“Coming Out of the Iron Closet: Contradiction in East German Gay History and Film”
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In this essay, I will be focusing on experiences and portrayals of outsiders, in this case of gayness, within the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). As my main cultural product of analysis I have chosen the 1989 East German film *Coming Out*, directed by Heiner Carow (1929-1997). I will situate Carow’s film within the historical and social context of the development of gay rights within the GDR. What I aim to show in this essay is the trajectory of duality in the GDR’s treatment of outsiders—in this case, of gay outsiders. I argue that GDR functionaries’ understanding of their role vis-à-vis the country’s differently sexualized citizens is one further example of the nation’s complex relationship with contradiction. We will recognize the presentation of this duality in Carow’s film, which uses sound, music, and image to deliver a narrative of contradiction. In what follows, I will briefly trace some historical and legal developments that are relevant for this topic before proceeding to an examination of Carow’s film itself, and particularly examples of its use of sound and music.

**History: Nietzsche and Foucault**

In an essay in which he explains his approach to excavating history, Michel Foucault writes:

>[Genealogy] must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history—in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 76)
In this essay, I will take a semi-archaeological or genealogical approach in the manner of Foucault (inspired as he was by Nietzsche), in order to look briefly at how specifically gay men—not lesbians (for reasons that will become clear)—came out of what Foucault calls “the long baking process of history” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 79). What we will see are the shortcomings, the advances, the trips and falls, and accidents that contribute to the narrative presented here (cf. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 81).

Genealogy, in this theoretical sense, reveals the historical construction and, to use the Nietzschean and Foucauldian metaphor, the inscription or written composition of bodies. “For Foucault,” theorist Judith Butler writes, “the cultural construction of the body is effected through the figuration of ‘history’ as a writing instrument that produces cultural significations [...] through the disfiguration and distortion of the body, where the body is figured as a ready surface or blank page available for inscription [...] of history itself” (“Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions” 603). Nietzsche, in Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (1882) and Zur Genealogie der Moral (1887), produces and develops the concept that inspires Foucault: namely, Herkunft or “descent.” Nietzsche tries to show how this Herkunft can manifest on or in bodies. As Nietzsche writes in Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (1882),

Der Gelehrte wächst in Europa aus aller Art Stand und gesellschaftlicher Bedingung heraus, als eine Pflanze, die keines spezifischen Erdreichs bedarf: darum gehört er, wesentlich und unfreiwillig, zu den Trägern des demokratischen Gedankens. Aber diese Herkunft verräth sich. Hat man seinen Blick etwas dafür eingeschult, an einem gelehrtgen Buche, einer wissenschaftlichen Abhandlung die intellektuelle Idiosynkrasie des Gelehrten [...] herauszuerkennen und auf der That zu ertappen, so wird man fast immer hinter ihr die “Vorgeschichte” des Gelehrten, der Familie, in Sonderheit deren Berufsarten und Handwerke zu Gesicht bekommen. (583, original emphasis)

One’s history or Herkunft begins to comprise not only genealogical (and, from a modern perspective, genetic) linkages, but rather also occupations—in the widest senses of profession,
time, pre-occupations—and activities. Through involuntary and voluntary corporeal reactions, *Herkunft* contributes to the construction and development of bodies and certainly personalities. Individual traits manifest themselves that could be, with archaeological effort, connected to past tendencies and occupations.

Building on this, Foucault takes us to task for customarily accepting that bodies are subject to only biology and physiology and the like. Instead, bodies show the evidence of this historical development and descent, in the sense of *Herkunft*: “The body is molded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances” (“Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” 87). One could supplement or expand upon this by adding that bodies are subject more abstractly to functions of power and external regulation, as one can see in many of Foucault’s other works (e.g., *Discipline and Punish* and *The Birth of the Clinic*). According to both Nietzsche and Foucault, then, one can observe that bodies are affected and effected by such various interactions with environment, law, society, and so on, and can also respond with resistances, whether implicit or explicit, in public or in private.³

