

Coming Out in East Germany

By Kyle Frackman

The film starts with a jubilant moment. Fireworks illuminate the sky, and we see revelers walking in the artificially and intermittently bright night. Amid the celebration, an ambulance makes its way through the East Berlin streets. Its siren wailing, it determinedly crosses the screen, from different vantage points and past the pyrotechnics and pedestrians. In the next scene we are in a hospital, as a young man on a gurney is wheeled down a hallway. Now things get uncomfortable. The young man, Matthias Seifert (played by Dirk Kummer), has attempted suicide, and his stomach must be pumped. A doctor and nurses work to help him. They try to get him to cooperate, their voices shrilly directing Matthias: “Come on, swallow!” “Don’t forget to breathe.” The discomfort of the scene escalates as the medical professionals maneuver a tube down his throat. Tears run down Matthias’s face. It is a relief when the film cuts to the following scene, in which Matthias lies in a hospital bed in a drab hallway. Fluorescent lights flicker above him; he is completely alone. The physician from the previous scene approaches Matthias and asks him again and again what drove him to this action. Crying, Matthias reveals the reason: “I’m gay. Homosexual.” “Oh, Matthias...,” the physician says, “That’s no reason to cry.” We then cut to a shot of a busy intersection and the film’s title: COMING OUT.

These scenes open the East German film *Coming Out*, created by acclaimed director Heiner Carow and released on November 9, 1989. It is difficult to overstate the significance of this film. *Coming Out* was a signal of changing tides in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany). The film arrived amid developments in late-GDR history that had already, though not necessarily known to all of its citizens, set it on a path toward dissolution. Most notably, the film also had its premiere simultaneous with another momentous occurrence: the opening of the Berlin Wall and East Germany’s borders.

As even its title reveals, Carow’s film is a “coming out film.” Coming out films are a subgenre of queer, or lesbian and gay cinema, usually thematizing the emotional journey of a queer protagonist’s struggle with self-realization and self-acceptance and toward the eventual coming out of the closet, while also undertaking a kind of activism that encourages those in the audience to come out, too. These films often follow a familiar trajectory that shares traits with the Bildungsroman, the German term for novels that depict a character’s formative education and development. Here the development is crucial, because the main character is not a complete individual when the story begins. Coming out films thus share similarities with “coming of age” films, which can include the ubiquitous American teen film, with similar narratives about the growth of characters toward some kind of maturity or further development. While stories focusing on children and adolescents are most common, these films can also show adults reaching some other stage of their own personal self-realization. In the case of *Coming Out*, the viewer follows Philipp Klahrmann (played by Matthias Freihof), a young teacher who must confront his past and come to terms with his own sexuality and self.

Aside from the narrative and cinematic traits that link it to these established genres, *Coming Out* is an East German film that also has international relevance and appeal. The camera affords us glimpses into the East Berlin gay scene, and the locations in the film are authentically East German. Although there are allusions to contemporary conditions in East Germany—including implied surveillance and repression by authorities and the anti-gay and racist violence depicted in the film—with minor adjustments the situations in the film could be taking place in other countries and national contexts.

The film’s first scenes, described above, help illustrate how *Coming Out* was and is a landmark film—primarily for its focus on homosexuality in the GDR, but also because it represented several “firsts.” The opening sequence was not the first depiction of suicide in East German popular culture; but it was the first time such a consequential event had been explicitly connected to homosexual experience. It also arose in the first feature film

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about homosexuality produced in the GDR, which further included the first portrayal of same-sex affection. Finally, *Coming Out* was also a monument because of its portrayal of queer life in East Berlin—at a historical juncture just before East Berlin disappeared—that encompassed a dramatic presentation of the gay scene, including cruising and bars, and same-sex affection and relationships.

