



# **“Happy Ends” to Crises of Heterosexual Desire: Toward a Social Psychology of Recent German Comedies**

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In the 1990s, a comedy wave swept over German film production, leaving a fundamentally transformed market in its wake. Assessments of how and why this genre developed and the kind of momentum it took on are only now emerging. Popular and academic work to date has approached these films through a generational model that emerged in the critical reception of the Comedy Wave itself. Such analysis, however, has brought forward only limited insight. In this essay, I will consider the Comedy Wave’s relationship to greater social and psychological transformations in Germany. I contend that these films derive from much more complicated sites of conflict than younger filmmakers’ rebelliousness. Within the history of the comedy genre, these films represent a specific form or subgenre that had significant resonance in Germany at a point of rapid cultural transformation. Of course, humor is one method through which the psyche contends

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with anxieties, and in this humorous film genre we might recognize an almost therapeutic set of representations in the era after unification.

One central point to the genre, and a point with which the generational model certainly cannot contend, is that the humor of the films derives from a crisis of heterosexuality. This crisis gives the genre narrative structure, and I will explore what relationship it might have to the “therapy” offered here. Of course, in the history of comedy the institutions of heterosexuality have provided a good many laughs; however, particular crises of heterosexuality drive these narratives. Within the Comedy Wave, I will explore extensively how homosexuality provides the “happy ends” to the narratives, *ends* in both senses of the word. Here gay men take up a role that they have never had before in film history: they serve as facilitators of heterosexuality in a particular form. However, to begin this analysis, I will first turn to the specific material structures and historical transformations that gave rise to the Comedy Wave. I will then take up the analytic tools afforded us by queer theory, which will provide an approach to the dynamic of sexuality at work here if we push beyond the surface representations. To conclude, I will turn to an examination of the psychic structures at play in the films’ crises and their relationship to social transformations.

### **Six Observations on Contemporary Conditions**

The German Comedy Wave filled theaters with surges of laughter. It swept away the decaying structure of auteurist New German Cinema (NGC) and all its attendant difficult, heavy themes. A new generation of filmmakers rode the wave. With the directors of the Comedy Wave, producers and new star figures also rose to prominence in a film industry that had previously ignored them. It often seemed as if this were a comedy tidal wave, or at least so the media reports went. From *Der Spiegel* to *Variety*, news of this wave filled the popular press starting in the early 1990s, subsiding by 1997. It is now time, after the media hype, to assess what happened. We might discover that some of the flotsam and jetsam left

in the wake has been there at least since the 1960s, if not much longer. German cinema has been rocked by waves since its beginnings. Expressionist style, Aryan entertainment, *Trümmer* film, *Heimat* film, sex comedies, New German Cinema, and feminist countercinema have all swept through German cinema, transforming style and establishing new generic expectations. And within each we can identify miniwaves: the worker's film, the neo-*Heimat* film, the problem film, the *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) film, and so forth.

The press, filmmakers, producers, and stars have framed the Comedy Wave of the 1990s as a generational conflict, a rejection that repeated the media frenzy at the 1962 Oberhausen film festival, which began NGC. Recall how at that festival a group of young filmmakers led by Alexander Kluge held a press conference to announce that "Papa's cinema is dead." Dressed in black and wearing sunglasses, these nervous twentysomethings were surrounded by photographers as they read their manifesto decrying the established film industry. They proposed to bury it with a new form of film production. As we know, this act of hubris was not without effect, and eventually the entire German film industry was transformed. Almost four decades later, a 1996 *Der Spiegel* article described how "many statements and demands of the Oberhausen proclamation read as if they were drafted just yesterday: except that the criticized 'conventional' film is now the classic auteurist art film."<sup>1</sup> Such assertions are not simply a matter of popular press. In a more differentiated fashion, David Coury suggested that the Comedy Wave

represents a larger paradigmatic shift induced in part by the desire of artists and audience alike to reintroduce structure and meaning into the cinema. Although many factors have contributed to this change, audience taste and the desire for narrative have played a dominant role, and both have led to a transformation and revitalization of the German Film industry.<sup>2</sup>

However, while it is undeniable that a shift has taken place in German cinema, it has a more complicated genealogy than can be

described by artistic generations or audience desire. And while the Comedy Wave made the most noise in the 1990s, it has not ended auteurism, art cinema, countercinema, or experimental film work. Alongside the first great success of the Comedy Wave, *Der bewegte Mann* [Maybe, maybe not] (dir. Sönke Wortmann, 1994), Wim Wenders's drama *In weiter Ferne, so nah!* [Far away so close!] (1993) appeared and drew better at the box office. Certainly, if one looks beyond the nonsense of generational posing, it is possible to identify similarities at the base of the media events being rehearsed and repeated here.

Recall that although the Oberhausen manifesto marked the willingness of a collection of punks—in requisite shades and leather coats—to step forward as auteurist geniuses, it still took a number of years before the apparatus of NGC was in place to allow film production. That apparatus was established through German public funding and through cultural capital garnered primarily in the US. Now a transformed source of public funding and a new type of cultural capital make the production of new films possible. The European Union (EU) has set up script development, production, subtitling, and distribution support mechanisms that have made this new wave possible. The EU has also supported theater renovation and subsidized screenings for European productions. In the new Federal Republic of Germany, with its emphasis on free-market economy, regional film boards that seek to foster economic development zones have become the primary source of funding. Even the traditional source of funding, the German Federal Film Board (FFA), has shifted to support films that promise profit. With such mechanisms in place, it is no wonder that the attendance figures for German films in Germany continued their steady rise, moving from a low of about 5 percent in 1990 to capture almost 30 percent of the audience in the first quarter of 1997. A significant difference from NGC, however, is that in the Comedy Wave, the media event takes place after the apparatus is in place. In effect, one could argue that the wave had been building momentum since the shift in the early 1980's to this for-profit, production-oriented mode of funding, a momentum independent of content and personality.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure, something and someone had to ride the crest, but contrary to the media hype, this generational rebellion had been in the works for over a decade.

Before I construct too crass of a base/superstructure analysis, it is important to look at the conditions associated with the films that made German cinema popular again. An examination of these further phenomena of the Comedy Wave leads us away from simplistic economic explanations to question cultural developments more broadly. Thus, if the first condition of the Comedy Wave was a shift in funding, beyond economic transformations we can note, second, that Germans began to go to German films in large numbers, but only to those German films that had a happy ending. This new phenomenon of cinema attendance at its historic point of emergence is, thus, related directly to the Comedy Wave.

Third, as popular as they were in Germany, the films of the Comedy Wave did not do well in export distribution. Even with the goodwill and intense effort of international distributing giants such as Buena Vista and Warner Brothers, the humor of these films simply did not seem to translate well. The great hit in Germany, *Der bewegte Mann*, distributed in English as *Maybe, Maybe Not*, simply did not draw box-office attention overseas. Such a phenomenon leads us to consider the cultural specificity of the Comedy Wave. Hans Badewitz, organizer of the international Hof Film Festival for more than thirty years, has appraised this lack of recognition outside Germany:

Only because Germany is internationally successful in [many] branches of business, one believes that German film must also be internationally successful. That's the wrong assessment for the medium of film. A film is not a BMW! A film reflects, to start with, national, regional peculiarities, such as language or a certain kind of humor. And that's a good thing.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly the films evidence a regionalism that can be directly related to the flexing of film-board and studio muscle. In the films of the Comedy Wave, the studio cities of Hamburg, Cologne, Munich, and Berlin showcased their vitality while providing

regional settings for the quick-paced urban films. Yet, in spite of Badewitz's praise, without significant subsidies the studios cannot rely permanently on the financial return from a limited regional or national audience. In a free-market-oriented Europe, where subsidy systems have shifted to support profitable work, the studios must produce films that appeal more broadly.

Fourth, we can note that these films share certain common narrative structures. This commonality has been understood as a result of studios imitating what works, to the point of market saturation. But such an observation does not describe what type of narrative worked, or why it worked. Coury has suggested, "What these new films have in common structurally is their reliance on traditional elements of the classic cinema: causality, linear narrative, closure, and the most necessary element of all, a happy end."<sup>5</sup> This observation leads us to look beyond the studio encoding mechanism to the audience and to question what desires about the narrative and the "happy end" were elicited from a German audience.

