von Mahlsdorf, also confirms the salience of the fear of Nazi persecution:

“I know that I am a provocation. People either reject me completely or they accept me, and usually vehemently<sup>41</sup> [...] I am happy to be alive at a time when living openly doesn't mean death anymore. If I had been born a few years earlier, I would have gone to the gas chambers.”<sup>42</sup>

-Lotte von Mahlsdorf, 1986, then aged 59

This intense fear instilled by the Nazis and their internment and murder of homosexuals explains the culture of fear and propensity for covert activities in the postwar divide between the two Berlins.

## 5 The Postwar Division of Berlin

After World War II in Europe ended in May 1945, Berlin was divided into four occupation zones by the Allied powers of France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the US<sup>43</sup>. Growing conflicts and threats between the western Allies and the Soviet Union and the politics

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<sup>39</sup> Deborah Walike. “Overdue Testimony: ‘Paragraph 175,’ at the Baltimore Jewish Film Festival, tells of the Nazis’ persecution of gays,” *Baltimore Jewish Times* 259, no. 5 (Mar 30, 2001): 58. Accessed April 25, 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 73.

<sup>43</sup> “Berlin after 1945,” Berlin.de, accessed June 07, 2016, <http://www.berlin.de/berlin-im-ueberblick/en/history/berlin-after-1945/>.

within the sectors culminated in the eleven-month-long blockade of West Berlin by the Soviet Union, which prompted the western powers to respond with the *Luftbrücke* (air bridge) which supplied West Berlin with provisions by air. Because the western powers came to their occupied sectors' aid, they were seen positively and therefore considered a friendly force to those living in the western sectors of Berlin. Ten days after the blockade ended, on May 23, 1949, the Federal Republic of Germany (also known as West Germany) was founded. Five months later, on October 7, 1949, the German Democratic Republic (also known as East Germany) was founded, and East Berlin was named the capital of the GDR. Thus, four years after the end of World War II, the formerly whole and intact capital was effectively split in two and existed thereafter in such an arrangement until reunification.

## 5.1 Ideologies

Influenced by the ideology imposed by the occupying powers, attitudes towards West and East, as well as regarding homosexuality, began to diverge between the western Allies-occupied West Berlin and Soviet-occupied East Berlin.

In the East, there was a desperate scramble to disassociate with the old Nazi past and embrace the new Communist future. Older folks from the “Nazi generation” were deemed lost causes, and the youth were thus prized for their ideological moldability<sup>44</sup>. In other words, the Communism and ideology found in East Germany had to be more hardline (as compared to the socialism found in the Soviet Union<sup>45</sup>) to compensate for the very recent ending of the Third

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<sup>44</sup> John Rodden, "Report Card from East Germany," *Soc Society* 47, no. 4 (2010): 345.

<sup>45</sup> Rodden, "Report Card from East Germany," 344.

Reich. Because of the SED's (Socialist Unity Party, *Sozialistische Einheitspartei*) single-party government stance, there was aggressive imposing of Communist ideology—including “the promotion of the family, pronatalism, and respectability”<sup>46</sup>—in the minds of citizens and also through the physical construction of the Berlin Wall. The film industry, similarly, was state-controlled, and the only East German film studio was DEFA (*Deutsche Film-Aktiengesellschaft*). All of this control resulted in former GDR residents later describing an inability to think critically and question their state of being<sup>47</sup>. This was through no fault of their own, as they make the good point of being indoctrinated at a young age, being only allowed to think in one way—the Party-sanctioned way, and they would police their own thoughts. Essentially, pupils were taught that capitalist America was evil: cartoons<sup>48</sup> in a ninth-grade civics textbook consistently portrayed Uncle Sam as superficially generous but underlyingly greedy with ulterior motives, usually involving a vulgar amount of money. America was considered the evil supplier of a trashy, imported (as opposed to being self-sufficient like the East strove to be, but this was also due to the West being the recipient to the Marshall Plan) mass culture and mass consumption<sup>49</sup>. As a result, East Germans were indoctrinated to view the US, and by relation other western and/or capitalist countries, with suspicion and distrust. Of course, this regard also extended to the physical presence of West Berlin and West Germany and their respective values.