Historical and Legal Background

By the late 1980s, the legal reality for homosexual citizens of East Germany had changed markedly since the country's founding. Following the Second World War, Germany was divided into four occupation zones controlled by the four victorious Allies. Then, in 1949, it was divided into two countries: the GDR and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, or West Germany). East Germany, corresponding to the Soviet Occupation Zone, was established as a socialist country and part of the postwar Soviet Bloc.

East and West Germany each established what laws would govern their newly-emerging nations. One of the questions to be settled was what would happen to §175, the anti-homosexuality law of the pre-war German legal code. Originally §143 in the Prussian legal code, §175 was carried over into German law with German unification in 1871. Under the Nazis (1933–45), the law had been intensified and elaborated: §175 and §175(a) now criminalized any even potentially sexual activity between men, including glances. A new paragraph—§175(b), outlawing bestiality—linked sex with animals to sexuality between men. (In line with earlier legal tradition, the laws before 1949 only addressed the prohibition and prosecution of male-male sexual activity, not lesbianism.)

During the formative postwar period between 1946 and 1949, there were various conferences and semi-public discussions about legal reform, including potential changes to §175. Dr. Rudolf Klimmer, a Dresden physician, was one of the most vocal supporters of compassionate reform and decriminalization of homosexual acts. Klimmer gave lectures, published on the topic and doggedly wrote letters and communicated with the authorities. He argued that, as part of ongoing efforts to remove any remaining elements of Nazism from all aspects of German society, it would be important to institute this change that would have great symbolic and tangible meaning following the defeat of the Nazis. But his arguments did not find a warm reception among East German elites and, as the GDR took shape, both the pre-Nazi version of §175 and the Nazi versions of §175(a) and §175(b) were adopted into its legal code.

A minor, yet far-reaching modification of the laws in 1957 provided that criminal prosecution could be waived if the individual infraction did not pose a risk to socialist society. But overall, before East Germany decriminalized male same-sex activity in the late 1960s, several thousand men were prosecuted for violations of §175. The records of the Ministry for State Security (the Stasi) and the *Volkspolizei* (People's Police) contain many examples of the application of the anti-homosexuality law. In addition, §175 was often included as an offense in cases involving other infractions, ranging from espionage to the unlawful possession of a firearm. Many of the files betray an alarmingly prurient interest in the sexual behavior of the men under suspicion of various offenses, making note of sexual practices and elaborate details of sexual encounters.

In 1968, with no real public announcement or discussion, East Germany decriminalized homosexuality as part of a general overhaul of its penal code. In 1969, West Germany followed suit and reformed the Nazi-era §175, so as to primarily focus prosecution on sex work, extortion and sex involving individuals under 21, the West German age of consent. Despite decriminalization, however, gay men continued to face scrutiny, surveillance and harassment in both West and East Germany. As surveillance was nearly omnipresent throughout GDR society, it was simply carried out in gay spaces as well. Although homosexuality was largely a taboo topic in East Germany, after decriminalization a range of debates and public discussions took place in multiple forums. These included letters to the editor of popular magazines like *Für Dich* and, in the late 1970s and 1980s, radio programs that featured, for example, discussions with medical and psychological experts or conversations with young people about sexuality. As in other countries in the 1970s and 1980s, a good deal of the discussion about homosexuality also dealt with the question of “seduction”—that is, whether homosexuals (especially, but not limited to men) had the ability to seduce non-homosexuals into their way of life.

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Grassroots organizing and activism began in the mid- to late-1970s. A crucial catalyst was the 1973 broadcast of Rosa von Praunheim's film *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt* (*It's Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives*) (1971) on West German television, to which nearly all East Germans had access. Also in 1973, the 10th World Festival of Youth and Students, hosted by the GDR, inspired more activism; Peter Tatchell, for example, a member of the British delegation, openly pressed for "gay liberation." Inspired by these and other events, a group called HIB (*Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin*, or Homosexual Interest Community of Berlin) coalesced as a social space for lesbians and gay men in East Berlin. The group organized empowering events on queer history and group excursions to parks, as well as performing private cabaret acts for its members. Both HIB members and gatherings were targeted by the Stasi, which aimed to infiltrate its ranks and undermine its activities.

