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‘These Are Not New Bigots’ – Queer TV, *Erinnerungskultur* and the Potential of Unproduction Studies

Abstract

The article discusses queer television using US and West-German prime-time soaps *Dallas*, *Dynasty*, *Lindenstraße* and drama series *thirtysomething*, outlining how they are in dialogue with each other through an entangled Cold War history. It places special focus on the depiction of gay and bisexual men during the HIV/AIDS crisis, as this chapter of queer history remains both decisive for public opinion on queer issues across borders, and its history is often obscured in collective memory. While the case studies consider actually produced/‘made’ work, they open up ways to engage with how systemic discrimination both on the level of production companies and audiences disrupt queer content, thus placing this in a framework of ‘unproduction studies’.

Keywords

unproduction studies | television history | collective memory | HIV/AIDS | LGBT History

Introduction: Unmade Queer TV and Silence in the Archives

Much has been written on queerness on television (particularly US television), scholarly (and public facing) work to make sense of the issue of ‘representation’, the idea that what we see on screen informs how we think about ourselves and the world at large. And certainly, there is compelling evidence for this, the mantra ‘Representation Matters’ is at the core of much queer activist work on media, especially since the formation of GLAAD. The media watchdog organisation was founded at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis trying to fight its defamatory and salacious coverage in the news. One of its founding members was none other than Vito Russo, the author of *The Celluloid Closet* (1981), the at the time, comprehensive account of gay and lesbian characters in Hollywood film, which he had painstakingly put together over years of archival research. Russo understood the power of screen media for queer

activism, in other words, the power of visibility; in his introduction to the book, he wrote: ‘The big lie about lesbians and gay men is that we do not exist. (...) We have cooperated for a very long time in the maintenance of our own invisibility. And now the party is over.’¹ He deemed this the end of a ‘closet mentality’ for screen media, unearthing queer subtext – queer coding, to use a by now common term – and historicising it to reveal the systemic homophobia at work in Hays Code Hollywood and beyond.

Russo makes the invisible visible, but it also means he highlights the stark absences; the silences in the archives that stand in a longer tradition of queer history’s silencing in both collective memory and the historical profession’s reluctance to acknowledge it. Even now, this history of invisibility is weaponised politically. Just think of the current anti-trans moral panic in Germany, the UK or the US that bases itself on the deeply harmful idea that trans identities are a modern development, when instead knowledge about their existence was wiped from historical record when the archives of Magnus Hirschfeld’s *Institut für Sexualwissenschaft* were burned by the Nazis in 1933.² The idea that any of this is new, then, that trans people are a fad of the 21st century, is the result of an indexical absence created by fascists. It is a gap in knowledge because white supremacists wanted it to be.

It is thus crucial for queer history to highlight these absences, to historicise and unearth from the archives these forgotten histories. In turn, then, television studies, I argue, should do the same. In all these studies of representation, there are spectres of alternatives – the unspoken ‘better’ versions of these texts that exist in any discussion of tropes or stereotypes, the passing mention of what could have been. But I want to go deeper than this: I want to turn to the queer television that never was: a study of ‘unmade’ queer television, in order to grasp fully the systemic queerphobia at work in the entertainment industry. This then also makes it possible to stress the role television holds for the forming of public/collective memory, thus positing unmade queer television as yet another form of ‘archival silence’.³

Unproduction studies broadly focuses on unproduced work as it exists in staggering numbers in archives (such as the Margaret Herrick Library in LA), but crucially, it also considers alternate versions of produced work to understand wider ‘textual, structural and industrial dimensions of film’ and television.⁴ Peter C. Kunze has argued that such an ‘unproduction studies’ provides us with ‘another avenue for understanding the complex power dynamics behind media production and the logic that informs industrial praxis,’⁵ as these ‘histories of failure allow us to give voice to the

silenced, the marginalized, the uncredited.’⁶ Crucially, Kunze understands ‘failure’ in the sense of Jack Halberstam’s seminal work⁷ as a productive tool to critique capitalism and heteronormativity, which is also ultimately fruitful for my reading of queer television. James Fenwick has further theorised unproduction studies and highlighted that ‘there is a history of unmade films by LGBTQ+ and persons of colour, films that remained unmade because of the structural inequalities and industrial gatekeepers’⁸ and that thus, ‘unproduction studies is a field that has the potential to highlight these patterns of structural barriers (...) (which also include censorship, political sensitivities, cultural conditions, production financing etc.) lead[ing] to the discussion of marginalization and absences.’⁹

