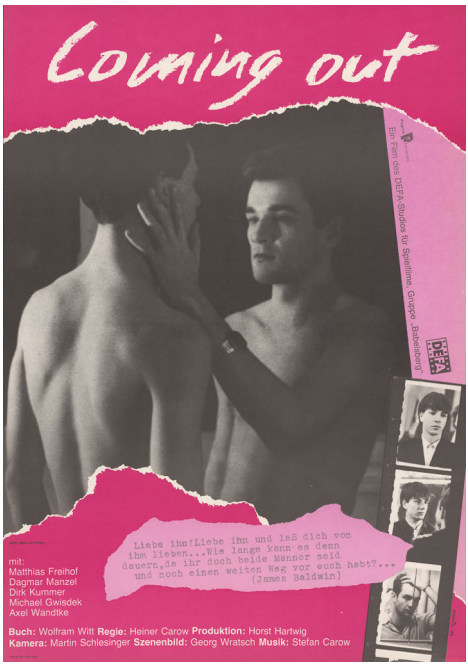
Coming Out (1989)

Thomas Preston

dir. Heiner Carow; prod. Horst Hartwig; screenplay Wolfram Witt; photography Martin Schlesinger; music Stefan Carow. 35mm, color, 113 mins. DEFA, distrib. Progress Film-Verleih.



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Heiner Carow's *Coming Out* (1989), released in cinemas the same day the Berlin Wall fell, is unique as the first (and last) East German film to place an unfolding homosexual relationship front and center. In doing so, the film challenges the social and institutional attitudes and conventions of a profoundly heteronormative East German society (Dennis). Its engagement with social questions of gay recognition and belonging is emotionalized, built upon a narrative of individual crisis, and is prototypical, therefore, of the melodramatic mode. As such, *Coming Out* also serves as an example of melodrama's historical role in democratizing recognition by expanding social sympathy onto hitherto unrepresented social identities (Williams). The fact that the film continued to resonate with the gay community in Germany well after the end of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) illustrates the film's ability to move across contexts—a testament to its emotional and critical power (Dennis; Frackman).

Coming Out embraces melodrama as a mode of storytelling, delivering a romantic drama full of twists and turns. We follow Philipp (played by Matthias Freihof), a high school teacher in Berlin, who meets and marries Tanja (played by Dagmar Manzel) early in the film. Marital bliss, however, is short-lived. After a surprise encounter with a friend from his childhood—Jacob (played by Axel Wandtke), whose significance to Philipp is left suggestively ambiguous—Philipp enters a prolonged daze, tuned out of the world around him in a sequence of scenes, signaling his internal disarray. Then, one evening he stumbles into a gay bar by chance and sets eyes on Matthias (Dirk Kummer), and, after another chance encounter, Philipp starts exploring his sexuality and

eventually sleeps with Matthias. Soon afterwards, Matthias awkwardly discovers that Philipp is married when Philipp bumps into Matthias while he is out with Tanja, and he flees the scene in tears. Tanja is baffled, the truth comes out, and Philipp's life begins to unravel. His marriage falls apart, he loses contact with Matthias, and a hollow cruising hook-up with a Matthias-*doppelgänger* only worsens Philipp's anguish. When he does finally find Matthias again, his world truly comes crashing down: Not only has Matthias found someone new, but this someone is none other than Lutz (Robert Hummel)—one of Philipp's high school students!

Typical of the »melodramatic mode« (Williams) are instances of stylized *mise-en-scène* that atmospherically foreground emotion and illustrate melodrama's plasticity, visually complementing documentary components of the film. Actual spaces of congregation for the gay community in Berlin are dramatized through color, lighting, visual editing, and choreography of bodies that absorb us as viewers into the affects that saturate the scenes. Philipp's first visit to the gay bar glows with warmth. Bodies hold each other tenderly, dance partners swirl by the camera, and smiling faces abound. The cruising location in Volkspark Friedrichshain, on the other hand, where Philipp meets Matthias' *doppelgänger*, could not strike more of a contrast. The atmosphere is cold, dark, and transactional. Individual bodies glide like planets in orbit, gravitating towards potential partners in the backdrop, and the use of lighting and shadows, as well as bodies, lends the scene a clandestine hue.

