



André Meier, dir.. *Do Communists Have Better Sex? (Sex im geteilten Deutschland)*. First Run/Icarus Films, 2006. 52 mins., color, subtitles in English

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This film, a mixture of scholarly research and light-hearted presentations of stereotypes about the role of sex in divided Germany (from the end of the Second World War to the fall of the Berlin Wall), is a welcome addition to recent discussions of sexuality in East and West Germany. With interviews from well-known historians and sexuality experts (Dagmar Herzog, Gisela Staupe, Dietrich Mühlberg, and Kurt Starke), newsreel footage about sex education films from East and West Germany, scenes of the everyday "West" and "East" body, and even a clip from a pornographic film made by the amateur film club of a GDR factory, the film has enough content to warrant serious consideration for academic use at the research and classroom level. But where the director might have offered in-depth analyses of the private and public topic of sexuality and sexual mores, the insertion of numerous "humorous animation sequences" (as described on the back cover of the DVD) throughout the film take the place of critical discussion, offering the viewer instead facile stereotypes that all too often leave one cringing in embarrassment. It will be difficult for some scholars or students to get beyond one of the first animated scenes, in which a doctor measures the penises of a West German man (16.9 cm) and an East German man (17.5 cm). No evidence in the film backs up such an absurd cartoonish

claim, nor is there a discussion of penis size having anything to do with sexual pleasure in Germany or elsewhere.

Still, it is worth watching the entire film, if nothing else for a basis of discussion about the politics of sex and people's everyday experiences of intimacy. More significantly, the film offers a plethora of concrete examples of historical evidence and its uses. The interviews here are the most informative; they summarize in accessible fashion the vast work these scholars have done on the subject. The newsreel clips and scenes of nude bodies on (one assumes) East German beaches are less helpful, since no dates accompany this film footage and, worse, it is even difficult to know in other nude montages what is being shown (East or West German? Professional or amateur video?) or, more importantly, why. The circle of naked women patiently sitting for what seems to be a class early in the film adds no more meaning to the film than when one sees the women all assume a kneeling position towards the end of the film, bent over with one hand on the ground and the other stimulating the clitoris, head slightly bent down. It is possible to guess from a general cultural knowledge of Germany that this group is likely composed of West German women who are part of a 1960s or 1970s sexual consciousness-raising group, where they practice taking control of

their bodies by stimulating themselves to orgasm without the help of a man or his penis. I was relieved to be spared the outcome of this female circle-jerk (circle rub?), the erotic yet peaceful Indian music in the background notwithstanding, not least because I feared a juxtaposition of the "successful" women in the circle with an earlier, animated scene of a line of East German toddlers. Referring to that much-mocked practice of communal potty training in day care centers in the GDR, in that animated sequence teachers awarded the young boys in the rows of potties with a socialist red flag for successfully having a bowel movement--demonstrated by a strained young face, followed by an audible "plop" and the boy's ecstatic jumping off the potty to join a parade. Such child-rearing practices in the GDR are worthy of further research, as are the women's groups that met together in the West to reclaim their bodies and their sexuality. But without explanation, they are at best mildly humorous windows into two societies, and at worst, they are unkind cheap shots of the most egregious kind.

The overall message of the film is not new, but the presence of images in the film adds a different dimension to the argument. That is, the evolution of the GDR's more tolerant policies regarding (heterosexual) premarital sex (albeit within the preferred confines of a monogamous relationship) not only allowed for East Germans to feel more comfortable with their bodies and sex, but also permitted the GDR regime to differentiate itself from the Federal Republic by adding an official political dimension to women's independence, including in the bedroom. Here, with few exceptions, is a key question the film leaves unaddressed: what about men and sex? Ultimately, the dominant theme here is women--East or West--as homemakers, workers, or friends, but above all as people happy (or not) with the way in which they achieve orgasm (or not). It is a film that belongs in any university library for the possibility of using it in addition to other materials

for research or teaching--but it is also a film that will require many explanations and discussions before and after a viewing.

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