The fact that the films are comedies might appear remarkable to those who recall that in the period of their emergence, the German literary scholar Otto Best identified Germany as the country with the least sense of humor. Best's observations aside, postwar German cinema has never been without its comedies. Comedy presents us with broad generic conventions that can serve many functions; during the 1970s the Bavarian sex comedies provided the antipode to New German Cinema. In the 1980s, a different form of comedy emerged with films in the various Otto, Loiro, and Manta series. Yet the happy ends of the Comedy Wave are distinctly structured in a way that sets them off from previous productions.

In keeping with a generational analysis, Coury understood these films as emerging in opposition to the aesthetics of dominant European art cinema. But Rainer Kaufmann, director of *Stadtgespräch* [Talk of the town] (1995), identified a social-psychological source for the films that differs from the generational model. He states, "Only since reunification have we felt whole enough to make films about normal people in normal

situations, to look at ourselves and say I'm O.K. Now we can make other films, more serious and vital films."<sup>6</sup> *Der Spiegel* echoed this assessment. Only two years after having identified the "Humor Revolution," *Der Spiegel*, keeping its finger on the pulse of popular culture, eulogized the end of the Comedy Wave:

If everything in the 1970s was somehow political, and in the 1980s cool posing and Zeitgeist, then in the 1990s the public sphere transformed itself more and more into a permanent arena of fun—a place of lively chaos. The satirical play, the parody, and persiflage of sense, reason, and deeper meaning followed consequently from the depoliticization of large parts of society: now everything was smiling surface, grinning jibes in view of the rubbish heap of this century's utopias.<sup>7</sup>

Whether we agree or not with this insistent grounding in the post-modern political arena, such statements indicate that the comedies are interconnected with deeper social concerns.

The films depict characters who emerged into the working world at the time of the *Wende* with its associated political and financial transformations. While the *Wende* is not directly addressed and politics play no role in the films, the transformed economic conditions do. The films are set in the west and populated with *Wessi* characters. Urban overcrowding, a problem that resulted from demographic shifts after 1991, is a recurrent theme. In this new free market economy, many of the characters work part-time or are self-employed with little sense of security. Many of them place their hopes, in the romantic spirit of capitalism, on the imagined financial windfall that will result when their talent is finally discovered. Women's economic conditions appear particularly precarious. Helen (Carin C. Tietze), the female lead in *Echte kerle* [Real men] (dir. Rolf Silber, 1996) cannot find a place of her own and must live with her sister. In her career success on the police force she must also confront the ostracism of her intimidated male colleagues. The female leads in *Abgeschminkt!* [Makin' up!] (dir. Katja von Garnier, 1993) and *Talk of the Town*, both roles played by Katja Riemann, are threatened with dismissal from their positions as cartoonist and radio



talk-show host respectively if they do not spice up their work to draw in more of an audience. And yet in all the films of the Comedy Wave these economic anxieties are displaced to low-level background concerns and do not provide the structure of the narrative. The characters seem to experience the same pressures as the films themselves.

Thus, fifth, these films, primarily relationship comedies, share anxieties about sex and gender that set them apart from most earlier comedies. Doris Dörrie's *Männer* [Men] (1985), a hit from the 1980s, is often cited as a precursor to the Comedy Wave. And the films do evidence certain similarities with *Men* that propel them onto the level of identifiable genre. Their conventions derive precisely from a commonality of anxiety—humor based on a crisis of heterosexuality.<sup>8</sup> The gender of the main protagonist refines the genre conventions to a further degree. Talented dynamic female protagonists demand of their world a successful career and, more importantly, the right man. However, if in the world of the female protagonist careers are a distant horizon, the right men are lost in a sea of masculine insensitivity. The search for Mr. Right is made urgent by a sense of age; in Dörrie's *Keiner liebt mich* [Nobody loves me] (1994), the main character Fanny Fink (Maria Schrader) says, "I'm turning thirty this year. And you know the saying, a woman over thirty is more likely to get hit by an A-bomb than find a man." As the women chart their way through these troubled waters, hilarity ensues. The German films *Abgeschminkt, das Superweib* [The superwife] (dir. Sönke Wortmann, 1996), *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* [A man for every melody] (dir. Peter Timm, 1993), *Talk of the Town, Irren ist männlich* [Father's day] (dir. Sherry Hormann, 1996), and *Die Putzfraueninsel* [The isle of cleaningwomen] (dir. Peter Timm, 1996) all revolve around these same problems. The generic variations of the women-centered films result from some of the women being more or less dynamic, and the search having to take place among more or fewer men.

Male protagonists, on the other hand, suffer as a result of being the German equivalent to a macho type: *Chauvis*. Their chauvinism will often result in an abrupt dismissal from a relationship,

or will mark their inability to begin or maintain a relationship. The behavior of the main characters in such films, and their uncontained desire, marked by insensitive randy masculinity, makes them incompatible with the opposite sex. And they find themselves often literally out on the street, confronting the housing shortages of the major German cities. Their odysseys end when, through various wacky adventures, they are able to reconcile their masculinity with feminine demands. The films *Der bewegte Mann* [Maybe, maybe not], *Real Men*, *Werner, daß muß kesseln* [Werner, eat my dust] (dir. Udo Beissel and Gerhard Hahn, 1996), *Männerpension* [Jailbirds] (dir. Detlev Buck, 1996), *Allein unter Frauen* [Alone among women] (dir. Sönke Wortmann, 1991), and *Nur über meine Leiche* [Only over my dead body] (dir. Rainer Matsutani, 1995) all provide variations to this generic theme. For instance, the action of *Maybe, Maybe Not* begins when Doro (Katja Riemann) finds her boyfriend Axel (Til Schweiger) in the bathroom of the restaurant where they both work having casual sex with another woman.<sup>9</sup>

A final point of related significance is that the representation of a crisis of heterosexuality is not limited to film in this period. In the early 1990s, a wave of literature emerged that, while not exactly being part of a comedy wave, concerned itself with the same gender and sexual anxieties. In 1994 *Der Spiegel* caught sight of a popular trend. If we accept critic Volker Hage's categories, then such diverse female authors as Hanna Johansen, Margit Hahn, Alissa Walser, Renan Demirkan, and Gabriele Wohmann provided contributions to the examination of this sexual anxiety. Their novels and stories depict women who, dissatisfied with their husbands and partners, literally take matters into their own hands, experiment with casual sex, and set off in search of Mr. Right. These women have a long and difficult search ahead of them indeed, if the contributions of male authors from the period are any indication. Matthias Altenburg, Ralf Rothmann, Sten Nadolny, Siegfried Lenz, and Jens Jöhler all describe male characters who confront independent women. The shaved genitals and gymnastic sexual demands of their female characters leave the male characters passive and limp with performance anxiety.

### **Queer Studies, Queer Theory, and a Few Further Conditions**

Before I begin a closer examination of this crisis of heterosexuality, I would like to clarify the terms of the analytical tools I employ. Recent discussions have tended to confuse terms like *gay studies*, *queer studies*, and *queer theory*. Queer theory often gets invoked as if it had superseded the other directions in critical theory. The result has been that much lesbian, bisexual, or gay studies work has come to be labeled *queer theory*. We can of course in no way consider the attendant historical and political projects of lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered people as achieved. An overhasty use of *queer theory* as a generic category threatens to efface knowledge specific to these people and movements. I do recognize that any insistence on clear boundaries between queer theory and the various studies models must and should be experienced as laughable, yet I would like to emphasize a certain productive tension that arises when queer theory is held as a distinct form of analysis, when these various directions of analysis are kept as separate nodes or pivot points.

*Queer studies* has emerged as an umbrella term for studies of what are termed “sexual minorities,” leading to a valuable analytic cross-fertilization. The various forms of queer studies have focused our attention on the identities of those outside socially privileged heterosexual object choice and heterocoital reproductive practices. Queer studies have put into question claims to the “naturalness” of heterosexuality, on which its privilege is based. Queer studies, as umbrella for distinct identities, does not dissolve identity distinctions. Yet in queer studies, communities once at odds with each other—for example, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered groups—are invited to give up their antagonisms through a recognition of a common position as sexual outlaws. However, outlaw status, as a position from which to engage a reevaluation of all values, is rarely the position contributors to queer studies seek to occupy (Camille Paglia aside). Rather, enlightenment and tolerance of diversity tend to inform the politics of queer studies. If a clamor for bourgeois respectability ensues from such work, “other outlaws” often get constructed

or simply left behind: Intersexed identities, pornography, s/m, pedophilia, non-"Western" sexuality, and so forth.

