

# COMING OUT

A FILM BY HEINER CAROW



**GDR, 1989, 113 min., color,  
aspect ratio 16:9, EN ST**

**DIRECTOR: Heiner Carow**  
**SCRIPT: Wolfram Witt**  
**DRAMATURG: Erika Richter**  
**CAMERA: Martin Schlesinger**  
**EDITOR: Evelyn Carow**  
**MUSIC: Stefan Carow**  
**PRODUCTION: DEFA Studio for Feature Films**

**CAST: Matthias Freihof, Dirk Kummer,  
Dagmar Manzel, Werner Dissel,  
Michael Gwisdek, Charlotte von  
Mahlsdorf, Axel Wandtke,  
Thomas Gumpert, Robert Hummel,  
Gertraud Kreissig, Gudrun Ritter,  
René Schmidt, Walfriede Schmitt,  
Ursula Staack, Horst Ziehen**

*Please note: DEFA Film Library teaching guides are meant to give teachers information and ideas for how they can use a film in an English-language classroom. (They are not meant to be detailed lesson plans.) Those who would like to adapt some of these ideas for a German-language classroom may be interested in our Guide to Teaching DEFA Films in German.*

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

*Coming Out* is a film that remains relevant for viewers more than three decades after its release. Although the film depicts the experiences of characters living in East Germany under late communism, its portrayal of the social discrimination and difficulties faced by LGBTQ+ people finds connections to contemporary viewers in many national contexts. *Coming Out* is regularly featured in queer film festivals and special screenings for its queer subject matter and for its proximity to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of East Germany and the end of the Cold War.

**Keywords:** Love, gender, sexuality, LGBTQ+, homosexuality, transsexuality, homophobia, identity, East Berlin, gay scene, high school, youth, everyday life in the GDR, East Germany.

**Ideal audiences and courses:** Adult audiences. College and graduate courses in: Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies; German Studies; German Language; History; Communications; Film & Media Studies. Topic areas: German cinema; queer and feminist theory; social movements; life under communism; 1980s; Cold War period; German society and culture.

**Content Warning:** Attempted suicide; racial and homophobic violence; physical intimacy; masturbation.

## CHAPTER BREAKS

- 1 . . . . . 00;00;20;25 . . . . . I'm Gay
- 2 . . . . . 00;06;52;26 . . . . . New at School
- 3 . . . . . 00;11;12;07 . . . . . First Night
- 4 . . . . . 00;18;39;05 . . . . . Philipp's Students
- 5 . . . . . 00;23;00;10 . . . . . Living Together
- 6 . . . . . 00;27;02;23 . . . . . Old School Friends
- 7 . . . . . 00;31;32;09 . . . . . The Gay Bar
- 8 . . . . . 00;40;02;26 . . . . . The Day After
- 9 . . . . . 00;51;23;04 . . . . . Matthias & Philipp
- 10 . . . . . 00;57;57;26 . . . . . I Need Space
- 11 . . . . . 01;01;34;07 . . . . . Birthday Party
- 12 . . . . . 01;15;55;23 . . . . . Looking for Philipp
- 13 . . . . . 01;24;33;19 . . . . . Alone & Afraid
- 14 . . . . . 01;29;24;14 . . . . . Why Are You Gay?
- 15 . . . . . 01;36;25;10 . . . . . The Old Man at the Bar
- 16 . . . . . 01;47;03;00 . . . . . Yes!

SUMMARY

Tanya and Philipp are both dedicated teachers who work at the same school. They become close and move in together. Tanya is very much in love and, eventually, she gets pregnant. Things get complicated for Philipp, however, when he sees an old high-school friend who reminds him of their earlier erotic bond. Philipp begins to admit that he is gay, a fact he has been repressing for years; but he feels torn about his identity and what to do. He starts to explore East Berlin's LGBTQ+ scene and, when he meets Matthias, they fall passionately in love. While Matthias, who is openly gay, trusts him, Philipp is afraid. He is unable to tell Tanya the truth, confront his sexual orientation or commit to Matthias until he has undergone a painful struggle.