**GDR: Legal and Social Connections**

I would like to shift to offer some details about the legal context of gayness in the GDR, which contributes to the cultural foundation on which Carow’s film was based and appeared in 1989. Relatively little has been written about the film *Coming Out*, despite Carow’s importance in the canon of DEFA directors; it is usually mentioned in passing as one of the late films produced by the DEFA Studios. Somewhat more has been written about the experiences of lesbians and gay men in the GDR, although mostly, with few exceptions, in German. Many scholars have an ambivalent relationship with the former East Germany, and this topic tends to
throw that ambivalence into relief, at least for some. The narrative of the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War tends to be characterized as the “victory of capitalism” and the victory of “us” over “them” or even, dramatically, “the end of history” (Rossbacher 164; Dietrich 4547; Lepenies 924). The country’s authoritarianism often overshadows—perhaps rightly—any policy priorities that moved toward eliminating social inequities. With the GDR’s resurgence in recent years in popular films like Good-Bye Lenin! (2003) and Das Leben der Anderen (2006), this topic connects to a reassessment of the make-up of the GDR and the place of numerous elements within East German society, some of which—like historical accuracy, human rights, aesthetic or formal value of East German cultural works and their placement in categories of “German” works—have been and continue to be discussed in German Studies scholarship (Carson; Creech; Horn; Schmeidl). Additionally, mentions of Coming Out tend to overlook many aspects of the film, as they are overshadowed by plot devices, the film’s chronology, and the film’s placement among artistic and cultural depictions of minorities.

The legal developments in the area of German sexual criminalization—as in other areas—are tortuous and often hard to follow. It is noteworthy that the GDR, which had been characterized, according to Denis Sweet, as “the most boring, predictable country in the world,” was in this social area a contrast to other East Bloc countries (“A Literature of ‘Truth’” 205). Skimming over some of the unnecessary details of the meandering changes of the German criminalization of same-sex affections, the most salient points are as follows. The relevant laws stemmed from an 1851 Prussian law that was codified in the German Empire in 1871 and altered and intensified under the National Socialists (1935); this law lived on in West Germany. East Germany took a different route, effectively decriminalizing non-coercive homosexual acts in 1967/68—a move that some cynically considered to be merely or at least primarily a
“propaganda move” vis-à-vis the West (Lemke, “Gay and Lesbian Life in East German Society” 35). In 1987, the GDR completely decriminalized same-sex acts; this East German law was held as the status quo for the unified German state’s laws. It should be noted that, except for a GDR decision that affected all non-consensual sex, all German legal provisions applied only to male-male sexual acts; lesbians were excluded by omission. Speaking to this in 1990, activists and writers Christina Schenk and Marina Körzendörfer wrote, “Lesben waren also einer doppelten Mißachtung ausgesetzt – sie wurden als Frauen nicht ernstgenommen und als homosexuelle Menschen nicht erkannt”; “Das [...] gewonnene Wissen über Schwule hilft hier nicht weiter. Lesben sind Frauen, also anders sozialisiert als Männer. [...] Kurz: Frauen sind sozialpsychologisch anders als Männer” (Schenk and Körzendörfer 78–80). As the National Socialists and earlier referees of sexual behaviors had done, the GDR thus indicated that the primary concern with respect to same-sex affection was based on men.

Considered to be a sign of a decadent, bourgeois, capitalist lifestyle, gayness was often disavowed by the political machine in the GDR and considered to be antithetical to communism and the worker’s movement (cf. Lemke, “Gay and Lesbian Life in East German Society” 32–33; Evans). Thus, the fact of the incremental decriminalization of gayness in the GDR—starting with the 1950 criminalization of only “coercive” acts—did little to satisfy gay men, lesbians, and would-be activists who expected policy changes, like the easing of censorship, to accompany the country’s legal stance. Prominent GDR agitators for gay rights both before and after the Fall of the Wall, like Jürgen Lemke and Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (who appears in Coming Out), maintained that the state, for the most part, publicly denied the existence of any sexual minority (Lemke, “Gay and Lesbian Life in East German Society” 32; Mahlsdorf 173). After East Germany signed the 1974 Helsinki Accords, however, which guaranteed the human right of
applying to emigrate, “homosexuality” was secretly an acceptable reason for the approval of applications to emigrate to West Germany (Sweet, “The Church, the Stasi, and Socialist Integration” 353; cf. Pieper 65). The idea of gays as health and security risks only fueled the fire of the East German government’s competing motivations of compassion and suspicion (Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism” 259).