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<sup>46</sup> Jennifer V. Evans, "Decriminalization, Seduction, and "Unnatural Desire" in East Germany," *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 557.

<sup>47</sup> Rodden, "Report Card from East Germany," 351.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 347.

<sup>49</sup> Greg Castillo, "Domesticating the Cold War: Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005): 265.

On the other hand, pro-US propaganda ran amok in West Berlin in the early 1950s because the US saw West Germany as “the West” and “in our orbit”<sup>50</sup>. It was the US’s responsibility to keep West Germany from Communist captivity. One form of the propaganda that was implemented included the very concept of consumption and equating consumption with “the American way of life”<sup>51</sup> because it was the exact converse of the self-denying ideology of Communism in the East, where it was collective first. In particular, the US government physically brought in appliances and model “American home” constructions into the Marshall-Haus, a US-sponsored museum in West Berlin to function as displays for the exhibition. The exhibition, which was overrun by popularity when it opened, was staffed by American Studies students from Free University of Berlin (*Freie Universität Berlin*), who explained the workings of washing machines, electric ranges, vacuums, and refrigerators<sup>52</sup>. In short, the US imposed an image of “the American life” onto the West Berliners, and since West Berlin was still vulnerable and reeling from the Soviet blockade, it ate up its saviors’ propaganda of consumption and willingly accepted it as the goal to strive towards. This consumption is understood as a “self-first” concept as opposed to “collective-first”.

## 5.2 Trajectories of the Fate of Paragraph 175

Although homosexuality was perceived in the immediate postwar years to be a link to Germany’s fascist past, and in particular, the non-proletarian bourgeois class, the East German

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Strausz-Hupé, “A Soviet Germany Would Mean Disaster for West,” *Saturday Evening Post*, August 2, 1952: 10.

<sup>51</sup> Castillo, “Consumption as Propaganda,” 268.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 269.

government still reverted Paragraph 175 to its pre-Third Reich definition in 1950. During the mid-1950s, commissions set up by the East German Ministry of Justice already existed to reform Paragraph 175 to decriminalize it entirely<sup>53</sup>. This effort is indicative of the start of East Germany's more lenient stance towards the statute, especially when compared to the West, which continued to persecute gay individuals under the Nazi's Paragraph 175. J.A.W., an East German who came of age during the Third Reich, was interviewed in the mid-1980s by Lemke, and he revels in the fact and in the judicial freedom that it was East Germany who did away with the statute before the West did:

Oh yes, it was a real liberation, the repeal of the statute, and before the other German state at that. For many long years that need to hide was an overriding pressure in my life. I suffered from having to lie and deceive—at work, everywhere. Without wanting to, people lived in illegality, beyond the law, in conditions of constant injustice, of constantly being vulnerable to prosecution, and worst of all, to ruthless blackmail.<sup>54</sup>

-J.A.W., 1985, then aged 68

Two years later, in 1987, the East German supreme court ruled that gay individuals should be guaranteed the same civil rights as all other individuals<sup>55</sup>. As a result, the age of consent was equalized to sixteen, and homosexual and heterosexual couples alike were, at least under the law, considered equals.

In the postwar West, homosexuality was still seen as something that could be “cured” or “fixed” and as a threat to the already emasculated nation<sup>56</sup>. However, efforts towards reform ultimately succeeded, as in 1969, one year after the GDR, West Germany decriminalized

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<sup>53</sup> Evans, “Unnatural Desire” in East Germany,” 556.

<sup>54</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 190.

<sup>55</sup> Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, 246.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 246.

homosexual activity between men over the age of 21. Five years later, the age of consent was lowered to eighteen.

## **6 The Postwar Years: Divided Postwar Attitudes Towards Homosexuality**

### **6.1 The “Corrupting Homosexual” Teacher**

In the postwar West, the “corrupting homosexual”<sup>57</sup> was seen as an unwanted vestige of the failed Weimar past, since the weaknesses and failings of the Weimar Republic paved the way for the rise of the Nazis. Now that World War II was over in Europe, West Germany was demilitarized. The opportunity for West Germany to start anew and to disassociate itself from its fascist past presents itself, but the “corrupting homosexual” was still considered the obstacle hindering the development of the family man. The homosexual was seen as selfish and even more dangerous, especially if he appeared outwardly unrecognizable, because he was even more likely to infiltrate his way into spheres of public influence, such as schools<sup>58</sup>.