CONTEXT

*Coming Out* was the first and only feature film to focus on homosexuality that was produced in East Germany (the German Democratic Republic, GDR). Created by acclaimed filmmaker Heiner Carow, *Coming Out* tells the story of how Philipp, a young teacher, comes to terms with his sexuality and accepts himself. Such a film was eagerly anticipated, especially by LGBTQ+ East Germans who wanted to see their reality reflected on screen. For more about the history of homosexuality and LGBTQ+ rights in the GDR, see the timeline of The Gay and Lesbian Movement in East Germany (see *Resource Materials*, below).

*Coming Out* had its premiere on November 9, 1989. East Germany, which had just celebrated the 40th anniversary of its founding in October, had been in turmoil for months. Old rules that had defined the East Bloc for many years were loosening, thanks to Mikhail Gorbachev and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union. Since early summer 1989, hundreds of thousands of East Germans—especially younger people—had found ways to circumvent the travel ban imposed on GDR citizens; asylum seekers occupied the West German Embassies in Prague, Budapest and East Berlin until these were forced to allow them to go to the West. Meanwhile, in the GDR, the civil rights movement that had been simmering for years blossomed into large-scale public protests.

During the first screening of the double premiere in East Berlin's Kino International, the Bornholmer Strasse checkpoint—where passage through the Wall that separated East and West Berlin was strictly controlled—unexpectedly opened. As word spread, people flooded through the checkpoint and out of East Germany, many for the first time ever. November 9, 1989 marked the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was a central symbol of Germany's post-World War II division and the GDR's dictatorial regime. The DEFA Studio for Feature Films, which had produced *Coming Out*, had expected the landmark premiere to get a lot of attention, but the opening of East Germany's borders and the fall of the Berlin Wall overshadowed the event in the short term.



Original 1989 poster.  
Designer unknown.

## CONTEXT

The only other East German film to address homosexuality had been released a year earlier: *Die andere Liebe* (*The Other Love*), a short documentary directed by Helmut Kissling and Axel Otten. (See *Resource Materials*, below.) Produced by the DEFA Studio for Documentary Film, it had been commissioned by the German Hygiene Museum in Dresden as an educational film designed to provide a first, constructive introduction to the topic of gay life and homosexuality for the GDR's general public. *The Other Love* adopts the point of view of a knowledgeable and neutral mediator, with voiceovers providing facts about the lives of East Germany's homosexual citizens. Interviews with lesbians, gay men and their families provided more personal information and emotional content, which helped audiences understand the individual lesbians and gay men portrayed, as well as the challenges and discrimination—from heterosexism to bullying—they faced.

The early reception of *Coming Out* was mostly positive, although there were exceptions. Some reactions focused on the monumental nature of the film, which highlighted its status as the first feature film on the topic and its importance for both LGBTQ+ and other audiences. Many of these responses also focused on the poignant story and the complicated situation in which the main character finds himself. Director Heiner Carow and author Wolfram Witt were awarded the Konrad Wolf Prize by (East) Berlin's Academy of the Arts. At the International (West) Berlin Film Festival in February 1990, *Coming Out* won both the Teddy Award for best LGBTQ+ film and the Silver Bear for its "outstanding artistic contribution" and its "expression of respect for human rights, humanity and tolerance." Some critics attributed these wins to the changing situation in East Germany. That same year saw the beginning of its international importance, however, with a US tour by the director and leading actor Dirk Kummer and screenings at LGBTQ+ film festivals in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York.

## ABOUT THE FILM

*Coming Out* delivers a poignant story about Philipp and his difficulties in accepting himself. Set in East Berlin in the late-1980s, in some ways the film follows the pattern of many so-called "coming out films," which resemble coming-of-age narratives. The story first joins the main character's life amid all its normalcy. Something happens to disrupt that normalcy and causes the character to recognize something hidden or to experience some development. Philipp's reality includes his life as a high-school teacher and eventually his relationship with another teacher at his school, Tanya. The unexpected catalyst for change comes when Jakob, Tanya's friend and a love interest from Philipp's past, visits Tanya and disrupts any sense of equilibrium that Philipp may have had. His difficulties are compounded and his life's future possibilities are expanded when Philipp meets Matthias, whom viewers first saw at the beginning of the film in the aftermath of his attempted suicide.

ABOUT THE FILM

Each of the three main characters—Philipp, Tanya and Matthias—illustrates a different component of consequences of the discrimination and repression that shape Philipp’s life. Philipp’s position in this is clear: the uncertainty he has continued to experience in his life, as well as the self-doubt and the perpetual concern about being a gay teacher have contributed to his insecurity and inability to maintain a successful relationship. He faces the judgment of everyone around him except, perhaps, his students—an almost unique community of support in the film’s depiction. The only other circumstance resembling the connections offered by Philipp’s students is the portrayal of the LGBTQ+ bars, where Philipp finds other people like him, with similar experiences.