Starting in the 1970s, the East German establishment’s interpretation of individuality shifted. After the transition of power between General Secretaries Walter Ulbricht and Erich Honecker, a form of “consumer socialism” developed in the GDR (Fulbrook 5). While the Socialist Unity Party (SED), had previously dismissed the importance of Western-style fulfillment, understood to be a source of inequity, the Party began in the ’70s to make allowances for individual development and self-realization beyond labor as long as Marxist economics was taken into account (Hillhouse 585–86). In the era of proclamations like Honecker’s that there were no taboos in socialism (Fulbrook 145), gayness became, in varying forms, more visible if not necessarily more acceptable. For instance, the Homosexual Interessengemeinschaft Berlin was founded in 1974, although it faced some state opposition and later that year had to start meeting in Charlotte von Mahlsdorf’s Gründerzeitmuseum (Thinius, Aufbruch aus dem grauen Versteck 22–23). The topic gradually appeared in venues like the “Unter vier Augen” column of the Freie Deutsche Jugend daily Junge Welt and the magazine Für Dich (Pieper 55). By the 1980s, sexual identity was starting to be seen as one of the ways in which citizens in a socialist society could label themselves.

Many lesbians and gay men found a workable solution by meeting semi-publicly in the Evangelical Church, starting in the early 1980s. Previous attempts to organize in secular locales, particularly in the 1970s, had met with concerted state opposition from the ruling Party; meetings
in churches then took advantage of the one place beyond immediate secular or state control (Sweet, “A Literature of ‘Truth’” 206). Energy toward further discussion sparked the creation of so-called working groups affiliated with churches in Leipzig and Berlin, followed by churches in other GDR cities (Sweet, “The Church, the Stasi, and Socialist Integration” 355). As the working groups continued working, however, they also caught the attention of the state police, the Stasi (Sweet, “The Church, the Stasi, and Socialist Integration” 355–56). Because of the potential for organization and activism, these groups were considered a threat to the socialist order and were correspondingly monitored, infiltrated, and sabotaged (Sweet, “The Church, the Stasi, and Socialist Integration” 356–58).

Despite or perhaps because of increased visibility, authorities were concerned as lesbians and gay men increasingly wanted to meet publicly, arousing suspicion. This resulted, according to one account, because “Westkontakte bestanden und weil Homosexuelle einen hohen Anteil der Ausreisewilligen stellten” (qtd. in Thinius, “Aufbruch aus dem grauen Versteck” 24). In reaction to the supposed connection between homosexuals and the West, the Stasi began operations based on their concern about the likelihood that “homosexuell veranlagte Personen,” newly visible and experiencing more social acceptance, could be politically abused. The secret police force was on the case. Indeed, a Stasi directive of the early 1980s clarified goals: “Erarbeitung konkreter Hinweise zu homosexuell veranlagten Personen unter Nutzung von Kontakten zur Kripo, aber auch zu Ärzten, Psychologen, Ehe- und Sexualberatern; Gewinnung von Schwulen und Lesben als inoffizielle Mitarbeiter; Nutzung vorhandener IMs (v. a. D. im kirchlichen Bereich), um den innerkirchlichen Widerstand gegen die homosexuellen Gruppen zu stärken; [...]” (Thinius, Aufbruch aus dem grauen Versteck 16).
In addition to demonstrating the continued paranoia and conflicts or contradictions of the state, the commissioning in 1983 of a Stasi-supported dissertation written at the Humboldt University by Gerhard Fehr provides us with some tragically humorous examples of how the official concern could manifest itself. The author of the analysis gives reasons for suspecting homosexuals: “Sie sind oft wegen ihrer Hilfsbereitschaft beliebt und verstehen es besonders gut, mit weiblichen Arbeitskollegen zusammenzuarbeiten” (qtd. in Thinius, “Aufbruch aus dem grauen Versteck” 23). He continues at length:


Clearly, homosexuals (i.e., especially or exclusively gay men) presented a clear and present danger to the socialist order, calling into question their presence there at all.