As an artistic response to this unfounded public fear based on the “predatory homosexual” stereotype, West German film director Frank Ripploh wrote, acted, and directed *Taxi zum Klo* (Taxi to the Toilet) (1980), in which he plays himself as a gay schoolteacher. Instead of falling into the stereotype of being a corrupting influence on youth and especially young boys, Ripploh satirizes the superficiality of “the gay scene” and effectively criticizes “the disillusionment with transitory sexual encounters,”<sup>59</sup> a point that is shared by those Lemke

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<sup>57</sup> Whisnant, “Styles of Masculinity,” 369.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 373.

<sup>59</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 37.

interviewed who were newcomers and jaded individuals alike and associated with “the gay scene” in East Germany.

Ripploh is a comically blasé schoolteacher who does not put all that much effort into teaching his pupils and being a mentor to them within the classroom. He shows up to school late and still dressed in his drag outfit from the night before because he spends his nights, generally speaking, having fun, and does not get disciplined by any school officials when he is late. His priorities obviously lie elsewhere and within a drastically different age range, as his boyfriend is a working, bill-paying adult, and this is an obvious distancing of teacher-Ripploh from his students.

In an interview with Lemke, Bert, an East German who had aspirations to become a teacher, voiced the very stereotype. It is exemplified with his simple statement: “people like me seduce their young students—that's what people think.”<sup>60</sup> With so much distance between him and his pupils, it is impossible to claim that teacher-Ripploh is a predatory “corrupting homosexual” who “seduce[s] their young students”, and the film is an exemplar dispelling this stereotype.

## 6.2 The (Un)Importance of Being Covert

*“I value not being identified at first glance. I would demand that of my partner as well.”<sup>61</sup>*

-Winne, 1984, then aged 20

“Cruising” is associated with covertness and covert activity, and this is cinematically portrayed in two films about gay schoolteachers, the West German film *Taxi zum Klo* (1980) and

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<sup>60</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 56.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

the East German film *Coming Out* (1989). Philipp Klahrmann, the schoolteacher in *Coming Out*, interacts with a slightly older student population, as he appears to be an instructor of literature in a secondary school in East Berlin, while Frank Ripplloh appears to be a primary school teacher who instructs his pupils in a variety of subjects.

In these two films, cruising is depicted as outwardly appearing somewhat innocuous with a clear underlying intention of picking up another person in a public place to go to a private location. Although the intention of picking up another man is clear to the viewer, these activities still appear covert because no action is undertaken in the public sphere. All the viewer (and by extension, the other cruisers present at the location) is able to see is the selection process.

In particular, the cruising in *Taxi zum Klo* is done in broad daylight, and all the viewer is able to see in this scene is the “courtship”, or selection process, which happens in the wooded area in the park. To the uninitiated, the mating dance may just seem like a strange, halting interaction, and this is to preserve the covertness. The cruising scene in *Coming Out* differs in the time of the day, but similarly also takes place in a park, at Volkspark Friedrichshain in Berlin. More predictably, the cruising happens at night and involves more people in the frame than at any other time in the film (aside from the club scenes), lending further belief to the sense of covertness in that these cruisers are looking for something, but they still need to retain an outward appearance of normalcy or innocence in public.

However, fundamentally different in *Coming Out* is that the cruisers have the protection of the night’s darkness working towards their advantage. This functions as a reflection of the differing standards of covertness between the East and West. The viewer is less able to discern the faces and features of the cruisers and instead have feelings of uncertainty if the cruisers are

familiar characters or strangers. In fact, some of the cruisers even bear semblance to Klahrmann's students. The fact that covertness under the cover of the night is emphasized in *Coming Out* tellingly shows that although Paragraph 175 was officially stricken off the criminal code in 1968, 20 years before the premiere of the film, its legacy of fear is still apparent and salient in the lives of East Germans.