Outside of Berlin, opportunities for lesbians and gay men were more limited and on a much smaller scale. As of the early 1980s, however, lesbians and gay men both in and beyond Berlin found a protected place to meet in what was, at first, an unexpected location: the Protestant Church. Under the auspices of the church—which was allowed a degree of freedom of assembly otherwise not available in the GDR—lesbians and gay men could meet in what they called *Arbeitskreise* (working groups). Discussions on topics such as "Homosexuality and Religion" addressed the setting, while other topics included "Queer History," "Sexual Health and Relationships."

Eventually, the popularity of these groups began to concern the East German regime and they were infiltrated by the Stasi. Grassroots gay liberation groups were also soon considered a political problem. Incremental changes were coming to East German society, however, especially by the late 1980s. Spurred by ongoing activism—such as church gatherings and repeated attempts by lesbian activists to commemorate homosexual victims at the memorial sites of Nazi concentration camps—the East German regime sought to address and control the issue by allowing public assembly of queer-focused organizations, just like those that had previously been illegal and prevented from securing meeting space. The age of consent for homosexual and heterosexual relationships was equalized at 14, and by 1989 changes to the laws removed the last vestiges of the criminalization of homosexuality in East Germany.

The Other Love

Another milestone in the gradually increasing tolerance of homosexuality in East German public life and discourse was the production of the GDR's first documentary on homosexuality. The short film *Die andere Liebe* (*The Other Love*), directed by Helmut Kissling and Axel Otten, premiered in 1988. It features interviews with lesbians and gay men as well as some of their family members and friends. The interviewees are articulate and frank. The film succeeds in depicting lesbians and gay men as a kind of "normal," not alarmingly different from the average East German. This was definitely one of its goals, though they become abnormal in their very exhibition within the scope of the film—that is, these individuals are shown as examples of lesbian and gay East Germanness to the audience that the film is trying to educate.

From the beginning, those involved in making the film conceived of it as a first step in educating society at large. These two elements—that it was considered a didactic film and that it was just an initial entry into the subject—permeate all the production documents associated with the film, as well as later accounts of the filmmaking process. It was the GDR's first foray into educating the heterosexual public about who "homosexuals" were and how they could fit into an East German and socialist worldview. Both the filmmakers and their advisers believed that this first impression would be crucial for the country's developing tolerance of lesbians and gay men.

One of the film's two heterosexual directors, Helmut Kissling (born 1945), was already familiar with making short documentaries and was drawn to the genre for its ability to address the true feelings and expectations of viewers.¹ In an interview conducted in 1986, two years before the release of *The Other Love*, Kissling lamented that although he would like

¹ Tolsdorf, Norbert. "Unter vier Augen mit Dokumentarfilmregisseur Helmut Kissling." *Film Spiegel* 22 (1986): 7.

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to make a documentary about homosexuality, it would be impossible to screen it, as it would only elicit a derisive response from the audience.² By the following year he must have felt that the GDR had overcome this obstacle, or perhaps he was encouraged by the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden, which commissioned the film, produced at the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films. As it turned out, Kissling ended up leaving the GDR, and the film was completed by his co-director, Axel Otten (born 1942).

In the treatment and proposed screenplay for *The Other Love*, Kissling and Otten describe the parameters for what they hoped to accomplish with the final product. It is clear from the perspective of both the filmmakers and consulting experts that the film should be a tool to educate primarily heterosexual viewers about gay East Germans. It was to work toward dislodging and deconstructing public prejudices against lesbians and gay men—to “subject one’s own feelings and judgments to critique.”³ In a list of prefatory comments at the start of the treatment, in which the filmmakers describe how they will achieve their goal, they assert the importance of anticipating and analyzing audience reactions. This passage emphasizes the documentary nature of the half-hour film, which “is about *real* destinies, points of view, experiences and realizations.”⁴ They also describe two preliminary decisions, the first regarding which people they choose to show, and the second regarding the inclusion of HIV/AIDS in the film.