Queer theory has focused attention on the construction of gender, sex, sexuality, and sexual identities, thereby placing the "naturalness" of all identities into question, and by doing so taking distance from queer studies. In this distance from identity models, queer theory has illuminated the mechanisms and effects of heteroocital hegemony, deconstructing the resulting constructions.<sup>10</sup> One thing we have learned from the queer theoretical contestation of the intolerant unstable hegemony of heterosexuality is that heterosexuality is always in crisis. And where a crisis of heterosexuality is at hand, the fundamental others to heterosexuality cannot be too far off. However, if queer theory attends to the mechanisms of construction, and especially the performance of crisis and hegemony, it runs the risk of divorcing this performativity from what is being performed. Such a separation is not necessary, of course. If the productive tension between queer theory and queer studies is kept at work, queer theory benefits from the contributions of queer studies. Queer studies provides an attention to specific historical, cultural, and socioeconomic arrangements that draws in and focuses the abstractions of queer theory. But what about our Comedy Wave? In the analysis that follows, I will try to keep the productive tension between queer studies and queer theory at play. To this end queer theory should provide a means to analyze the social-psychological basis of the Comedy Wave. And through queer studies we should be able to comprehend the conditions of the sexual minorities lingering in the shadowy margins of the genre.

But it was the 1990s after all, and in 1994, after over a century of legal persecution, Germany decriminalized same-sex sexuality. This year was precisely the point of emergence of the Comedy Wave, and within this genre we do not find gay characters in the margins. We find them occupying leading and major supporting roles right in the narrative centers of the films. Indeed, we can identify as a further condition of the Comedy Wave that a significant number of contributions rely on at least one gay character, if not a setting in a gay milieu, including *Maybe, Maybe Not*, *Real Men*,

*Nobody Loves Me*, *Talk of the Town*, and *Kondom des Grauens* [Killer condom] (dir. Martin Walz, 1996). *Maybe, Maybe Not*, the film credited with beginning the trend, is actually set primarily in a gay milieu. These gay characters do not occupy peripheral positions. They are central to plot development and provide the means whereby the crisis in heterosexuality is resolved. The gay man provides the happy end. In *Nobody Loves Me*, *Maybe, Maybe Not*, *Talk of the Town*, and *Real Men*, it is contact with a gay man that facilitates resolution. This resolution does not come in the predictable “tough guy learns to cry” scenario, although in *Maybe, Maybe Not* gay Norbert (Joachim Król) does teach straight Axel to shop and cook. In return, Axel teaches Norbert how to assert himself, at least against newspaper thieves. The ambiguity the main male leads take on as a result of their relationship with gay men propels the narratives to their end.

In *Maybe, Maybe Not*, *Real Men*, and (although not as elaborately so) *Talk of the Town*, the ambiguity results from a temporary-gay narrative. The temporary-gay narrative shares many of the structures that Chris Straayer has identified as comprising the temporary-transvestite film genre. To adapt Straayer, the generic elements include: the narrative necessity for contact with a gay man; the simultaneous ambiguity of the character’s sexual preference to the film’s other characters and its clarity to the film’s audience; the construction of the straight man as object of desire for both women and gay men; the insistence on the biological or fixed explanation for sexual preference; the temporary-gay character’s sensitization to the conditions of women and gay men; heterosexual desire thwarted by the perceived ambiguity; a coming-out as straight followed by a heterosexual coupling.<sup>11</sup> This centrality of gay ambiguity distinguishes temporary-gay films from recent Hollywood films that include gay characters, such as *As Good as It Gets* (dir. James L. Brooks, US, 1997), *Object of My Affection* (dir. Nicholas Hytner, 1998) or *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (dir. P.J. Hogan, 1997).

As means of illustration, *Real Men* in particular evidences all of the aspects of the genre. *Chauwis* Police Inspector Christoph Schwenk (Christoph M. Ohrt)<sup>12</sup> is kicked out of his apartment by

his girlfriend because he was unable to choose between her and his motorcycle. He spends the rest of the day going from bar to bar "drowning his sorrows." Having passed out in what turns out to be a gay bar, Schwenk wakes up the next morning in bed with Edgar (Tim Bergmann). Schwenk has been narratively coded as a macho cop, in part through his full repertoire of lesbian jokes. He is no friend to the queer community. Schwenk is thus distressed by his loss of memory and the possibility that he had sex with Edgar. Edgar, a gay auto mechanic, does not provide the details of their brief night together. Edgar's refusal withholds certainty from both Schwenk and the audience. Edgar instead offers Schwenk a room in his apartment. Confronted with a housing shortage, Schwenk eventually accepts, making it clear that he is interested only in women. However, Schwenk's partners Mike (Oliver Stokowski) and Helen begin to wonder. And because Edgar is under observation as part of a car-theft ring, the entire police force begins to wonder about Schwenk. Schwenk becomes sensitized and falls in love with Helen. They never do catch the car thieves, but don't worry about Eddy. In a plot twist drawn from *Victor/Victoria* (dir. Blake Edwards, US, 1982), the presumed-straight Mike comes out, to everyone's surprise, and even more surprising, reveals himself to be Edgar's new boyfriend. The two couples drive off together in the final scene.

But if we step back from this description of the particular elements of the various films and their comparison to each other, we come to the limits of classic genre theory without having understood why these stories entertain at this particular historic juncture. It is important to recognize that comedies have always relied on a crisis of heterosexuality. We could ask generally, How does a crisis in heterosexuality get transformed into the stuff of comedy? Certainly the disruption of gender and sexuality provided by the temporary-gay narrative inserts queer comedic elements into a narrative. However, to resist generalizing or totalizing observations, I would like to focus the question and ask, How does this specific crisis in heterosexuality get transformed into the stuff of the Comedy Wave? We can observe that in each of the films of the Comedy Wave a queer element drives the narratives

along a trajectory counter to the “normal” story. These elements insert the unfamiliar into the story that propels the narrative and draws the spectator into wanting to know what happens next. In *The Superwife*, a surprise divorce liberates the main character from her staid condition as housewife. In *Only over My Dead Body*, sudden death removes the *Chauvis* Fred (Christoph M. Ohrt) from his quotidian womanizing. He is forced to make a deal with death: in a twist on Fritz Lang’s *Der müde Tod* [Destiny] (Germany, 1921), Fred must make happy one of three women whose hearts he had broken in life. In *Talk of the Town*, Monika’s (Katja Riemann) new dream-prince lover turns out to be married to her best friend Sabine (Martina Gedeck); their affair disrupts everybody’s lives. Divorce, death, adultery, housing shortages, and prison sentences—along with gay men—variously disrupt fragile heterosexual arrangements. We can understand all these elements as *queer* in the broadest sense of the term. They are not analogous, yet each destabilizes heterosexual imperatives in a different way. The queer elements of the Comedy Wave thus differ significantly from those in films like the Hollywood screwball comedies, where disruption came from within the parameters of heterosexuality itself: the threat of marriage to the wrong partner.

Queer elements are not limited to the structure of the narrative. Setting also disrupts heterosexuality. In *Real Men, Maybe, Maybe Not*, and *Nobody Loves Me*, the apartments of the gay men are filled with fetish objects.<sup>13</sup> In Edgar’s apartment these objects constantly appear as sight gags, confronting Christoph and Helen. Disproportionately sized penises pop out in unexpected places. The humor of the shock reaffirms the straightness of the ingenue as it marks the gay man by this particular pound of flesh. Because the straight man, by nature of the definition, can have no desire for the penis, the gay man as foil can *only* desire the penis. The anxiety of the straight man creates a reductive fixation on the gay man, thus displacing any of his own desire for another man onto the gay man as desiring all penises all the time. Through Christoph we see Edgar as architect or designer of the penis-filled environment. The audience of course knows that Christoph has no attachment to these objects. However, through Helen’s naive

point of view we eventually see Christoph as co-occupant of this apartment and therefore as "gay by association." Queer elements thus play on the expectations of the audience. Either they create a sense of surprise when the element appears without frame or narrative foreshadowing, or they create a sense of pleasure when the film establishes an insider status for the viewer.

