

## A Golden Age for Queer Sexual Politics? Lesbian and Gay Literature and Film in 1970s Germany

### Call for Papers

The German Gay Liberation Movement began with a work of art. Rosa von Praunheim's film *It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives* (1971) was the trigger for the formation of homosexual emancipation groups all over West Germany. With its fierce critique of the approaches to assimilation of the 1960s homophile movement and with its revolutionary impetus, the film marked itself as a threshold towards a new time of liberation.

From the very start of the movement, women took part in the various emancipation groups. Nonetheless, gay men were dominating these groups. Since the early 1970s, homosexual women also formed up all-female lesbian groups, inspired by the women's movement's critique of the patriarchy. Verena Stefan's book *Häutungen* (*Shedding*, 1975) played a substantial role in the process of shaping a political lesbian identity and eventually turned into a cult text of both the feminist and the lesbian movement.

Historical accounts of gay liberation movements have often been presented in the form of a saga, as Scott Bravmann has pointed out in his 1997 book *Queer Fictions of the Past*. This certainly applies for the 1970s in Germany: the period between 1971 (Praunheim's film) and 1982 (when the term AIDS was coined) has regularly been constructed as a Golden Age of German queer history. This view is dependent not only on the historic facts themselves, but also – and significantly – on the way in which they are narrated in works of art, both of the 1970s themselves and of our times. Individual memory and historical construction are fundamentally structured by narration – and literature and film do not only participate in this process of shaping an intelligible past, but are also spaces of reflection on this process.

In the last few years interest in the more recent past of LGBTI movements has increased in the humanities. In particular, the period that is characterized deeply by the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the politics of activist groups such as ACT UP! and Queer Nation in the US context has been reread in the frame of concepts of trauma, loss and temporality. The German context did not see mass movements against the social, political and ideological consequences of HIV/AIDS like in the USA. The media reactions to AIDS nonetheless brought about a homophobic climate of repression and hatred, and German queers found effective strategies for self-aid. It seems that LGBTI activists as well as academics have only started the work of mourning the deaths of the AIDS epidemic in the past few years.

Against the backdrop of this rather dark and negative decade, its predecessor, the 1970s, begins to appear as a heyday of Gay Liberation, radical politics and sexual freedom. In Germany, the 1970s are often seen as a “legendary decade”, as the editors of a collection of essays about the so-called *Rosa Radikale* (‘Pink Radicals’) write – being aware of the historical construction this understanding is based on.<sup>1</sup> The years after the students' revolt of 1968 were a departure for queers both in the FRG and in the GDR. Sodomy laws were

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Pretzel/ Volker Weiß: Die westdeutsche Schwulenbewegung der 1970er Jahre. Annäherungen an ein legendäres Jahrzehnt, in: Pretzel/ Weiß (eds.): *Rosa Radikale. Die Schwulenbewegung der 1970er Jahre, Geschichte der Homosexuellen in Deutschland nach 1945*, Vol 2, Hamburg 2012, p. 9–26.

liberalized in both German states in 1968 (GDR) and 1969 (FRG). Important homosexual emancipation groups such as *Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin* (Homosexual Action West Berlin, FRG) and *Homosexuelle Initiative Berlin* (Homosexual Initiative Berlin, GDR) were founded in 1971 and 1973 respectively. When the catastrophe of the epidemic hit the movement in the early 1980s, it was desperately estranged and almost incapable of united action.

However, what exactly made the 1970s a “legendary decade”? What was its revolutionary potential and its path-breaking political and aesthetic strategies? Which elements, movements and memories had to be marginalized in order to facilitate the historical construction of the “legendary decade”? Have the 1970s been narrated differently by the heterogeneous groups involved in LGBTI movements – especially by lesbian women in contrast to gay men? Why has the lesbian movement often been made invisible in academic discussions about both the Women’s movement and the homosexual movement?<sup>2</sup> Can the movement of the 1970s Pink Radicals not only be seen as an unreachable and irretrievable past, lost forever because of the AIDS crisis, but also as a foundation and inspiration for the AIDS movement of the 1980s?

In recent years some artists, film makers and writers have created works of art reflecting the queer 1970s in complex ways. In her 2014 novel *Sisterhood*, Claudia Koppert turns toward the early years of feminist and lesbian activism by staging the generational conflict between the protagonist and her adolescent daughter. By focusing both on the mother’s and the daughter’s perspectives, the novel creates a highly intricate reading of the ‘legendary’ feminist and lesbian past. Yoni Leyser’s film *Desire Will Set You Free* (2015), tells the story of a migrant to Berlin who discovers her trans identity. Both the plot of the film and some of its scenes are reminiscent of Praunheim’s 1971 film, and Praunheim finally appears in the film along with other ‘heroes’ of the 1970s such as Blixa Bargeld and Nina Hagen. The queer 1970s seem to exercise quite a strong appeal for contemporary reflections of queer culture.

The conference aims to explore the queer appeal of the 1970s by both highlighting the legendary aspects of the 1970s and questioning the historical construction. It also seeks to unearth marginalized, erased or ephemeral cultural expressions of the time and to investigate to what degree women, marginalized masculinities (proletarian and migrant) and the reality of the GDR have been excluded from historical narratives. The conference will focus on the representation and construction of the queer 1970s in literature and film and highlight the process of cultural canonization, the differences between male and female homosexual expression, the characteristics of trans\* and racialized experiences, and the queer culture of East Germany.

We invite papers that focus on literature and films of the 1970s as well as papers that investigate contemporary cultural expressions that reflect the 1970s. Papers may scrutinize either individual authors and film-makers or thematic aspects in various works of art. We invite papers on ‘serious’ as well as experimental, avant-garde, underground, trivial and pornographic texts or films. Papers that analyze German culture in a broader European context are especially welcome.

Possible contexts and topics include:

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<sup>2</sup> Gabriele Dennert/ Christiane Leidinger/ Franziska Raucht: *Lesben in Wut. Lesbianbewegung in der BRD der 70er Jahre*, in: Dennert/ Leidinger/ Raucht (eds.): *In Bewegung bleiben. 100 Jahre Politik, Kultur und Geschichte von Lesben*, Berlin 2007, p. 31–61.

- lesbian and gay literature
- lesbian and gay film
- heteronormative works referring to LGBTI issues
- works referring to trans issues
- works referring to issues of race
- Punk and Glam Rock
- Drag Culture (*Tunten*)
- Pornography

The conference will take place from July 21-22 2017 at Humboldt University of Berlin.

The conference language is English.

For individual proposals, please submit a one-page, double-spaced abstract in English with a short biographical note before 31 December 2016 via [kulturgeschichte-sexualitaet@hu-berlin.de](mailto:kulturgeschichte-sexualitaet@hu-berlin.de).

The accepted papers will be published as a collection of essays after the conference.

Unfortunately, we are not able to fund travel or accommodation costs.

The Conference is organized as part of the HERA-funded research project “Cruising the 1970s: Unearthing Pre-HIV/AIDS queer sexual cultures” by the Research Center “Cultural History of Sexuality” (Institute for German Literature, Humboldt University of Berlin).

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