The shock factor of the nudity in *Taxi zum Klo*, while having been described as ingratuitous<sup>62</sup> and justified, serves as a(n exaggerated) parallel to the relative openness of the West in comparison to the East: "in the West sexual codes are highly articulated and displayed, and individuals eroticize others only within the same code; in the East sexual codes are less well articulated and involve forms of masking."<sup>63</sup> The scenes of Ripploh cruising in public parks and public bathrooms alike is a testament to these articulated and displayed codes of acceptable open displays of homosexuality in the West. These are displays of nudity and homosexuality in public places. However, in private, the viewer is still privy to seeing everything, quite literally. After Ripploh successfully picks up a man from the park, the activities the two partake in are depicted in explicit detail, with no inch left uncovered. Although Ripploh's private trysts take place within his apartment, we still have to keep in mind that this is a cinematic depiction of homosexuality, and such openness associated with Western artistry is a very clear and irrefutable sign of the stark difference in Western and Eastern sexual codes.

I don't want to brag, but no one can tell what I am, and I don't give it away in how I come across, that's not my style.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Janet Maslin, "Taxi zum Klo," *The New York Times*, October 2, 1981, accessed April 27, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9505E6DC103BF931A35753C1A967948260>.

<sup>63</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

-Body, 1983, then aged 36

Body's quote shows that despite saying he is not bragging, he is proud of the fact that he blends in with the heterosexual crowd and that his outward appearance is not blatantly gay. He mentions specifically that *he* doesn't give it away in how he comes across, which means that Body consciously makes the effort to adhere to outward-appearing heteronormative (and perhaps even hegemonic) masculinity. Again and again, this has been a recurring theme noticed in gay East Germans, young and old:

Typical for the homosexuals in the sixties was: outwardly hide yourself and live inside your own four walls. It became clearer [...] to me that I was compelled to hide an important part of me from others. Hiding was also a lot of trouble. Being up front would have required more strength than I had.<sup>65</sup>

-Joseph, 1985, then aged 41

But why? What drives these gay East Germans to mask and hide themselves? Joseph answers this as well, in simple terms. For "fear of being exposed as a laughable figure [...] I didn't want to belong to those who were disrespected."<sup>66</sup> He simply did not want to be disrespected, and instead, valued more the respect that all humans deserve. From what these interviews show, this was only possible in East German society if the individuals actively put in the effort to hide—mask—themselves or their identity. Perhaps this was an indication of self-hate or internalized homophobia as well.

The "masking" alluded to by the East German interviewees is certainly also reflected in *Coming Out*, although the narration of *Coming Out* follows, in a mildly similar vein to *Taxi zum Klo*, a secondary school teacher who is gay. But unlike Ripplloh in the West German production,

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<sup>65</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices* 130-131.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

Klahrmann grapples with his identity and hides it from everyone for most of the film, including his supervisors at the school he works at and his girlfriend, and he instead comes to terms with it in private. This suppression of his homosexuality into the private self is a stark contrast to the frank openness of the West and especially to Ripplloh.

### 6.3 Family and Relationship Values

Peter, a worker living in East Berlin who was in a committed relationship at the time of being interviewed by GDR gay activist Jürgen Lemke, describes the gay East German mentality:

Gays can only resist the pressure from their environment by living their love and discovering themselves. [...] A gay man can recite a thousand times to himself, “I am worth just as much as any person,” but it still remains a phrase as long as he does not experience essential things the way the majority of people do. [...] The love of one’s partner, feeling responsible for him—in short, a life in common. [...] Someone from their midst, someone they can touch. Opening up the conversation is important, too, because there is little sense in frightening people off. After all, we’re the ones who want something from them and not the other way around. [...] If I were to kiss Volker on the street, we would only provoke resistance. The time for strolling arm in arm through the streets has not arrived yet. At the present, what is important, in my opinion, is that people learn to tolerate us, that they learn to live with us, without completely condoning everything we do.

–Peter, 1988, then aged 44<sup>67</sup>

There is a lot to discern from Peter’s interview quote. Overall, he adopts a pessimistic and somber tone. Although he says that the empowerment of gay individuals comes from loving one’s self, “by living their love and discovering themselves”, he still admits to the essentiality of

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<sup>67</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 85.

finding love and finding an external source of love. This is a clear indication of his mindset that he believes in the all-importance of love and a life partner, the latter which shows a more traditional, SED-imposed way of thought.