Of course, specific characters pose a standard and more consistent disruptive potential. Queer characters exclude the audience from easy determinations and a sense of the stability of heterosexual norms. The character of the sissy, for instance, as historic stock foil to the masculinity of the male lead, has appeared in films since the first part of the twentieth century, providing sight gags and acting as the butt of jokes.<sup>14</sup> The sissy relies on the symbols and codes of femininity in dress and behavior being displayed on a body coded as male. The humor of the sissy results from the incongruity of these symbols and codes, the disruption of sex and gender polarities they cause, and the subsequent restoration of those polarities. When the sissy is constituted through drag, the goal is not to achieve a complete citation of the codes of femininity or to pass as a woman. As opposed to the temporary transvestite, both audience and characters recognize the incongruity of the sissy; his humor rests on the impropriety of the performance of a feminine male. The happy end comes with the restoration of the gender polarities of masculine male and feminine female.

Vito Russo complained that "nobody likes a sissy,"<sup>15</sup> and indeed gay film critics tended to vilify the sissy as undermining the positive image aesthetic they sought to promote. Queer film theory, however, has become enchanted with the sissy, following on reevaluations of drag and gender performance like those Judith Butler has provided. Butler's recognition that drag performance reveals the performative aspect of gender does not mean that there is no gender. Butler writes that "there is no 'proper' gender, a gender proper to one sex rather than another, which is in some sense that sex's cultural property. Where that notion of the 'proper' operates, it is always and only *improperly* installed as the effect of a compulsory system."<sup>16</sup> The codes and



behavior of the sissy disrupt gender polarities, their impropriety hinting at other possibilities and thus revealing the constructed nature of gender. However, gender as a construct means that there are contexts of stabilization and that culture is about regimens of inscription, installation, and compulsion, about encoding preferred readings. As performative and not performance, gender is outside the complete control of the individual.

Praise of queer elements and queer representations often overestimates the significance of the text or image, and this should make us attentive to the limits of queer disruption.<sup>17</sup> In the film (or literary) texts under examination, here we recognize a tension between the disruption of the sissy and the restoration of the proper in the happy end. The sissy's disruption reveals the often violent compulsion of this ending. In Straayer's depiction of this tension between ending and content, we can even detect a suggestion that the end allows the disruption. Straayer writes, "These films offer spectators a momentary, vicarious trespassing of society's accepted boundaries for gender and sexual behavior. Yet one can relax confidently in the orderly demarcations reconstituted by the films' endings."<sup>18</sup> The pleasure of such films draws from both disruption and fixity.

In the Comedy Wave, where masculinity came under consideration, the sissy took on an intensified function. *Real Men or Alone Among Women*, films where the sissy as character is absent, are haunted in their titles by a questioning of "real" masculinity. In *Nobody Loves Me*, Orfeo (Pierre Sanoussi-Bliss), the gay Afro-German fortune-teller/drag performer/extraterrestrial, pushes well beyond the stock function of the sissy to establish multiple incongruities in a film that seeks to challenge the unity of German culture. But in *Maybe, Maybe Not*, the sissy pervades the gay milieu into which Axel stumbles. An early shot of Waltraud (Rufus Beck) working out with Norbert at a gym sets him up as the central sissy in the film. The two of them pedal away on stationary bikes as Waltraud openly and shrilly relates his outrageous exploits as the only gay member of a men's consciousness-raising group. The camera pans and tracks in a way that is unnecessary for the logic of the conversation between the two. Indeed, the

function of this mobility is located in its extended depth of field that draws the hypermasculine males working out around Norbert and Waltraud into the spectator's line of vision. In this circumscription of Waltraud, the body of the sissy is revealed as containing a specularity of relation. This body is present to be looked at, and we watch it being watched by the "real" men.

In the Comedy Wave, however, the to-be-looked-at-ness extends beyond the sissy. Masculinity is on display, but the spectacle of the masculine male body is an erotic spectacle of the surface that differs from the spectacularity of the sissy.<sup>19</sup> Here we run into interesting limits to the queer elements. Caught between looks and between genders, the sissy is not coded as an object of sexual desire, whereas the bodies of actors Til Schweiger and Christoph Orth are on display for the spectator's voyeuristic pleasure. Foil to the sissy, the masculine male breaks with the conventions of masculine erotic spectacle, setting up the body as open to the (homo)erotic desire of the spectator;<sup>20</sup> "real" men can be desired by women *and* men.<sup>21</sup> Built into this "reality" of the character's manliness is an anxious disavowal of any reciprocity of a homoerotic look. In the Comedy Wave we know that the character's desire is straight. So even straight male spectators can look, because Christoph and Axel will not be looking back. Even if we see them being watched by men, we know that their gaze is fixed on women.<sup>22</sup> Christoph and Axel are shocked and frightened by the sight of the penis, whether plastic or flesh.<sup>23</sup>

This fixity of desire is asserted not only by the dialogue but by the visual construction of the character as well. In *Maybe, Maybe Not*, the wandering quality of the opening robotic crane shot with its impossible tracks, pans, and glides could be attributed to Axel's own heterolibidinal drift. The final third of the film is motivated by a shot established as Axel's heterosexual gaze. This episode begins with Axel in the park, while the spectator, in communion with Axel's psyche through an interior monologue, looks through Axel's gaze as he "scopes chicks," which (re)-assures us of the straightness of Axel's desire. However, one of the women breaks the one-dimensional surface of the camera shot, and thereby Axel's (and the spectator's) spell of illusion. She

identifies herself as a former lover—Axel's first—and draws him into a rendezvous. That Elke (Antonia Lang) returns Axel's gaze sets his straight sexual desire out of control again. Axel must arrange to cheat on Doro, now his new wife and nine months pregnant—and hilarity ensues.

### **Happy Endings to Melancholia, Heterosexual and Homosexual**

In seeking to understand the crisis of heterosexuality played out in the Comedy Wave we can note yet a further phenomenon: melancholy prevails over the films' affective structures. Melancholy might not seem an auspicious emotion upon which to base a comedic narrative, until we recall that the mixture of humor with sadness and depression, this seeming paradox, provides the delights of a sad clown like Charlie Chaplin's little tramp. In the Comedy Wave, melancholia finds one embodiment in the gay man. The sad, lonely gay man, given his long filmic history, needs little introduction. Certainly the first gay film, *Anders als die Andern* [Different from the others] (dir. Richard Oswald, Germany, 1919), relied on the image of the melancholic homosexual. Outcast, outside, living in the fallen world of art, he finds no room in bourgeois society for social or personal fulfillment. In this film, as in so many subsequent dramatizations, love remains unrequited or unfulfilled, dashed by the horrors of its outlaw status. The development of this character continued in Germany, as in other national film histories, well into the period of the seventies and gay liberation, with significant contributions from such films as Wolfgang Petersen's *Die Konsequenz* [The consequences] (West Germany, 1977) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Faustrecht der Freiheit* [Fox and his friends] (West Germany, 1975). And even films so significant to the gay rights movement as Rosa von Prauenheim's *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Situation, in der er lebt* [It is not the homosexual who is perverse, but the society in which he lives] (West Germany, 1971) or Frank Ripploh's *Taxi zum Klo* [Taxi to the toilet] (West Germany, 1980) relied on this generic character.

As an immediate explanation for the psychology and source of this melancholic homosexual, we can turn to Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," where he indicates that melancholia, with its painful sullenness, unsociability, inability to love and to be loved, results from a stalling of the process of *Trauerarbeit*, the psychological mourning attendant upon a loss. In the case of the homosexual character, however, melancholia does not have its origins in the usual source of melancholia, the loss of a loved one. The melancholic homosexual is not constructed as having lost a love object; instead the frustrated search for this object is his fundamental motivation. Alternately, Freud offers us the possibility that melancholia can also have its source in the loss of an abstraction like an ideal. Because for the homosexual character the ideal of affiliation as defined by the heterocoital imperative is foreclosed, the character is bound into a condition of homosexual melancholia.

In representations of homosexual melancholia, the social moral censure that bars the homosexual from sociability exhibits the same qualities Freud ascribes to that primary source of psychological moral censure, the superego. As we read this description, let us be attentive to a resonance between ego and homosexual and between superego and heterocoital imperative.