Tanya’s role in the film is often downplayed or ignored due to the primary focus on gay men’s lives. It is her friend Jakob, who sparks Philipp’s latest realizations and brings about his exploration of East Berlin’s LGBTQ+ scene. Tanya becomes Philipp’s girlfriend and gets pregnant. Her frustration and uncertainty due to Philipp’s preoccupation and absence characterize the experience of family members, partners and spouses of queer people struggling with their identities. Tanya’s character demonstrates that there are other consequences of social discrimination. Homophobia and heterosexism do not affect only one group of people; everyone suffers from these pervasive forms of oppression in different ways.

Finally, Matthias, like Philipp, is well acquainted with the mechanisms and effects of homophobic prejudice. *Coming Out* begins with Matthias’s suicide attempt, which he tells the attending doctor was because of his homosexuality. When Matthias finds and connects with Philipp, he believes that he has found someone special with whom he can have a relationship—beyond the cruising and casual sex that the film shows the audience is a part of gay life. Philipp breaks his heart, however, and Matthias finds solace with one of Philipp’s students.

Beyond such experiences, the characters in *Coming Out* are shown in the context of East German society. What one sees in the film is a society with distinct troubles. One social problem is a proliferation of violence. At one point, neo-Nazis assault a Black German man, an attack that Philipp tries to stop. Later in the film, we see a few men verbally and then physically assault a gay man in a subway station; unlike in the earlier incident, Philipp flees and avoids intervening, as it is too personal for him. Another social problem, subtly presented in the film, is the pervasive surveillance and social control that is a product of a repressive society. Philipp is judged by the official structure of his school administration and his colleagues; and his mother’s inability to accept his sexuality leaves him lacking both social and familial support.



Original 1989 poster, by Gabriele König.

BIOGRAPHIES



**Heiner Carow, Director (1929–97)**

Heiner Carow directed some of the most important East German DEFA productions. His semi-autobiographical film *Die Russen kommen* (1968/87, *The Russians Are Coming*)—the story of a young boy obsessed with Hitler’s victory, set in the last days of WWII—was banned for being “contaminated with modernism” and for “lacking an antifascist hero.” The Prenzlauer Berg love story of a single mother in *Die Legende von Paul und Paula* (1972, *The Legend of Paul and Paula*) became an unparalleled box office hit. Carow made many other successful films in the GDR, including *Ikarus* (1975, *Icarus*), *Bis daß der Tod euch scheidet* (1978, *Until Death Do Us Part*) and *So viele Träume* (1986, *So Many Dreams*). After *Coming Out*, Carow directed *Verfehlung* (1990, *The Mistake*), a story of star-crossed lovers set just before the Wall opened. For more, see Carow’s page on the DEFA Film Library website.



**Matthias Freihof, Actor (Philipp) (b. 1961)**

In 1986, Matthias Freihof appeared in *Käthe Kollwitz: Bilder eines Lebens* (*Käthe Kollwitz: Images of a Life*). He became internationally known for his lead role in *Coming Out*, which won the Silver Bear at the 1990 Berlin International Film Festival. Freihof also played in *Zurück auf Los!* (2000, *Return to Go!*), a gay tragicomedy directed by Pierre Sanoussi-Bliss that addressed racism, AIDS, friendship and the ephemeral joy of living. Matthias Freihof has worked with film director Doris Dörrie, and shared the screen with Tom Cruise and Kenneth Branagh in Bryan Singer’s *Valkyrie*. For more, see: the filmed interview with Freihof (see *Resource Materials*, below) and Freihof’s page on the DEFA Film Library website.



**Dirk Kummer, Actor (Matthias) (b. 1966)**

Dirk Kummer was interviewed and discussed his personal experiences in *Die andere Liebe* (1988, *The Other Love*), the only East German documentary about gay life in the GDR. Originally hired as the second assistant director for Heiner Carow’s *Coming Out*, he was cast in the role of Matthias. He played in *Verfehlung* (1990, *The Mistake*) and continued working with Carow until the director’s death in 1997. Kummer then began directing movies. His award-winning film *Zuckersand* (2017, *Sugar Sand*) was based on his childhood and youth in 1970s East Germany. For more, see: the written interview with Kummer (see *Resource Materials*, below) and Kummer’s page on the DEFA Film Library website.