Peter then goes on to say that it is important to speak out and educate those who do not identify as gay, but it is not only because they need to be lifted out of their ignorance, but because “we’re the ones who want something from them and not the other way around”. This shows that Peter sees gay individuals as at the mercy of heterosexuals and therefore still in a subservient position.

Peter describes a hypothetical situation of sharing a kiss with Volker, his partner, in public, and immediately dismisses its possibility as being readily accepted as “not arrived yet”. Perhaps he is just being pragmatic, as he firmly asks first, for others’ tolerance of homosexuals, but his usage of the word “tolerance” as opposed to “acceptance” is also telling that the time of acceptance has not come yet.

Finally, his last statement imploring those who are not gay to coexist in peace “without completely condoning everything we do” is thoroughly negative. He is asking for peaceful coexistence, but at the same time, he is also asking (more like settling for) the GDR public’s non-and/or reluctant acceptance or approval of homosexuality. If Peter was being pragmatic and simply being realistic before, this characterization cannot be said after his acceptance of non-complete condonation. Peter is but one person from East Berlin, but his opinions were not unique<sup>68</sup>, as they were also observed in *Coming Out*.

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<sup>68</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 85.

What is understood as the ultimate goal depicted in *Coming Out* is the relationship of the character Jakob and his partner. The artistic depiction of gay partnership within the film is what all homosexual individuals should be striving for—a loving, committed relationship in which both partners live together and are devoted to each other. In the film, Jakob appears obviously self-assured and confident in himself and his life with his boyfriend, though confrontational when Philipp Klahrmann brings up their troublesome past history as secondary students. The main takeaway is that Klahrmann gets a preview of what he, or all gay individuals in the East, should be striving for, and this is also articulated by Peter, further reflecting the trend of traditional family values in the East.

But what about family values shared by gay individuals in the West? The West German film *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt* (It is Not the Homosexual Who is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives) (1971) contains glimpses into what the Western mindset was. *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers...* is a low-budget, satirical film that aimed to expose the vices of homosexuals. Daniel, the main character in the film who moves from the countryside into Berlin, claims that “Die ewige Liebe ist scheiße. Man sollte so lange mit jemandem zusammenbleiben, wie es Spaß macht. (Everlasting love is shit. One should stay with someone only for however long it’s fun.)” This is the polar opposite of what Peter, a real individual from the GDR, said when Lemke interviewed him. It is understood then, that the film exposes the fact that gay individuals in the West value the short-term, the transient. *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers...* makes light of the plight of gay men and satirizes their determination towards casual and carnal relationships. Unlike the East, the gay men of the West

are always searching for “dem nächsten unpersönlichen Fick (the next impersonal fuck).”<sup>69</sup> A further step forward in thinking reveals that the West also values the individual more. As Daniel in *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers...* said, it’s only worth it to stay with someone for as long as it’s fun for one’s self. Although the film is highly satirical and not always serious, it is still clearly indicative of the West’s more established tolerance of homosexuality because such “selfish” thought was already circulating a decade before the creation of *Taxi zum Klo*.

#### 6.4 We All Face Similar Obstacles

Realistically speaking, the lives of gay individuals are not as fantastical as what is portrayed in *Taxi zum Klo*. *Faustrecht der Freiheit* (Fox and His Friends) (1975) is a West German film directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder who also stars in it as Fox, the gay, simple, and gullible main character. Fox finds himself suddenly without work at a carnival when his boyfriend, the carnival owner, gets arrested for tax fraud. Fox is determined to win the lotto so he does not have to work anymore, and he does win it soon after finding himself out of work.

When the carnival owner, his boyfriend, gets arrested for tax fraud, Fox comes out of the staging tent to bid him a confused goodbye. The two men kiss and embrace, and the viewer is left with no doubt that the two are lovers. Noteworthy is the fact that this scene is shot with a medium shot, showing that the storyteller had no qualms about the homosexual content. Neither long shots nor closeups were used in this scene, meaning that the kiss—which also took place in

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Kienzl, “Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt,” *critic.de*, March 28, 2014, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://www.critic.de/film/nicht-der-homosexuelle-ist-pervers-sondern-die-situation-in-der-er-lebt-6599/>

a professional working environment—was as ordinary as a kiss between a heterosexual couple. This is indicative that in the West, by the mid-1970s, when the film was made, homosexuality had become more accepted as one form of a norm, or a secondary character trait, at least in what is artistically reflected. In comparison to East Germany, the West is more open to overt displays of affection between two gay individuals in a work environment.