If we turn to melancholia first, we find that the excessively strong super-ego which has obtained a hold upon consciousness rages against the ego with merciless violence, as if it had taken possession of the whole of the sadism available in the person concerned. Following our view of sadism, we should say that the destructive component had entrenched itself in the super-ego and turned against the ego. What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct, and in fact it often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death, if the latter does not fend off its tyrant in time by the change round into mania.<sup>24</sup>

Remaining focused on the resonance of homosexual and heterocoital imperative, this passage reads like the film script for *Different from the Others*, and indeed for so many other films in the

history of the representation of homosexual melancholia, where the narrative resolution usually arrived with the homosexual's socially forced murder (suicide).

In the Comedy Wave something new is at work. The character of the melancholic gay man differs from previous figurations. After gay liberation and the loss of social censure, the exclusion that gives rise to homosexual melancholia had to be relocated. Allowed socially to have relationships,<sup>25</sup> this character, the melancholic gay man, still does not revel in his subcultural liberation. Instead, the moral censure that bars him from pleasure now indeed moves from the social into the psychological and is enforced solely as direct property of the superego. We note that when the new melancholic gay man falls hopelessly in love, this falling in love is never constructed as attraction to the specific ego of the other. Rather, the melancholic gay man always finds himself attracted to a type, the only possible embodiment of the lost ideal of the heterocoital imperative: the heterosexual male. And in the Comedy Wave we recognize that the *Chauvis*, the "real man," embodies this ideal. The attraction to the *Chauvis* is not simply explained by his quality as the "forbidden fruit." What makes him forbidden, what precludes the *Chauvis* from providing fulfillment, is quite simply that the heterosexual male cannot both reciprocate the attraction and remain heterosexual. Thus homosexual melancholia binds the homosexual into a state of unfulfillable desire and impossible mourning. The happy end for this character can come only with the redirection of his desire to his "proper kind."

In *Real Men* a complicated scene establishes Edgar's homosexual melancholia. Christoph and Edgar sit together in a gay bar as part of Christoph's attempt to fulfill Edgar's unrequited desire and thereby overcome his melancholia. Christoph wants to find Edgar a suitable (gay) love object. Shot from their point of view, the camera pans across the bar scene with a voice-over conversation in which Christoph suggests man after man, and Edgar reveals a knowledge of all the faults that make them unsuitable. Finally Christoph prompts him to describe his ideal love object. After describing a sensitive macho, Edgar points out a man at

the bar. The scene cuts to a position that reveals them looking into a mirror hung above the corner booth where they are sitting, their gaze directed upwards into the mirror. The mirror is hung at such an angle, however, that their reflections look into the camera instead of back at them. While the two appear as any other couple at the bar, indeed it is Christoph's rejection of this ego ideal reflected at us that proves his real manliness. Of course, as reviewer Sven Schwyn noted, "Everything ends with a not entirely believable, but beautiful happy end."<sup>26</sup> That end is "happy" in that Edgar does couple up with Mike, but the scene's implausibility lies in its position at the exact end of the film and its lack of any established motivation other than Mike's and Edgar's both being gay. So this scene does not bear witness to any successful transfer of desire from Christoph to Mike. But if we are to believe in the happiness of this scene, we must presume such a transfer.

Other films contain gay characters motivated by the same construction. In *Maybe, Maybe Not*, we do know that Norbert has had previous relationships, but that these have always been impossible. In the scene that introduces Norbert, Waltraud confronts him with the observation that Norbert always orients his desire toward the wrong guy. And we watch as he pursues Axel to the point of his own isolation. In the end he is compensated with Axel as a buddy. In *Nobody Loves Me*, Orfeo also appears as a melancholic, but he is in love with a gay man. The object choice, however, continues to operate in a parameter of economic, racial, and social ideals lost and/or inaccessible to Orfeo. And his happy ending comes when he is whisked away to extraterrestrial existence on the planet Arcturus. In *Talk of the Town*, René (Kai Wiesinger) does not appear as a melancholic initially. In the first part of the film René has made do with a compromise lover, Karl (Moritz Bleibtreu), gorgeous but dumb. But then René meets "the man of his dreams," his sister's lover, the fixedly heterosexual Erik (August Zirner), and he abruptly breaks off his relationship with Karl. In the end René returns to Karl with an explicit compromise: Karl will get smart if René gets in shape.

Alongside the homosexual melancholia, these films present a heterosexual melancholia that also differs from earlier

forms. In her book *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler recently returned to a discussion she began in *Gender Trouble*, presenting a complicated and productive reading of the role of melancholia in ego formation. Reading Freud's essays "Mourning and Melancholia" and "The Ego and the Id," she identifies a development in Freud's thought that "makes clear that there can be no ego without melancholia, that the ego's loss is constitutive."<sup>27</sup> The loss that constitutes the ego begins in the subject's passage through the oedipal conflict where, even before the prohibition on incest, a prohibition on homosexuality has already been enforced. Butler writes, "The oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been *accomplished*, that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced."<sup>28</sup> The successful passage beyond the oedipal conflict thus marks the entry both into (hetero)sexuality and into gender. Butler writes:

Consider that gender is acquired at least in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments; the girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification. Thus the identification contains within it both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the unrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis.<sup>29</sup>

For Butler, the barring of homosexual cathexis in the oedipal conflict results in the construction of heterosexual desire. This barring differs from that of the incestuous heterosexual cathexis. The incest taboo results in the transfer of heterosexual desire onto a new/replacement object, allowing for the loss of this cathexis to be grieved. However, the other barring remains primarily closed to a transfer of homosexual desire. Thus, in the transfer of heterosexual desire only one form of cathexis can be grieved. Homosexual cathexis remains unrieved and for Butler "ungrievable."<sup>30</sup>

The Comedy Wave can be understood as an artifact of what Butler identifies as the ensuing "culture of gender melancholy."<sup>31</sup> Within this framework we recognize the *Chauvis* as a

significant product in the structuring of heterosexuality. Butler writes:

Becoming a "man" within this logic requires repudiating femininity as a precondition for the heterosexualization of sexual desire and its fundamental ambivalence. . . . One of the most anxious aims of his desire will be to elaborate the difference between him and her, and he will seek to discover and install proof of that difference. . . . Indeed, he will not identify with her, and he will not desire another man.<sup>32</sup>

Following Butler, the supersession of the *Chauvis*, the distance between him and her, can only be bridged through a bridging of the distance between him and him. Indeed this bridging is precisely what we find the films attempting to represent. Butler's insistence that this condition is ungrievable leads to the conclusion that this bridging is impossible and that heterosexual culture is condemned to a permanent state of melancholia and distance—an interesting proposition. However, even if they are only representations, the discovery of a happy end in the narratives under consideration indicates that some mechanisms of grieving must be available and that this paradigm of gender melancholy must be approached with a critical care. Butler's insistence on an ungrievable state threatens to make heterosexuality itself the problem, rather than the mechanisms that enforce heterosexuality. We should not hastily foreclose a search for grieving mechanisms that allow for the supersession of the heterocoital imperative while still keeping open the possibility of heterosexuality. We must be careful to distinguish heterosexual object choice and libidinal investment from a system of heterosexuality that forecloses any other possibilities. Not all men are *Chauvis* and, as the films indicate, even the "real men" can learn to reject the commands of the imperative.

It should also be clear that we must be careful to distinguish between prohibitions and imperatives. Prohibitions are much more closely aligned with mechanisms such as repression, foreclosure, disavowal, and denial. Psychologically, prohibitions set parameters to the will by removing the possibility of certain



objects. The incest taboo, for instance, removes all the parents from a particular relationship with the will of the child. It does not, however, guarantee the outcome of the transfer of desire as the child develops its own affiliative objects. Certainly Butler concentrates on prohibitions in her analysis. Imperatives, on the other hand, derive from a related form of injunctions, albeit positive, along the line of *you shall*. While one may indeed follow such injunctions, it is possible to respond with an *I will* that might counteract the imperative. One might also pay an imperative no heed whatsoever. Homosexuality, for instance, might be understood as one such response to the heterocoital imperative. Butler tautologically attributes the source of the “prohibition” at work here to the heterosexual culture that prohibits it.<sup>33</sup> Unless we want to turn our backs on all the sociological and historical research charting the changing structure of sexuality and family, we must recognize that there is nothing natural about this prohibition and that heterosexuality, like any other hegemony, is constantly in crisis. Without some underlying mechanism of power to stabilize and enforce it, this “prohibition” melts into air. Furthermore, I would insist that heterosexuality is constantly in a state of crisis not just as a result of the contraventions of homosexuals. The heterocoital imperative, like any other imperative, relies on a particular willing subject-agent to carry it out; however, we need in no way take this subject-agent as a universal. And as our films portray, even those men who have achieved the idealized position of masculine male can cease to function as agents of the imperative without loss of subjectivity.