BIOGRAPHIES



**Dagmar Manzel, Actor (Tanya) (b. 1958)**

Dagmar Manzel has had an extensive on-stage, film and television acting career. In 1986, she appeared in two DEFA films: Heiner Carow's *So viele Träume* (*So Many Dreams*) and Siegfried Kühn's *Der Traum vom Elch* (*The Dream of the Elk*). After *Coming Out*, she played in *Verfehlung* (1992, *The Mistake*). Manzel's career grew after German unification. She won the German Film Prize for Best Actress in 2000 for her role in the German TV series *Klemperer – Ein Leben in Deutschland* (2000, *Klemperer: A Life in Germany*), and again in 2006 for her performance in *Als der Fremde kam* (2006, *When the Stranger Came*). She has worked with many important German film directors. For more, see: the filmed interview with Manzel (see *Resource Materials*, below) and Manzel's page on the DEFA Film Library website.



**Werner Dissel, Actor (Walter) (1912–2003)**

As a young man, Werner Dissel was a photojournalist. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, he became part of the anti-Nazi resistance. He was arrested and imprisoned from 1937-39, and then put on "front probation"—i.e., sent to the front with the Wehrmacht. After WWII, Dissel appeared in many East German films, including *Der Fall Gleiwitz* (1961, *The Gleiwitz Case*), *Rotkäppchen* (1962, *Little Red Riding Hood*), *Till Eulenspiegel* (1974), *Der Traum vom Elch* (1986, *The Dream of the Elk*) and *Die Architekten* (1990, *The Architects*). He also appeared in many TV series, including after German unification in 1990. For more, see Dissel's page on the DEFA Film Library website.



**Michael Gwisdek, Actor (Achim) (1942-2020)**

Michael Gwisdek was one of the most accomplished (East) German actors of his generation, winning important awards such as the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the 1999 Berlin International Film Festival for *Nachtgestalten* (1999, *Night Shapes*) and the German Film Award in Gold in 1991 for *Der Tangospieler* (1990, *The Tango Player*). His directorial debut, *Treffen in Travers* (1988, *Rendezvous in Travers*), was shown at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival. For more, see Gwisdek's page on the DEFA Film Library website.



## TEACHING ACTIVITIES

### Please note:

- The following activities are divided into those that can be used before, during and/or after viewing the film. They are suggestions and not necessarily meant to be scaffolded to build on each other.
- They are designed to accompany the screening/viewing of *Coming Out*. Some of them would also be appropriate to use with the documentary *The Other Love*. (See *Resource Materials*, below.)
- Some extra questions/activities specifically involving *The Other Love* are included at the end.

### Pre-screening activities

Depending on course topics, helpful background knowledge might include the resolution of World War II, the division of Germany, ideological differences between East and West in the Cold War, life under communism, etc.

- General discussion questions along these lines might include: *What cultural differences were there between the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany? What do you know about people's lives in the two Germanys in the 1980s?*

Have your students read through the timeline of The Gay and Lesbian Movement in East Germany (see *Resource Materials*, below). Then:

- Give your students a writing prompt or hold a classroom discussion on “*What do you know about homosexuality in East Germany?*” to get them to articulate what they have learned.
- Break your students into small groups and have them discuss the legal situation for LGBTQ+ East Germans and how it changed over time. At what point, with respect to these legal developments, was *Coming Out* released?

### Activity for during the screening

Prepare a handout with room for students to note their observations on questions such as:

- Who are the main characters and what do we know about them?
- What do we know about Tanya’s friend Jakob? What do we know about different men at the bar?
- How are the standard expectations of East German society communicated with respect to gender and sexual behavior?
- How is the “difference” of LGBTQ+ (non-heteronormative) sexuality signaled?
- Where does one find aspects of community in *Coming Out*?