Also in 1982 and 1983, lesbians and gay men coalesce in groups in Leipzig, Erfurt, Eisleben, Halle, Magdeburg, and Berlin. Members in Leipzig write, “Wir wollen nicht gegen, sondern im Staat leben, verstehen uns selbst als Teil Sozialismus-Realisation. In diesem Sinne wollen wir unsere Unzufriedenheit produktiv machen” (SCHWULE IN DER KIRCHE 1). Party leaders discovered that the state’s dearth of social services for lesbians and gay men and its lack of awareness of these citizens’ needs were, first, encouraging these citizens to seek out the community and assistance of the Church and, second, contributing to the already significant problem of attempted legal emigration (Hillhouse 589–93). The Protestant Church, which—
because of East Germans’ inability to organize elsewhere—had been an incubator for social movements, did not gain new flocks of the faithful, though, as approximately 10% of these organization members identified as Christian (Hillhouse 594). In order to combat the success of the Church, the Central Committee of the SED advocated increasing homosexual integration into the socialist order, which could be achieved, for example, through changes to existing laws, continued deliberation, increased availability and visibility of organizations for lesbians and gay men, and publicity campaigns to reduce social prejudices (Hillhouse 590). In 1987, the Sonntags-Club, the GDR’s first gay club, is recognized and begins meeting in Berlin. In 1989, the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum releases a (slightly depressing) homosexual-themed documentary entitled *Die andere Liebe*. Individual subjects are also important in this discussion, and these are often most clearly heard and seen in memoir narratives and interviews from this period (e.g., Gutsche; Lemke, *Ganz normal anders*). Carow’s film represents one more—but not final—confrontation between homosexuality and socialism (cf. Sieg). I have gone through this preceding examination to illustrate some of the contradictions in the GDR at this time, that is, especially after 1976.5

**Interlude**

This essay began with an aim toward excavating and connecting some of the monuments in GDR culture. Foucault’s appreciation for the interconnectedness and unpredictability of social and cultural actions and reactions allows us, as we saw in his understanding of *Herkunft*, to note the corporeal effects of the kinds of legal, social, and political ballet described above. Every day, the individuals in this context—who are or inhabit Nietzschean or Foucauldian bodies—are restricted and funneled in different directions. Laws are codified, ignored, changed, and repealed. State action becomes complicit in resistance and occasionally co-opts it. Meeting places are
eventually discovered and closed down, directing those attending toward new locations, like clubs and bars, including ones that would eventually be shown in Carow’s film, as living exhibits or monuments of resistance and change. Resistance can be found in both active and passive action, in motion as well as in stillness, in sound as well as in silence. Following Judith Butler, we can see that “material environments” will always become part of the action or reaction, since all human action is supported in some way, whether it is by roads or shoes or something else (Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”). Carow’s film thus becomes a kind of cultural and historical, if not legal, bookend in its status as the first feature film to treat this topic, an extension of the social developments and activist organization in the 1970s and ’80s.

**Coming Out**

The film *Coming Out* was the result of another kind of action, the director’s seven-year-long struggle to make the film, and premiered on the fateful night of 9 November 1989. In a consideration of the film’s context, in what can retrospectively be seen as the twilight years of the GDR, it is useful to see the 1976 expatriation of the singer Wolf Biermann as the turning point that it in many ways was. The late 1970s and early ’80s saw a “brain drain” of emigrating talent from the GDR, including actors Manfred Krug, Angelica Domröse, and Armin Müller-Stahl (Allan 15). Moreover, this period saw the expansion of a theme in several DEFA films, namely what Seán Allan has called “the alienation of the individual,” which served to provide a kind of criticism of GDR society (16).