The filmmakers decided to feature “only outwardly inconspicuous homosexuals... (particularly since they also comprise the majority of homosexuals), in order to keep the acceptance threshold as low as possible. In principle we have stayed with this position, even if we deviated from it in one case.”⁵ This excerpt makes abundantly clear the calculations involved in sculpting what the filmmakers thought would give the most successful first impression—and footage of the protagonist who is allegedly conspicuous in his homosexuality was not included in the final version of the film. Much of this behind-the-scenes, preproduction debate revolved around concerns about the supposed effeminacy of gay men. In this and other passages, we can see some of the struggles that the experts and filmmakers faced as they attempted to envision both the “real” homosexual—as they understood her and him—and the imagined, anticipated audience members and general public. Put simply, their solution was to be positive, while realistic. Of course, these terms are highly contingent and problematic in this context, where the filmmakers aimed to show a partial understanding of a misunderstood minority in a highly regulated format. They clearly feared that their imagined future audience would primarily feel embarrassed by and ashamed of effeminate gay men and, in general, not be as enlightened as “we are”—that is, as the filmmakers themselves.

It is striking that HIV/AIDS does not appear and is not discussed in a documentary made in 1988. It is an omission that could have sprung from various affective concerns—on one hand, avoiding the provocation of disease-related fear, while on the other also avoiding the disease-related shame it would most likely have caused. In the screenplay, Kissling and Otten write, “AIDS is not a *relevant topic* for all the homosexuals that we met (including beyond the film).”⁶ Their comments, however, do not make clear whether “not a relevant topic” means that there were no HIV-positive or AIDS-afflicted individuals among their interview partners, or whether the filmmakers and their interviewees never mentioned or considered HIV/AIDS in the process of making the film. Indeed, Kissling and Otten argue that to build the disease into the film in any way would foster the incorrect belief that “AIDS is a disease of homosexuals” and that “homosexuality

² Tolsdorf, 7.

³ Kissling, Helmut and Axel Otten. “Szenarium: Partner V.” (February 4, 1988), 1, Sächsisches Staatsarchiv – Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden, 13658 Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden, Nr. FVIII17.

⁴ Kissling and Otten, 1.

⁵ Kissling and Otten, 1.

⁶ Kissling and Otten, 1.

⁷ Kissling and Otten, 1.

⁸ Kissling, Helmut. “Die andere Liebe: Erfahrungen eines Dokumentarfilmers,” in *Kamera! Licht! Aktion! Filme über Körper und Gesundheit 1915 bis 1990*, ed. Susanne Roeßiger and Uta Schwarz (Dresden: Sandstein Verlag, 2011), 88. Not to put too fine a spin on it, but this was homosexuality’s first appearance only in filmic form. His meaning is clear, but it can be argued that homosexuality had been in the “Krankheits-Ecke,” if not the “Verbrechens-Ecke” (crime category) in the GDR since the country’s inception.

⁹ The section on *The Other Love* draws on Kyle Frackman, “Shame and Love: East German Homosexuality Goes to the Movies.” *Gender and Sexuality in East German Film: Intimacy and Alienation*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2018. 225–48.

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and AIDS are two sides of the same coin.”⁷ In 2011, Kissling opined, “it [would have been] counterproductive to connect homosexuality to illness in its very first depiction in the GDR.”⁸ The authorities who wrote letters in support of the approval and production of *The Other Love* agreed with the filmmakers.⁹

Production Background

The director of the feature film *Coming Out*, Heiner Carow (1929–97), was well-respected as the director of several very popular DEFA films. His film *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (*The Legend of Paul and Paula*, 1972), for example, about two unusual characters in a mythic and stylized love story, was an enormous success and soon became a cult favorite. He was not immune to censorship, however; an earlier film, *Die Russen kommen* (*The Russians Are Coming*, 1968–87), was banned and not screened until 1987. Carow was also an important East German cultural figure, who served as vice president of the Academy of Arts from 1982 to 1993.