Despite their atmospheric contrast, these spaces have more in common than is initially apparent. Both spaces, we learn, are linked by a shared anonymity. In the park, there are no names or introductions, and in the bar when Philipp goes looking for Matthias after splitting up with Tanja, the barkeeper, Achim (played by Michael Gwisdek), tells him: »Here nobody knows each other's names or where they live. Everyone here is alone« (all translations mine). This comes as a surprise, both for Philipp and the viewer—a moment that reflects upon melodrama's capacity to open up social questions through the emotional twists of individual fate. After all, what could it mean to *have to* remain anonymous, even in such an intimate, enclosed, seemingly safe space? The questions that Achim's statement raises about recognition in the GDR loom over the rest of the film and frame the resolution of Philipp's failed romance with Matthias. While Philipp's misfortune in love is driven by misrecognition and coincidence, it is subtended and exacerbated by the social conditions of the gay community. Philipp's too-late-ness when he finally finds Matthias is *also* a materialization of the heteronormative forces shaping his circumstances, and the necessity to remain anonymous gives the lie to the fantasy of equality under GDR socialism.

The film reaches its melodramatic climax when Philipp returns to the bar one final time after seeing Matthias and Lutz together in a previous scene. In typical melodramatic fashion, Philipp's inner turmoil and self-destructive impulses are externalized: He hurtles around the bar, dances manically, engages in mischievous behavior in his interactions with strangers, all before ruining a drag performance. Then, as Walter (Werner Dissel), an elderly patron, attempts to intervene, Philipp wrestles him to the ground, yelling insults at him in the process. The bemusement the audience may feel watching this sequence breaks into shame as the bar goes silent at the embarrassing and potentially injuring spectacle, with Achim about to throw Philipp out of the bar. But to everyone's surprise, Walter picks himself up and tells the crowd, »It was a misunderstanding, nothing more!«, and proceeds to shepherd Philipp onto a bench in the corner of the bar.

The ensuing sequence complicates melodrama's function as an »aesthetic realization of social forces embodied in individual energies« (Gledhill xvi). It goes beyond the parameters of the »private« and breaks into explicit historical and political commentary, all the while employing common filmic devices to melodramatic effect through the delivery of its critical blow. Walter puts Philipp's pathetic suffering into perspective, telling him dourly, »There's been worse,« and downs one schnapps after another while narrating the story of his one true love, lost in a Nazi concentration camp fifty years earlier. His monologue closes with a commentary on the ostensible success of socialism in eradicating forms of racism, the relative improvement of the situation for gay citizens, and at the same time the GDR's failure to address legacies of homophobia extending from Nazi Germany into a socialist present. This is the most explicitly political moment of the film, even if softened by its pandering to the GDR's self-understanding as a society of perpetual progress. Although such direct political address falls outside of the conventional boundaries of melodrama, the sequence is nevertheless melodramatically inflected in that it relies on sentimental audience response. Walter becomes a veritable socialist victim/hero: his righteousness is conferred by his suffering at the hands of the Nazi regime, his ability to tolerantly endure half a century of prejudice, and his forgiveness of Philipp for lashing out. Despite its ideological shading, his monologue's pathos nevertheless proves effective by affording a sense of urgency for his call for gay recognition, and thus illustrating melodrama's capacity to convey meaning as a »felt affect« (Gledhill xxii).

Seemingly moved by Walter's story—as the viewer is—to this dual recognition of how things *have* improved and how things *could yet* improve, Philipp projects a new position *vis-à-vis* his own situation in the subsequent final two scenes, characterized by an aura of self-assurance. When Philipp is subjected to the heteronormative prejudice of his workplace superiors at the school, he stands up to them in full view of his class—an act that, as the film shows us in a cutaway close-up shot, resonates positively with his likely closeted student, Lutz. The final scene then shows Philipp cycling serenely through Berlin before disappearing among the traffic as the credits roll. His seeming acceptance of himself does not mean, however, that we do not question his fate, especially considering the sense of isolation that this final frame punctuates. His suffering is not inevitable but a consequence of his social conditions, and thus we see the political power of melodramatic pathos as well as the complex negotiation between emotion and contemplation that it begets. Identifying with victimhood here involves acknowledging the inadequacy of socialist claims of equality, a message that Philipp's individual fate delivers powerfully to his audience.

References

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