In the final decade of East German cinema, social and political developments in the GDR and beyond continued to inflect the production and reception of DEFA films. Increasing unrest in Eastern Europe—in Poland, for example—connected to a decrease in the import of Polish and Hungarian feature films into the GDR (Allan 16–17). Censorship was erratic but usually
definitive (Allan 17). After Gorbachev’s rise to power in 1985, the movements toward glasnost and perestroika began—albeit slowly, given the Party’s resistance—to affect cultural policy in the GDR. These years saw the production of a number of films on topics previously untouched or equivocally managed and delayed, Carow’s Coming Out among them.\(^6\) In 1989, a number of monumental political, cultural, and social events cascaded toward November 9, when Coming Out, was screened and lost in the fray, although it was mostly positively received, arguably for a wide variety of reasons.

Carow’s film was viewed favorably in East Germany, considered to be a box office hit. It has been argued that East Germans’ positive reaction had little or nothing to do with the film’s treatment of gayness per se. Instead, Coming Out’s most successful thematic undercurrent was its advocacy of the importance of recognizing “outsiders”; or, as Denis Sweet has described it, “the courage to stand up and be counted for what one really was. . . .,” “the struggles of the East Germans as they sought to cast off repression and free themselves” (Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism” 250). On the other side of the divide, West Germans lauded the film’s fortitude, the film’s background, as it were—not the film itself. For the West Germans, Sweet writes, “Coming Out was an embarrassment that hearkened back to an earlier, more naïve stage of development of gay liberation long since left behind in the dust of Western history. . . .,” “an underdeveloped homosexuality from an underdeveloped place” (Sweet, “Bodies for Germany, Bodies for Socialism” 250). The film’s didactic nature led one East German critic even to write that the film’s portrayal could be seen as forced: “[Ich sehe] in dieser intensiven Ausführlichkeit eine Spur von missionarischem Eifer, von Überreden- und Überzeugenwollen. . . .” (Peter Ahrens qtd. in Habel 101). Nonetheless, for whatever reason, Carow’s film won the Silver Bear at the 1990 Berlin Film Festival.
The film opens with the aftermath of a suicide attempt by one of the main characters, Matthias (played by Dirk Kummer). His stomach is pumped, after which he reveals to the doctor that he took the pills because he’s gay. (This event is never taken up explicitly in the rest of the film.) Philipp (Matthias Freihof), a new and young high-school teacher, gets to know another teacher, Tanja (Dagmar Manzel), and they start a relationship. An old friend of Tanja’s, Jakob (Axel Wandtke), is revealed to be a former love interest of Philipp’s. The encounter causes an emotional crisis for Philipp, whom we soon see inside a gay bar, where he drinks too much and is taken home by Matthias and Walter (Joachim Pape), an older man, who had been in a concentration camp on account of his gay behavior. Philipp visits Jakob, and we learn about Philipp’s parents’ intervention in their youthful relationship. Philipp and Matthias meet again, as Philipp stands in line overnight for concert tickets, a birthday present for Tanja. Becoming more disturbed, Philipp separates from Tanja, after which we see Philipp attending Matthias’ 19th birthday party. That night, Philipp and Matthias sleep together. After Tanja, Philipp, and Matthias are unexpectedly at the concert for which Matthias had obtained the tickets, Philipp is forced to come out to Tanja. Emotionally troubled, Philipp goes to the bar where he met Matthias and causes a large disruption, prompting Walter, the gay concentration camp victim, to tell of his experience under the Nazis and how communism helped him. In the penultimate scene of the film, Philipp’s classroom is visited by teachers who are there to observe his class to see whether he is still fit to teach. The film ends as Philipp leaves his apartment and bicycles out onto a Berlin street. There are two main types of duality or ambiguity that I want to present, both of which revolve around the film’s use of music. The three sequences I have chosen to discuss either form a counterpoint with a rising or falling part of the narrative or provide ironic commentary. I will present these in the order in which they occur in the film.
Sound and Music in *Coming Out*

Already at the very start of the film, as an ambulance rushes through numerous shots carrying Matthias to the hospital following his suicide attempt, the camera lingers on shots of Berlin in which New Year’s fireworks light up the sky—unwittingly now evoking the celebratory atmosphere that would follow on the day of the film’s premiere and in the next year with German Reunification. The low-pitched sound of the fireworks, traffic, and a train provide a juxtaposition to the piercing siren, ground the film’s setting, and link to later uses of sound. Matthias’ act, a bodily expression of discontent and revulsion at the heterosexism of GDR society, places him directly in contact, literally, with the hand of the state (cf. Sieg 286). The recorded ambient “noise,” equally privileging the ambulance’s siren and the echoes of the fireworks, helps to place us in Berlin and makes us co-sufferers and/or retrospectively part of a resistance or expression of dissatisfied existence through our involvement in the film’s diegesis.