According to interviews, Carow had thought of making a film like *Coming Out* since at least the mid-1980s. Every film made at the state-run DEFA Studios had to navigate its way through several stages of approvals, a process that could take years. The approval process was not always contentious, as most of the films that DEFA produced were not very controversial. Yet it was not uncommon for a film to experience trouble along the way and sometimes without much or any explanation. For example, Carow had tried to make a film titled *Paule Panke*, which included a scene with a drag queen, but did not receive official approval from the studio.¹⁰ He thus knew that *Coming Out* was not going to be a film that would move quickly through the approval process. In Carow’s telling, Hans Dieter Mäde, the director of the DEFA Studios from 1976 to 1989, had said that a film like *Coming Out* would never be made on his watch; although it isn’t clear, part of Mäde’s resistance may have been to producing a feature film focused on homosexuality.¹¹

One of the ways the filmmakers could influence how their creations might be received by studio decision-makers was by obtaining *Gutachten* (letters of support). Carow and Wolfram Witt (1953–2003), the screenwriter of *Coming Out*, secured three letters from experts who attested to the need for such a film. The letters, written in early 1988, came from a legal scholar (Karl-Heinz Schöneburg), a psychiatrist (Maria Planitzer) and a researcher on sexuality and youth (Kurt Starke). They made two types of arguments for the film, (a) pointing to past discrimination and persecution of homosexuals, especially under the Nazis, and (b) affirming the social (and socialist) good that such a film could do by helping to integrate all members of society.

Breakthroughs

The landmark intervention that these external experts were advocating came to fruition with the production of *Coming Out*. The most obvious and important milestone that the film signified is its very existence as a feature film focusing on homosexuality in East Germany. Although *The Other Love* was released in 1988, *Coming Out* represented a completely different undertaking.¹³ It was a feature-length film, with a much higher budget and a well-known director; and it was to be widely distributed with more copies of the film than usual. Additionally, the film was intended to have a very broad appeal, rather than being narrowly “educational”—as *The Other Love* was—or speaking only to members of the East German queer community or people who knew them. In light of this ambition, one of the film’s great successes—its ability to foster audience identification with and sympathy for the situation of each of the three main characters: Philipp, Matthias and Tanya (played by Dagmar Manzel)—grew from Carow’s talent for creating accessible and appealing plotlines and characters.

¹⁰ Dehn, Peter. “Herausforderung: ‘Coming Out’ – erster Film über Schwule in der DDR.” *Die Wahrheit*, November 11, 1989.

¹² Poss, Ingrid and Peter Warnecke, eds., *Spur der Filme: Zeitzeugen über die DEFA*. Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2006. 453.

¹³ Films for educational purposes were produced by the DEFA Studios on behalf of public institutions—such as, in this case, the Hygiene Museum in Dresden—as well as mass organizations. These films did not usually enjoy a theatrical release, which was reserved for DEFA films distributed by PROGRESS Filmverleih. Instead, educational films were distributed to regional and/or area film offices (Bezirks- and Kreisfilmstellen) and distributed through their educational channels. Exceptionally, *The Other Love* had an official premiere at the Babylon cinema in East Berlin on November 2, 1988.

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East Berlin's Gay Scene

In addition to making the experience of coming to terms with one's homosexuality accessible to a wide public, *Coming Out* familiarized audiences with gay life in East Berlin and challenged the taboo of showing same-sex affection. The film's first portrayal of the city's gay scene comes after Philipp has an unexpected and rather distressing encounter with Tanya's friend Jakob. When he gets home, Philipp is surprised to find Jakob and, during their short encounter, we discover that they had had a relationship and/or were love interests in high school. Jakob also reveals that Philipp's parents secretly separated them. Philipp is left reeling by the encounter. In the next scene—in which he and a colleague are in the teachers' lounge—the music and slowly zooming camera focused on Philipp convey the intensity of the disruption he has just experienced.