**TEACHING ACTIVITIES**

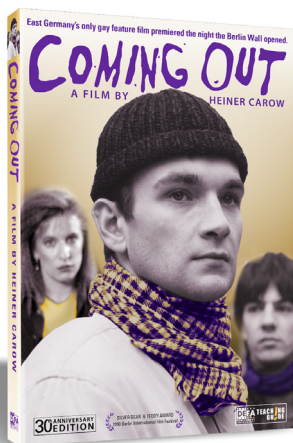
**Post-screening activities**

**Prompts for discussion and/or writing:**

- Use your observations to explain what happens in *Coming Out* and what the film conveys about the experiences of gay men and other queer people in East Germany.
- Of the three main characters in *Coming Out*—Philipp, Tanya and Matthias—with whom do you sympathize the most? Or do you sympathize more with Jakob? Explain your answer.
- How are Philipp’s two relationships portrayed in *Coming Out*? How is his relationship with Tanya perceived by their colleagues? How does the film contrast the two relationships?
- Show the clip of the bar scene when Walter tells Philipp about his life as a gay man, his persecution under the Nazis and his commitment to the GDR’s social aspirations. (*Film Chapter 15*, see p. 3)
  - Summarize Walter’s story.
  - What is the significance of this scene in Philipp’s evolution as a character and the overall plot of the film?
  - What do you notice about the sound, lighting, camera angles, editing, costuming and/or acting that makes the scene stand out?
- At the end of *Coming Out*, Philipp stands in front of his class—while he is being observed by fellow teachers—and says, simply, “Yes.” How do you interpret this scene? Where does the film leave each of the main characters?

**Other Activities**

- Comparative approach: Have your students conduct online research about the history of lesbians and gay men in the US and West Germany. How does their situation in the 1980s compare to what we know from the timeline of The Gay and Lesbian Movements in East Germany (see *Resource Materials*, below)? What differences are the students able to identify and how can they be explained? What similarities are present?
- Discussion and re-writing of dialogues: Have your students discuss selected film stills and write (new) dialogues among the characters to show how the story could be re-written or the narrative altered. What new dialogues among these characters would you write if they lived in today’s Germany?
- Letter to a distributor: Have your students compose a 1-to-3-page letter to a distributor or festival organizer in order to convince them that the film should be released or shown today.



A DEFA Film Library DVD release (2021).

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

Possible related research topics

- Research or read James Baldwin's 1962 novel *Another Country*. Discuss why the 1977 translation of the novel into German might have been important to East Germany's LGBTQ+ movement.
- Read and discuss one of the interviews in Jürgen Lemke's book, *Gay Voices from East Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991).
- Research the life and work of one of the main actors. Remember that there are filmed interviews with Matthias Freihof and Dagmar Manzel, and a written interview with Dirk Kummer. (See *Resource Materials*, below.)

Questions about *The Other Love*

These questions are about the 1988 documentary *The Other Love*, which is available as a bonus feature on the DEFA Film Library's *Coming Out* DVD release.

- What attitudes towards homosexuality are conveyed by people interviewed in *The Other Love*? Are their attitudes similar or different from what you see in *Coming Out*? How do they compare to what you think people would say about the topic now?
- Compare and contrast how *Coming Out* and *The Other Love* portray gay life and the LGBTQ+ scene in 1980s East Berlin.
- Because it is a documentary, we assume *The Other Love* is "objective." Debate whether this is the case, or whether the film has a message it is trying to get across. What are arguments supporting each point of view? Would you revise your definition of what a documentary is?

RESOURCE MATERIALS

**Bonus Films** (in German with English subtitles) on the DEFA Film Library's *Coming Out* DVD release:

- *The Other Love* (*Die andere Liebe*, GDR, 1988, dirs. Helmut Kissling & Axel Otten, 35 min., color, aspect ratio 4:3, doc.)
- *Interview with Matthias Freihof* (Germany, 2020, dir. Bernd Sahling, 17 min., color)
- *Interview with Dagmar Manzel* (Germany, 2014, dirs. Ferdinand Teubner and Katrin Teubner, 20 min., color)

**Texts** on the DVD and the DEFA Film Library website:

- Timeline: The Gay and Lesbian Movement in East Germany
- "Coming Out in East Germany," by Kyle Frackman (Univ. of British Columbia)
- "DEFA's *Coming Out*," by former DEFA dramaturg Dieter Wolf
- "A Silver Bear, Golden Cadillac: An Interview with Dirk Kummer"

**Companion Website:** <https://blogs.ubc.ca/comingout/>

SELECTED SCHOLARSHIP  
AND REVIEWS  
in English

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