Volker, the partner of Peter, who was introduced in the previous section, explains that even though he is unafraid to be open about his relationship at his work,

I am relatively open about my relationship, even at work. I consider myself emancipated, and yet I do not transcend my gay biography. The majority of people do not like us gays, do not accept us. That has remained stuck in the back of my mind, because that's the way things are. [...] I am always on the lookout, and am always checking myself. I don't believe a heterosexual man is constantly aware of his sexuality.

-Volker, 1988, then aged 40<sup>70</sup>

he is still acutely aware that there is little tolerance, much less acceptance, of homosexuality in the East as an open identity. He is quite aware that he is from a minority group, and that the majority group of heterosexuals likely never gives their privilege any thought because East German society caters to them by default. While this was the reality in East Germany, West Germany seems to have transcended this heterosexuality-as-default.

While Fox was introduced earlier in this section as *gay*, simple, and gullible, his character is better defined as simple, gullible, and *then* gay because he finds himself gradually swindled of his lottery winnings not because he is gay, but because he is simple-minded and (too) easily believes in the goodness of others. After he wins the 500,000 DM, he appears to have bought himself a new wardrobe, but has not yet recklessly given away any other large lump sums.

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<sup>70</sup> Lemke, *Gay Voices*, 92.

Unfortunately, this is still the turning point in Fox's life because of the materialism that led to his severe downfall at the end of the film. To tell this story, Fassbinder uses the West's openness to his filmmaking advantage, as he exposes the fact that the gay characters who swindled Fox out of his lottery winnings are also able to be as selfish and conniving as generic heterosexual characters, underscoring yet again that there is very little differentiating homosexual characters and heterosexual characters in this film. Instead, the characters are fundamentally defined by their values<sup>71</sup>. In a message alike to that of *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers...*, *Faustrecht der Freiheit* also exposes and condemns the materialism of the gay population of the West.

Overall, *Faustrecht der Freiheit* sheds important light onto the fact that homosexuals in the West have become more widely accepted as a form of a default because the obstacles that they face are just as mundane as those of heterosexuals. Instead of the threat of blackmail, as was the case at the beginning of the 20th century, the Western homosexual feared the loss of a job or getting swindled out of money. The normalization of homosexuality through film shows that the climate of the West accepted this more easily.

## 7 Conclusion

As society is reflected and critiqued in artistic mediums, historical change in attitudes towards male homosexuality is also seen in the production of homosexual-themed films from Germany. Paragraph 175 had been a longstanding aspect of German society since its incorporation into the German criminal code following the formation of the German Empire in

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<sup>71</sup> Roger Ebert, "Fox and His Friends Movie Review (1979) | Roger Ebert," RogerEbert.com, January 1, 1979, accessed June 01, 2016, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/fox-and-his-friends>.

1871. Its history follows that of modern Germany as well as the changing attitudes of tolerance and acceptance in the nation. During the Weimar Republic, Paragraph 175 was on its way to abolishment, with the process marred largely only by the failings of the republic. Films created during the Weimar Era pled on behalf of the gay individuals victimized by Paragraph 175 and the blackmail it encouraged. During the Third Reich, homosexuals were aggressively targeted and interned in concentration camps, which in turn caused a widespread fear among the older gay individuals of a repeat of history after the war. When Germany became East and West Germany, the attitudes towards homosexuality also diverged. In the West, there existed more openness and acceptance, which was also seen in the sheer number of films with gay content compared to the East, which only had one gay-themed film to ever be produced. The differentiating point between the films from the two Germanys is that the films from the West exposed the vices the gay population were susceptible to, such as materialism, but in the East, the overwhelming trend reflected in both society and cinematic representation was a strong sense of hiding away the gay identity. Although Germany is now reunited and another quarter century has passed since the reunification, there is still examination to do, to see if values and attitudes among the contemporary gay German community has changed, and if recent films reflect these changes.

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