It is in this condition that Philipp enters the world of gay East Berlin.¹⁴ The two bars used as shooting locations in *Coming Out*—Zum Burgfrieden and Schoppenstube—were real gay bars and part of the authentic gay scene in East Berlin. As Philipp approaches the entrance, the viewer can already see that it is indeed a different world inside the bar. Varied, bright colors erupt through the windows, marking a distinct contrast with the grey and muted tones of buildings that are characteristic of much of the outside world one sees in the film. Someone pulls Philipp into the bar and right into a costume party that adds to the spectacular impact of the gay world to which the viewer and Philipp are being introduced.

The sequence that follows is deliberately overwhelming, for both Philipp and the viewer. In contrast to the understated appearance of everything we have seen until this point, a series of shots now focuses intently on the wide range of individuals, whose colorful appearance is heightened by a variety of costumes, hairstyles, makeup and dancing. Famed trans icon Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (1928–2002) has a cameo as a barmaid who tells Philipp her gender-sexual origin story. The music playing is mostly *Schlager*, a genre of German pop song that disarms with its often schmaltzy, sentimental lyrics and instrumental style. This, too, creates a strong contrast between the bar scene and the rest of the film, which is accompanied by a tonally- and rhythmically-complex original score, composed by Stefan Carow. It is also in this sequence that Matthias first spies Philipp and, appearing as a kind of Pierrot with a whitened face and a tutu around his neck, later helps Walter (played by Werner Dissel, 1912–2003) bring an intoxicated Philipp home.

Walter plays an instrumental role in Philipp's self-realization and -acceptance, marking a turning point near the end of the film. Feeling rejected by Matthias, Philipp retreats to the gay bar where they had originally met and proceeds to get drunk and make an obnoxious scene. As he is on the verge of being ejected from the bar, Walter sits Philipp down and delivers sage words. It is a clarifying (and didactic) moment. At first, Philipp drunkenly mistakes the older man's attempt to assist him for a pass and pushes him away. Sobbing and barely able to speak through his tears, Philipp reveals what he considers the horror of his gayness; he is terrified at the prospect of being alone and lonely and, even more so, of being a gay teacher. By this point, the film has shown the overbearing nature of his school administration's supervision (and arguably, by extension, surveillance) successfully enough to allow us to sympathize with his justifiable fear of scrutiny. Philipp has experienced various forms of rejection—from his former girlfriend, his mother, his employer and Matthias; his social isolation is shown as nearly absolute, disconnecting him from friends, family and the state apparatus.

In response to all this, Walter dryly comments "It could be worse," while a drag performer dances, kicking her legs up and down behind him. In vivid contrast, Walter then describes his life as a gay man of an earlier generation, living under the Nazis. He tells Philipp of Karl, his great love, and how their same-sex relationship was discovered; after they were each imprisoned in solitary confinement, Walter was sent to a concentration camp. The somewhat propagandistic moment comes when Walter explains why he became a member of the Communist Party. "The comrades saved me," he says, slightly slurring his words. They "did away with people exploiting their fellow human beings. Today no one gives a hoot if someone they work with is Jewish or whatever. But gays... We forgot them," Walter says, before rising and

¹⁴ I have written about this scene in an article in *German Life & Letters* vol. 71, no. 4 (2018). The article is available on Humanities Commons: <https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:20349>.

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walking out of the shot. Walter's personal story, its relationship to the struggle for equality and the role of communist comrades all fit seamlessly within the antifascist narrative upon which East Germany based its claimed identity as the "better Germany." But Walter also embeds a critique about homosexuals being left behind, which adds to the power of the scene. It seems to be clarifying for Philipp's self-understanding as well.