The next scene extends this. Matthias is wheeled into a hospital trauma room, all the while being slapped on the face by attendants and nurses. In an uncomfortable and eventually a literally gut-wrenching scene, Matthias is continuously addressed by shrill voices, which tell him to open his eyes, lean his head forward, and swallow the tube that is being guided down his throat to allow for the pumping of his stomach (see fig. 1). Matthias repeatedly coughs and gags, as the professionals tell him not to forget to breathe. Liquid is poured into a canister connected to the tube, which now leads down Matthias’ throat. After the procedure, we see Matthias on a hospital bed, alone in a drab hallway, illuminated by flickering fluorescent lights. A microphone close to Dirk Kummer, playing Matthias, records his crying and the rustling of his hospital gown. It is at this point, when a female doctor approaches and asks Matthias why he did this, that we discover what will of course be the film’s main premise, namely the position of gay people in
(GDR) society. This is firmly established by a cut to a shot of a city intersection on a gloomy, grey Berlin day. Trabants flow through the intersection and an unadorned sans serif font announces the film’s title, in English and all uppercase letters: “COMING OUT.” Loud noises of car engines and horns provide a stark contrast to the intimate and uncomfortable previous scene with Matthias in the hospital (see fig. 1). This unpleasant hospital scene reminds us of the conflicted and contradictory supporting hand of socialism. Saved by state and institutional medicine, Matthias survives and remains an anomaly within socialist society. Tucked away in the quiet hospital, Matthias’ nonetheless disquieting scene and situation are enveloped by the subsequent noise and the dreary light of the next day.

These scenes, without musical accompaniment, differ from the second scene I would like to discuss. After running into Tanja (literally) and giving her a bloody nose, Philipp and Tanja have slept together and started a relationship. An intermediate scene shows Philipp’s unconventional teaching methods, which are unexpectedly observed by the school’s head teacher. In the next scene, Philipp is exiting his apartment building with belongings in his arms, which he proceeds to load into a cart and move to Tanja’s place. As he pushes the cart across the street against a red light, music enters and overlaps into the next scene, a performance of Mozart’s 1791 opera *Die Zauberflöte* in the Komische Oper. An allegory of a journey toward enlightenment with allusions to Masonic philosophy, the opera treats themes of brotherly love, the triumph of “virtue and justice,” and the goal of enlightenment.

The insertion in *Coming Out* shows us one of the most famous selections from the work: the duet between Papageno and Papagena, which takes place almost at the end of the opera. Papageno, a bird-catcher, who had been longing for a wife since the beginning of the story, like the heroic prince Tamino, must endure trials multiple times in the opera (e.g., avoiding the
temptation of women) to prove his worth and virtue. At the point of the duet, Papageno had
despaired at not having Papagena, his love whom he had recently found, and prepared to hang
himself. The opera’s libretto calls for a set consisting of a hall with two doors through which
one will find trials by fire and water. Tamino and his love, Pamina, pass through these tests
unscathed. Papageno uses another way to summon Papagena and she appears. They sing their
duet about being married, being happy, and having many children.9 The opera set that we see
here, however, consists of a rundown grey building, much like many that one can see in the East
Berlin in the film, indeed, like the ones past which Philipp was just pushing his cart (see figs. 2
and 3).

As Papageno and Papagena sing, Philipp, surrounded by his students, appears to enjoy
the music. (It isn’t clear whether he is emotionally moved or just has a runny nose, prompting
his student to give him a tissue.) The two singers repeatedly sound out their happiness about
their future children (i.e., “Erst einen kleinen Papageno!”,” “Dann eine kleine Papagena!”,” etc.).
As the future parents’ rhythmic lines repeat and pulse after each other, a female student of
Philipp’s who is sitting next to him, puts her hand on his leg. He looks at the student, and she
appears amused. This is prior to Philipp’s meeting Tanja’s friend, Jakob, who was his former
love interest. Papageno and Papagena’s duet, a romantic dialogue between a man and woman
who plan for their marriage and children, ironically and somewhat didactically foreshadows
Philipp’s newfound recognition of his gayness and the odd interaction between Philipp and his
student. The duet simultaneously invokes, however, the opera’s eighteenth-century ideals of
brotherly love and judgment on the basis of actual accomplishments and not perceived qualities.