In the critical appropriation of the concept of heterosexual melancholia, we can note further that one primary distance is not present in the films, the distance between her and her. The difference in the relations between women invites us to recognize the paradigm of heterosexual melancholia as a paradigm that operates differently along gendered lines. In the novels mentioned earlier, erotically aggressive women are a point of crisis for men, but in film representations this is not the case. In the films’ resolution of heterosexual melancholia, women do not have to learn to identify with lesbians in order to be desirable to men. It is

the *Chauvis* and the distance between men that is thematized and made the central point of crisis. It is the *Chauvis* that must be superseded. In the Comedy Wave the relationship between her and her is not represented as blocked. The female buddy is frequently present. Monika is physically intimate with her female coworker and ultimately comes to cohabitate with Sabine. Helen and her sister live together and we see them sleeping together. *Makin' Up!* shows Maischa (Nina Kronjäger) and Frenzy (Katja Riemann) in bed with each other in an interesting and complicated series of shots that simultaneously express and disavow a sexual relationship.

If we concentrate on the male-centered films of the Comedy Wave, we find the paradigm of heterosexual melancholia most clearly represented. We also recognize that here female characters are primarily isolated, presented only in desiring relationships with men. In *Alone among Women*, the apartment that the generic circumstances force Tom (Thomas Heinze) into is occupied not by a gay man but by three "feminists" who all set out to convert him. As Tom begins to change, they suddenly fall in love with him and enter into a state of competition with each other. This "humorous" competition drives the narrative through the final third of the film. The resolution of heterosexual melancholia offered is perhaps most complicated in *Maybe, Maybe Not*. It is Doro who pulls Axel out of his gay affiliation. Doro seeks to reinscribe him into heterosexuality through an elaborate marriage ceremony. However, the presence in the receiving line of Norbert, Waltraud, and Franci (Nico van der Knaap), shot as a sight gag with the latter two in drag, ruins the wedding for Doro. This social enforcement of the heterocoital imperative also ultimately fails to control Axel's desire. Indeed, any transformation of Axel comes at the end, after the resolution of conflict between Doro and Norbert. This resolution frees up the relationship of Norbert and Axel, and only then does hope develop for Axel and Doro. Likewise, in the transition of *Real Men's* Christoph to becoming a suitable partner for Helen, he must make a passage through temporary homosexuality. In *Talk of the Town*, Erik and Monika experience each other as soul mates because of a

commonality of interests; these same shared interests also lead René to recognize Erik as his soul mate. But the supersession of the *Chauvis* can only result in and from a crisis in heterosexuality itself, and as we have seen throughout this paper, precisely this crisis propels the films under examination.

Psychologically, as in the structuring of homosexual melancholia, the straight main characters and their narratives are also tormented by the merciless violence of an excessively strong superego. They are tormented by their own failure to live up to the heterocoital imperative. In *Nobody Loves Me*, the relation between this imperative and its resulting “pure culture of the death instinct”<sup>34</sup> is made explicit. The film begins with the main character Fanny Fink on a videotape prepared for a dating agency in which she confesses her fear of turning thirty. We see her shortly afterwards in her Conscious Dying course. Throughout the rest of the film, as she searches for Mr. Right, she also learns how to sleep in her self-made coffin. Less explicitly, main characters Maischa, from *Makin’ Up!*, and Monika, from *Talk of the Town*, express an anxiety over their age as a sign of the unattained ideal of heterosexuality.<sup>35</sup> At thirty, they are never going to get a man. The men in the narratives of *Maybe, Maybe Not*, *Real Men*, and *Alone among Women* experience the loss of a loved one at the beginning of the film. Axel and Christoph both lose the girl and their heterosexuality. The attempt to overcome this melancholia, to restore the lost object or ideal, propels the narrative, keeping our attention focused on the men’s odysseys.

In addition to its psychological presence, the imperative/prohibition is external to the characters, constantly reminding them socially of their failure. Both Fanny and Monika, for instance, have mothers who show up at comedic moments to confront the characters with their failure to live up to the heterocoital imperative. Madeleine Fink (Elisabeth Trissenaar) taunts her daughter about her inability to find the right man, typically inquiring, “Is your biological clock digital? Don’t you hear it ticking?” Helen is forced to ask Christoph to pose as her fiancé so that in her search for an apartment she will appear acceptable to the realtor. In the case of Axel and Christoph, the very construction

of the temporary homosexuality is social, an exterior crisis. It is based not on a transformation of their characters but rather on a social perception that places them outside of heterosexuality.

What makes the films of the Comedy Wave stand out in a history of sexuality is that they do not provide comfortable resolutions, and by no means does the crisis of heterosexual desire get resolved through the triumph of the heterocoital imperative. *Real Men* has a beautiful but not entirely believable happy end. Doro has kicked Axel out once more, and the only signal of reconciliation is Norbert's savant promise that "she'll get over it." René and Karl have reconciled at the end of *Talk of the Town*, but Monika and Sabine have both broken off their relationship with Erik. They are left outside of a heterosexual relationship, coupled with René as an affiliative family.<sup>36</sup> Maischa's new boyfriend can only spend short periods of time in Germany as a result of his work, leaving her with her career and her friendship with Frenzy in *Makin' Up!*. The ends are happy because they mark the end of the mourning of heterosexual melancholia, but without an assertion of normative behavior. The characters experience a renewed sociability, an ability to love and be loved, and the presence of a positive sense of self even though they continue to live outside the injunctions that seemed unfulfillable at the outset of the film.

We noted earlier that in Butler's assertion of the loss in gender melancholia as "ungrieved and ungrievable,"<sup>37</sup> she leaves no way out for a resolution of the *Trauerarbeit*. When Butler suggests that "heterosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions, and these prohibitions take as one of their objects homosexual attachments, thereby forcing the loss of those attachments,"<sup>38</sup> the description certainly applies to *Chauvis* characters. They are the central representatives of the crisis of heterosexual desire. They are the site of social distance, separating him and her as well as him and him. Such a description applies to the untransformed *Chauvis*, yet in these narratives the *Chauvis* does transform. By marking this loss as ungrievable and requiring that the heterosexual male identify with women and desire men, Butler's paradigm seems to insist that the only solution to the crisis of heterosexual desire is indeed the supersession or negation of heterosexuality

through homosexuality, bisexuality, or polymorphous perversity as well as gender dysphoria. And yet the films, like Freud's conception of *Trauerarbeit*, do have an end, one that is not quite so radical as that put forward by Butler. The characters do move out of their melancholic states without giving up heterosexuality. In the films it is not heterosexuality in itself that is the point of crisis, but the imperatives and prohibitions that drive a particular model of heterosexuality. Certainly we can suggest that precisely in this resolution lies the therapeutic quality of the genre, drawing audiences repeatedly to review different configurations of the same symptom but similar models of a "cure."

How does this cure appear? How does the grieving take place? At the end of "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud described the resolution of the mourning work as coming with the discharge of rage through a relinquishing of the mourned object as worthless, or by a transformation of the ego.<sup>39</sup> The transformation in self-worth attends upon this resolution. In "The Ego and the Id," Freud reflected on his assessment of the relationship of melancholia to ego formation.<sup>40</sup> He notes:

We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego—that is, that an object cathexis has been replaced by an identification. . . . Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution toward building up what is called its "character."<sup>41</sup>

The mourning process of both heterosexual and homosexual melancholia, the end of the terror of the heterocoital imperative, can be accomplished only by the transformation of the character of the ego. Rather than submitting to the sadistic control of the ego by superego and the ensuing melancholic existence, the "ego deals with the first object-cathexes of the id (and certainly with later ones too) by taking over the libido from them into itself and binding it to the alteration of the ego produced by means of identification."<sup>42</sup> Freud identifies this formation as the "ego-libido," a

stabilizing return of libidinal energy in which the ego becomes strengthened against the *you shall* of the superego.