These bar scenes were extremely significant, both for GDR audiences as a whole and for members of the East German queer community. Except for *The Other Love*, there had been very few open and positive portrayals of homosexuals in East German media, and none on film. Shortly after Philipp is dragged into the bar, the main waiter, Achim (played by Michael Gwisdek), finds a spot for him at the bar and tries to make him feel comfortable. After dancing pairs swirl past in an intercut shot, Achim addresses Philipp just off camera: "No need to be scared. We all started out like you. Be brave." In addressing Philipp, Achim also speaks to the many viewers of the film, including those who need some kind of support and consolation—both queer viewers, who had long awaited some kind of reflective portrayal of their experience, and non-queer viewers in need of calming reassurance and a sense of the difficulties of queer life in East Germany.

Portraying Same-Sex Affection

Coming Out's general depiction of queer people (predominantly men, in this case) is certainly related to its portrayal of same-sex affection, as well as the possibilities for and complications of same-sex relationships. One of the defining narrative points of the film is Philipp's relationship with Tanya. We come to understand that Philipp feels that being in a relationship with a woman is what is expected of him, including by his difficult mother. Yet, ironically, it is his relationship with Tanya that facilitates his reconnection with his former love interest, Jakob. Viewers infer that there were gay rumors about Philipp during high school. Although Tanya, as well as Manzel's portrayal of this woman in a difficult position, often gets sidelined in discussions of *Coming Out*, this storyline illustrates some of the seemingly insurmountable challenges facing many lesbians and gay men as they confront heterosexism and homophobia, possibly make the choice to come out and openly live their true selves, and perhaps hurt someone in the process.

The frank depiction of Philipp's physical relationship with Matthias is another element that took *Coming Out* to a new frontier of cinematic depiction. About halfway through the film, Philipp finally realizes his own confusion and dissatisfaction in his relationship with Tanya. His disquiet and uncertainty have become visible, even to her, and come to a head when he leaves a note on her kitchen table asking for some time to himself. Philipp immediately goes to Matthias. The film soon shows the two of them in Philipp's apartment. Their tender conversation reveals their yearning for connection and their desire to feel welcome in society. Naked, the two men embrace, kiss and are eventually shown lying together on the bed, their legs entwined, as the camera pans up their bodies. The straightforward, almost ordinary nature of this scene is a component of why it is extraordinary. One of the goals of many lesbian and gay activists at the time, both in the GDR and elsewhere, was to convey the unremarkable quality of same-sex sexuality—that the substance of homosexual relationships was just a variation of normal sexual behavior. Although the scene is tame by contemporary standards of eroticism, at the time—and especially in the East German context—the film's depiction of Philipp and Matthias's intimacy was paradigm-shattering in its frankness.

Reception and Legacy

Thirty years after its premiere—on November 9, 1989, the same evening East Germany unexpectedly opened its borders—*Coming Out* thus remains a landmark film. In milestone years—marking the anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall or the unification of East and West Germany—Carow's film remains popular for public film screenings and prompts discussions about the history of sexuality, East German history and German national identity. Around the world, the film is screened regularly and has been shown at events in the Republic of Georgia, the Ukraine, the Czech Republic and Russia, as well as in the United States, Canada, France and Australia, among many other countries.

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At the same time, *Coming Out* naturally evokes different reactions among its diverse audiences. For some, the film is a relic of earlier, melancholic portrayals of gayness. For many Western (especially North American) audiences, for example, *Coming Out* is a reminder of gay cultural productions in the early to mid-1980s, which tentatively asserted their existence during the period of concern and fear that surrounded the emergence of HIV/AIDS. For others, however, *Coming Out* remains a poignant story about the complications of sexuality, identity and one's relationship to oneself and one's community. Philipp and Matthias—not to mention other remarkable characters in the film, like Werner Dissel's elderly Walter—become emblematic of queer visibility and invisibility, as well as ongoing efforts to achieve recognition and equity in discriminatory social settings. It is remarkable that a film like *Coming Out*, focused on the process of “coming out” in a particular social and historical context, remains popular with audiences and still continues to spark discussions about identity and social change.

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