Musicologist Susan McClary has written that “Music enters through the ear – the most
vulnerable sense organ. It cannot be closed or used selectively: one can avert one’s eyes from the
decor of an elevator but not one’s ears from its Muzak” (18). I mention this, because film analysis usually privileges seeing over hearing. Indeed, sound can sometimes be seen as “other” within the world of film (Mary Ann Doane in Flinn 6). Moreover, music helps to create the impossible or the improbable (Walter 212). Although Theodor Adorno argued that classical music is (negatively) transformed by its non-live presentation (cf. Flinn 81–82), this film’s presentation of music by Johann Sebastian Bach altered not in the manner that Adorno described, but by Bach himself, can contribute to our understanding of the ambiguity of lesbians’ and gay men’s positions in GDR society.

Much later in the film, after Philipp has slept with Matthias, we discover that there is a possibility that Tanja is pregnant. After she and Philipp have a fight, the next scene, the third and final sequence I discuss here, shows Matthias arriving at Philipp’s door with flowers. When he doesn’t find Philipp at home, Matthias goes looking for him. As Matthias leaves and heads to a carnival, we hear J.S. Bach’s 1734 Weihnachtsoratorium (BWV 248), at first with the sounds of traffic and the carnival attendees before it cuts out the other sound—one of the film’s mixtures of diegetic and non-diegetic music, which blend into each other. The choir ironically declares, “Jauchzet, frohlocket! Auf, preiset die Tage!” as Matthias forlornly hands his flower bouquet to a woman working at a carnival stand.10 The choir continues to cheer Matthias on as he walks around. We cut to a medium close-up shot of Philipp and Tanja at a concert performance of this piece. This is immediately before Matthias’ presence at the concert hall at intermission provokes Philipp’s coming out to Tanja in the following scene.

Especially since the Bach Revival, which Felix Mendelssohn sparked in 1829, Bach has been frequently re-appropriated and mobilized to make points about cultural authenticity. As musicologist McClary (cited earlier) has written, repeated groups have “kidnap[ped] Bach” from
the previous mobilizations in order to make use of him for their own purposes (63–64). McClary advances a compelling argument about Bach’s music’s ability to deliver contradictory—and even revolutionary—musical material. Often considered the beginning of the ancestral line of canonical German(-speaking) composers, Bach presented a style of composition and cultural presentation or production which was a successful combination of musical and religious styles, his own unique synthesis of his German take on Italian and French forms as well as Lutheran and Pietist devotion (McClary 21–22, 24).

The *Weihnachtsoratorium*, which we hear in this scene, was finished and performed in the Christmas season of 1734, and has its genesis in a secular piece that Bach composed the previous year: *Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten!* (BWV 214).\(^{11}\) The night of 7 December 1733, Bach frantically completed this secular cantata for a performance the next morning. This work, meant to celebrate the birthday of Queen Maria Josepha (1699-1757), the consort of Augustus III, Prince Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, was to be part of the ambitious Bach’s application package to become Court Composer in Dresden. The next year this music praised the birth of Jesus. In what in musicology is called a “parody,” Bach lifted much of the music from this earlier work to use in the *Weihnachtsoratorium* the following year. While the use of parody was not unheard of in pre-19th-century composition, including in Bach’s work, this replacement adds another dimension to the pattern already present in Carow’s film.

Hiding behind the *Weihnachtsoratorium* is this secular cantata, which has its own curious gender-sexual play. Two of the cantata’s four numbers become hermaphroditic in their presentation of male soloists singing female characters. Irene, the Greek goddess of peace, in a recitative sung by a tenor, delights in her olive tree, which is lush and rich and runs with sap. Fama, the goddess of fame and rumor, in a recitative sung by a bass, declares that her/his voice
will penetrate the Earth and sing the queen’s praises (cf. Young 263–64; Whittaker 640–41). The composition further thwarts expectations by upending and reversing the “orthodox” order of recitative-aria (Whittaker 640–41).