If we observe the ends of all the films, we certainly note this character transformation as part of the resolution. Characters appear energetic, sociable, outwardly directed. At the end of *Makin' Up!*, for instance, Maischa and Frenzy have reconciled with their conditions as young, single career-oriented women with less-than-ideal male partners. In the final scene they even turn to the camera in direct address and play out a pseudoadvertisement for the female spectators, presenting themselves as examples of success, offering to take care of the male trouble the women viewers might have. In the case of the former *Chauvis*, the temporary-gay narrative has put an end to the "real man's" grieving process. Still heterosexual, his masculine sexual desire has indeed been reined in. Clearly coupled up, he has learned to focus his erotic desires and commit his energies to what he really wants. From the difference in these two conclusions, we recognize in the Comedy Wave that although the happy end might not promise the presence of a proper sexual partner, it does not mean the end of sexuality. In fact, in many of the films, although the mourning caused by the superego is ended, the presence of unfulfilled sexual desire is left over. Libido is focused, but an object may not be present, causing some comedic ambiguity in the happy end.

If we focus on the reconstitution of the *Chauvis* in the end, we recognize that the new configuration of ego-libido results from a bridging of the gap between him and her by also bridging the gap between him and him. Both moves are made possible by an opening up of the "other" route of transfer, once barred by the heterocoital imperative. In this framework sexuality remains "cultivated" through the prohibition of the incest taboo that forces the child to transfer cathexes. Yet other objects, attachments, and points of transference with which the adult can cathect become available. Not all of these cathexes, however, are sexual in nature. Freud explained that "the transformation [of erotic libido] into ego-libido of course involves an abandonment of sexual aims, a desexualization."<sup>43</sup> Of course here he was writing of the sexual aims toward the prohibited or lost object. Yet a different type of

desexualization takes place in the films: in all the resolutions, although the characters are freed to desire, they are not freed to a heterogeneity of desire.

In the case of the former *Chauwis*, the gap between him and him is bridged, but the attachment is a nonsexual one. Butler's requirement that the relationship between him and him be a desiring relationship does not seem to be met here. The films do not present bisexuality or polymorphous perversity as the ideal of their conclusions. However, given the role of desexualization Freud put forward, we might question whether all desiring relationships must be sexual. Can a libidinal cathexis not take place by other means? We note from the banter at the end of *Maybe, Maybe Not* that Norbert and Axel seem to have moved on to a new form of cathexis. Their relationship is now based on an attachment precisely of desexualized friendship with the "proper" direction of their desire away from each other. At the end the desire of the various characters flows along clear and stable trajectories. The happy end of the various films under examination arrive when the "real men," having passed through a temporary-gay narrative, come both to identify with the gay men and to desire only one woman. While we might distinguish between identification and desire, we can recognize that they present various forms of libidinal cathexis.

In these films, the crisis of heterosexuality is resolved not by reinforcing the heterocoital imperative but by fixing an individual ego-libido. Within a scheme of typification, like has come to desire like. Heterosexuals desire each other and homosexuals like Edgar (*Real Men*) and René (*Talk of the Town*) are comfortably directed toward "their own." The happy end to melancholia is not a simple matter of narrative closure, but a particular type of closure. The happy endings to this crisis of desire thus display a fixity of desire. Again we can note that no character in the film is freed to a heterogeneity of desire. If heterosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions, we do not want to overlook the significance of an obverse statement at work here: Homosexuality is cultivated through prohibitions, and these prohibitions take as one of their objects heterosexual attachments, thereby forcing the

loss of those attachments. Regardless of the objection that the prohibitions at work here differ in terms of degrees of coercion and punishment, this recognition is significant for the spectator model these films suggest.

One of Freud's great theoretical strengths was the proposition that the psychic mechanism of sexuality is fundamentally the same, regardless of its outcome, unless we are to presume that somehow homosexuals and heterosexuals are separate species. We must be able to identify a structural parity. The two statements above taken together ultimately undermine the import of the prefixes *hetero* and *homo*. They seem to draw us to the obvious but necessary observation that all sexuality is somehow fundamentally based on prohibitions and exclusions. If we add to this our discussion of imperatives, we can put forward a general observation that does not rely at all on the homo/hetero distinction: Sexuality is cultivated through prohibitions and imperatives. Prohibitions take as one of their objects sexual attachments, thereby forcing a loss. Imperatives direct the possibilities of cathexis, thereby forcing attachments.

I will confess that I am unsettled by what seems to be an identification in these films of a proper object of desire for character and spectator alike, and I would invite us to be attentive to it. We should differentiate between the desiring relationships among the characters and the desiring relationship between spectator and film. Certainly, on the level of narrative representation, the removal or foreclosure of certain attachments determines the possibilities for a transfer of desire, thereby constituting libidinal cathexis: Must the characters' ego-ideals be represented through the form of fixity we find in our happy ends? We can recognize in the films a socially constructed scheme of typification at work. We recognize the characters in an either/or schema, as either heterosexual or homosexual. These are, after all, comedic and popular representations, and their legibility relies on clear signals of type. On the level of narrative, is this a return of a different kind of imperative to separate as species? Is it perhaps impossible to consider sexuality without some form of imperative? The schema of typification that presents us with groups of "like" could



certainly be contested. The happy ends need not have tied things up so tightly. Instead of supporting received patterns of legibility, this socio-logic of types could have been disrupted by endings relying on a heterogeneity of subject positions. But what about the spectator's desiring relationships?

I do not want to remain abstract in my considerations of the spectator. I do not have surveys or interviews with the audience members of the film, yet I would not want to suggest that such material would provide us with a definitive insight into the spectator. By way of conclusion, I would like briefly to try to balance the above psychological considerations with a return to the considerations that began this essay, which addressed the sociologic operating here through the films' relationships to the contemporary cultural and economic conditions in Germany at their point of emergence. There I identified certain clear and remarkable cultural conditions that should situate these films as part of the social transformations of the German audience of the period. Along with their psychological significance, these films clearly evidence sociological significance as well; however, to fully explore these connections would require a complex social-psychological apparatus that simply does not exist. Therefore, at this point, I can only turn to certain questions and observations informed by the preceding analysis. We might ask: Why at this particular time did such representations rise as a popular generic form? Why, simply, did they get people laughing in Germany?

Certainly something was in the air politically. The paradigm of typification within which these films operate is at the heart of the liberal models of tolerance: a side-by-side alignment of communities whose difference is contained as much by the inward direction of their desires as by the harmonious pursuit of equivalent goals for desire. By that I mean, for example, that the characters of the Comedy Wave relentlessly follow the same pursuits of happiness, gay or straight, albeit within their respective communities. Of course, this social model has never succeeded at containing difference. It has effaced and negated difference but not sublated it. If there is success in these narratives, these are still movies, not real life. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that in

the postunification period, political debates about gay-straight relations were indeed in the air. With unification in 1994, a legislative debate ensued that tested the limits of straight-gay tolerance and eventually led to the repeal from the German legal system of Paragraph 175, the antihomosexual paragraph. In this debate we recognize the emergence of a new aspect of modernization where tolerance of homosexuality has become a benchmark of social preparedness for admission into the transnational community. The ability to live side by side with the gay community seems currently to mark an ability to live side by side with diverse national and ethnic communities. The European Court of Justice and the Conventions on Human Rights generalize this principle. The German debate from 1990 to 1994 made it specific. Yet it seems to me that such considerations, while meriting further attention, take us too far afield here. These films do not evidence overt political commitments that might indicate an attempt to persuade audiences.

As we saw at the beginning of this essay, these films did have mass appeal; the comedies kept drawing in audiences. We could understand the audiences of all genre films, and these films in particular, as expressing some cultural symptom. Given the triumphalism that accompanied unification, we might suggest that the economic and affiliative instability of the *Wende*, the great losses attendant on unification, resulted in an inability to mourn that differs from the one conventionally associated with postwar German culture. We could surmise that an ensuing mourning process had to find expression just as the anxiety regarding the upheaval of the era had to be displaced, and the films of the Comedy Wave played out these psychic needs. In such a logic, the characters of the Comedy Wave appear as therapeutic ego-ideals for a German audience. I am hesitant to make such a suggestion, given the work of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich and the perennial preoccupation with the health of the German psyche.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, divorcing this analysis from discussions of the postwar era, we note that these characters and their melancholic antics do mark trends and transformations, but as points of projection. If we were to pursue this understanding of

cultural symptom and therapy, we could attend further to the upsurge of genre in films in general. Before the Comedy Wave, from 1989 to 1992, there had been a short-lived resurgence of the horror genre, in films all dealing with unification explicitly. Psychoanalysis from Freud to the present suggests that horror and comedy share the peculiar ability of allowing the spectator to confront anxieties. The comedy, however, brings with its happy end an assurance that everything will be fine, a pleasurable relief from anxiety. The Horror Wave had no such happy end. There, the transgression of boundaries at the point of unification remained horrific. As the process of unification dragged on, we can recognize the films of the Comedy Wave as displacing and playing out the ensuing anxieties of the *Wende*. Happy endings certainly became more significant as economic and affiliative instability continued.

We have noted that audiences for the films begin to dwindle in 1997. The genre seems to lose its ability to fascinate around this time. We might want to attend to new mechanisms of representation that come to the fore during this period; for example, the Internet clearly becomes more significant at this point. Whatever we might find there, as we have seen here, for at least five years an assertion of individual will in the face of heterocoital imperatives became the culturally significant mechanism of representation.

## Notes

1. "Das Lachen macht's," *Der Spiegel*, 1996, 214–30.
2. David N. Coury, "From Aesthetics to Commercialism: Narration and the New German Comedy," *Seminar* 33 (1997): 356–73.
3. This essay is drawn from a forthcoming larger work, *Frames of Belonging: European Film from National to Transnational Productions*, on precisely the relationship between shifts in European film financing and the aesthetics of the European film. Limited work has been done on this topic so far. See Hans-Gerd Pracht, ed., *Kulturelle Filmförderung des Bundes* (Bonn: Bundesministerium des Innern, 1997); Marcelino Oreja, "Towards a Competitive European Programme Industry for the Year 2000" (editorial),

*MEDIA Programme Newsletter* 13 (1996): 2; Angus Finney, *The State of European Film: A New Dose of Reality* (London: Cassell, 1996).

4. Heinz Badewitz, "Neue deutsche Filme pffiffer, frecher" *Frankenpost*, 24 October 1996, E4.
5. See Coury, "From Aesthetics to Commercialism."
6. Micaela Bracamonte, "Right for the Part: New German Film Is Good for a Laugh . . . But Will It Last?" Munich: Online Concept by MagsOnline, 1997.
7. See "Die Spaßrevolution frißt ihre Kinder," *Der Spiegel*, 1997, 178–81.
8. We can also note that historically in the background of the point of emergence, the federal parliament was debating the repeal of the antiabortion law and the antihomosexual law (§218 and §175, respectively.) Also, primarily due to shifts in the former GDR, unemployment among women skyrocketed. This led to a general discussion about the role of gender in the workforce.
9. It is interesting to note that later in the film a parallel scene takes place in the bathroom of a gay bar. This time, however, a leather stud with a *riesendödel* (giant dick) comes on to Axel, and Axel seems to have forgotten his own penchant for bathroom sex. He exposes his panic at this threat to his heterosexual masculinity (another man thinks that he might be gay) by moralizing about the impropriety of the leather stud's behavior.
10. Even though it seems tedious to have to rehearse the argument after three decades of discussion, a recent spate of "anticonstructionist" books and articles indicates that the debate continues. Constructionism does not, or at least need not, deny a biological essence to sexual behavior. However, constructionism has led us to understand that the "gay gene," or any of the other proposed loci of the sought-after biological predisposition to same-sex desire, has no significance in and of itself. Signification comes only in the cultural context of expression. Hence the "gay gene," the "Jewish nose gene," white forelocks, or ribbed fingernails are only visible when individuals are culturally prompted to see them.
11. If we broaden the generic considerations, we could identify it as a genre of temporary gender and/or sexual displacement and include a film such as *In and Out* (dir. Paul Rudnick, US, 1997).

12. In addition to sounding like the plural of the word for farce (*Schwänke*), *Schwenk* means “swing” in German, marking *Real Men* with the same kind of false ambiguity as the English title *Maybe, Maybe Not* provides for that film.
13. In *Nobody Loves Me*, the entire apartment building is filled with queer elements, until the building manager, Lothar Sticker, begins to change the building into respectable middle-class sterile luxury condos.
14. For a detailed discussion of the sissy, see Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).
15. See Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*.
16. Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 312–13.
17. Such overestimations too often rely on a sense of individualism that seems naive to questions of ideology. See, for instance, the discussion of performance and genderfuck in June Reich, “Genderfuck: The Law of the Dildo,” *Discourse* 15.1 (1992): 11. Although they might be able to “perform” similarly, there are social, historical, discursive, and psychic differences between a lesbian woman with a dildo, a gay man, and a straight man.
18. See Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-orientation in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
19. For discussions of the emergence of the male body as erotic spectacle, see Richard Dyer, “Don’t Look Now: The Male Pin-Up,” and Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema,” in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992), or Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
20. By *spectator* here I refer to both the audience as well as on-screen characters. In *Maybe, Maybe Not*, Axel’s specularity is constantly played out for on-screen gay sissy spectators. The gag of such shots rests on the audience’s awareness of Axel’s straight desire and thus the inconsummable status of such desire. The joke is

on the sissies who desire the unattainable and desirable straight masculine body. However, the joke, resting as it does on the “absolute” desirability of Axel’s body, is also played out for offscreen spectators. The casting, wardrobe, and makeup of the film sought to remain true to the quality of caricature in its comic-book basis, except in the notable casting of Til Schweiger as Axel. His buff body, presented as desirable, threatens the straightness of any male spectator called into the appreciation of Axel. The assertion of Axel’s straightness allays the potential for panic. Thus the character of the butcher, the other example of masculinity and homosexuality, appears as a caricature of the hypermasculine.

21. For a discussion of the conventions and limits of the homoerotic spectacle, see D. A. Miller, “Anal Rope,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), and *Bringing Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
22. An inflection of this anxious disavowal is found in the recent Hollywood “gay wave” as it seeks to appeal to a broader audience. The trailers to *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* assured the audience that they were about to see Wesley Snipes and Patrick Swayze, action heroes and on-screen heartthrobs, in their hardest roles. By placing their drag performance in this superlative context, the trailer “allowed” straight men to watch the film by reminding them that Noxeema Jackson and Vida Boheme were only characters, performed by “real” men who usually performed “real” men. Or consider the savvy casting in *In and Out* of Tom Selleck, a straight man rumored to be gay, as a gay man, which ultimately served to reference and reinforce Selleck the actor’s straightness.
23. See n. 9.
24. See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in vol. 14 of the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1974).
25. See, for instance, the main character Peggy (Frank Ripplöh) in *Taxi to the Toilet*.
26. Sven Schwyn, “Review of *Echte Kerle*,” CineNet, 1996, <http://old.kino.ch/previews/e/EchteKerle>, July 1997.

27. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 170.
28. Ibid., 135.
29. Ibid., 136.
30. Ibid., 140.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 137.
33. Ibid., 139.
34. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 53.
35. Female supporting characters evidence the same anxiety. After the breakup, Doro (*Maybe, Maybe Not*) is advised by her liberated female friends to get over Axel and the anxiety that she is expressing about being in a relationship: She is better off on her own. However, when she confesses to them that she is pregnant, their expressions of excitement are staged in such a way as to undercut their earlier "liberated" positions. Women's "liberation" in general comes up for consistent persiflage.
36. The final shot of the film asserts this point. It comes after René has helped Monika and Sabine literally throw a new "dream man" out of the house. Elevated by a low-angle shot, the three are configured embracing each other in a triangle with René between and above them. This configuration both references Holy Family iconography and disavows a lesbian relationship between Monika and Sabine.
37. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 140.
38. Ibid., 136.
39. See Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 445.
40. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler examines at length the connection between the concept of ego developed in "Mourning and Melancholia" and "The Ego and the Id."
41. For a discussion of the highly problematic quality of character and its further development in social psychology, see Randall Halle, "Between Marxism and Psychoanalysis: Anti-Fascism and Anti-Homosexuality in the Frankfurt School," in *Male*

*Homosexuality and the Socialist Left*, ed. Gert Hekma, Harry Oosterhuis, and James Steakley (New York: Haworth, 1995).

42. See Freud, "The Ego and the Id," in vol. 19 of *Standard Edition*, 45.
43. *Ibid.*, 46.
44. See Alexander Mitscherlich and Margarete Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn: Principles of Collective Behavior* (New York: Grove, 1975).

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