This somewhat odd—or queer—collection of performance, structural, and textual material (the libretto was written by Bach himself) is sanitized for the next year’s composition, the literal creation of a compound of multiple works (cf. Mann 124). The hybrid, then, with its accompanying baggage, appears to us also in a synthetic form: visually and aurally. The joyous and parodic musical work, whether in its sacred or original secular form, reinforces the melancholic tone of the film, adding to the irony and inverting the music.

**Conclusion**

Resistance, here in a sometimes dual and/or ambiguous mode, reveals the otherwise invisible boundaries of power relations, but is still a part of those power relations in multiple forms. As Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality*, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. [...] [Power relationships’] existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle” (*The History of Sexuality* 95).

The bodily inscription or formation that I discussed above has been visible here in the real world and the filmic world. What we see in the development of the GDR—and in other societies and contexts—is the re-appropriation or re-instrumentalization of minority groups, and especially in this case, gay men (and lesbians, although in a different way). In my examination, I have shown some of the apparent contradictions in GDR society and its presentation in the narrative of Carow’s film. The film’s treatment of gayness is certainly of a particular time and place, although one can often see that we have not progressed as far as we may think (e.g.,
Neumaier). The evolution of East German social policy precluded or subverted related questions of patriarchy, constellations of family life, and compulsory heterosexuality (Sweet, “The Church, the Stasi, and Socialist Integration” 361–62). What we see in the film, then, is partly the result of a struggle of resistance that is projecting itself toward a version of freedom.

1 I would like to thank the DEFA-Stiftung for the permission to reproduce the included images from Carow’s film and Konstanze Schiller of the DEFA-Stiftung for her assistance with the images. Hiltrud Schulz of the DEFA Film Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst was a generous source of assistance with this and other projects. I thank Larson Powell for his feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.

2 Trailer for Coming Out: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UkM_EPZdfM

3 Foucault has also advanced the idea of “convulsive flesh,” that is, individual bodies’ resistance efforts (“26 February 1975” 213).

4 Rüdiger Pieper wrote in 1987 that “it has been rumored in the West that homosexuals are given preferential treatment in the granting of exit visas to the West” (65). Indeed, “[i]n its article ‘Gestaffelte Abwehr’ (15 September 1986, p. 148), Der Spiegel maintained that 10,000 emigration permits had been granted to homosexuals during the 1984 Ausreisewelle - a position from which it has since distanced itself (“Versteckspiel um Infizierte in der DDR,’ Der Spiegel, 16 February 1987, p. 148)” (Pieper 65n).

5 The experiences of some gay men in the GDR are explored in the recent documentary, Unter Männern – Schwul in der DDR (2012) (dir. Rösener and Stein).

6 Allan also includes among these, for example, Lothar Warneke’s Einer trage des anderen Last (1988), Karl Heinz Lotz’s Rückwärts laufen kann ich auch (1990), Jörg Foth’s Biologie (1990), Peter Kahane’s Die Architekten (1990), Evelyn Schmidt’s Der Hut (1990), and Andreas Höntsch’s Der Straß (1991) (18).

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-Hsn_SyB1I

8 Carow’s technique here can also be read as an example of melodrama, a genre and approach of which he was fond (see, e.g., Powell).

9 Another performance of the Papageno-Papagena duet: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OL7YF0Djruk

10 The opening of Bach’s Weihnachtsoratorium: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggm0SZCWKZo

11 Performance of Tönet, ihr Pauken!: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMWShmoLxZo
Works Cited


Fig. 1. Matthias’ stomach is pumped in the hospital. © DEFA-Stiftung / Martin Schlesinger.
Fig. 2. Philipp takes his belongings to Tanja’s. © DEFA-Stiftung / Martin Schlesinger.
Fig. 3. Papageno and Papagena begin their duet. © DEFA-Stiftung / Martin Schlesinger.