It is through this lens that I want to look at several popular television prime time soaps in West German and US television, and how they are in dialogue with each other through an entangled history, a ‘queer Atlantic’.¹⁰ Germany’s unique post-war history and continued relationship with the US during the Cold War opens up potential to discuss transnational entanglements of both television production and queer histories. I place special focus on the depiction of gay and bisexual men during the HIV/AIDS crisis, as this chapter of queer history remains both decisive for public opinion on queer issues across borders, and its history is often obscured in collective memory. While the case studies consider actually produced/‘made’ work, namely episodes of *Dallas* (1978-1991), *Dynasty* (1981-1989), *Lindenstraße* (1985-2020) and *thirtysomething* (1987-1991), and have been widely discussed in the literature on queer representation, I do want to go back to them precisely to reframe them through the lens of unproduction studies, and to flesh out their reading with previously not consulted archival material. This re-reading opens up ways to engage with how systemic discrimination both on the level of production companies and audiences disrupt queer content in a way that ultimately leads to unproduction, and not just the more immediate censorship of the existing text(s). Consequently, then, I argue, as television production is transnational, so is its unproduction.

German Television, *Erinnerungskultur* and Systemic Queerphobia

Germany’s television history is inextricably entangled with the occupation of the country following the Second World War; the medium’s institutionalisation a direct reaction to Germany’s Nazi past. Television’s birth coincided with the Federal Republic’s under the auspices of the Allied Forces, and

consequently played an important role in its nation building. I thus focus on West Germany as a consideration of the GDR/DDR warrants a separate in-depth discussion and I want to outline entanglements with the US that in this form only exist in the Federal Republic. Here, radio and television (both summed up under the term *Rundfunk*), were central to the idea of ‘reeducation’ after the fall of the fascist dictatorship – a logical step given a regime in which Goebbels’ ministry had developed the so-called *Volksempfänger*, cheap radio receivers, solely for the purposes of propaganda.

Post-1945 then, the Allied Forces (mainly the US and the UK) decreed that broadcast media was to be developed independently from the new German state apparatus, as to guarantee unbiased news reporting, and to use media for cultural education while building a new democratic (re)public.¹¹ While the US-American broadcast system was and is largely ad-financed, it was clear Germany would not be able to generate advertising revenue for years to come. Consequently, the system was modelled on the BBC instead. It was (and is) financed through a public fee (separate from taxes),¹² and called *öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk* (public service broadcasting). Coverage was split along occupational territory and state lines, such as the *Bayerischer Rundfunk* (Bavarian Broadcasting) that still covers all of the state of Bavaria, then part of the American occupation zone. These broadcasting institutions were gradually handed over to the Germans starting as early as 1946.¹³

The realities of German broadcast media operations are however much different; granted, complete independence from the state was perhaps always utopian. As media historian Konrad Dussel outlines, the boards (*Rundfunkrat* and *Verwaltungsrat*) that still run broadcast services today include cultural representatives and church officials (in and of itself a questionable practice), but they also include local politicians and official state representatives.¹⁴ These boards then also vote for the presidents (*Intendanten*) of the services, basically guaranteeing a direct influence of both church and state actors on media production.¹⁵

As we can trace a direct connection between formation of the *öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk* and a larger project of German denazification and rebuilding, a discussion of it must also include consideration of the country’s *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance). Germany prides itself on this large-scale culture of public/collective memory encompassing museums, archives and memorials, such as the sites of the former concentration camps. Yet this process of memorialisation is ultimately flawed, as it focuses only on Nazi Germany as the one big evil

(glossing over, for instance, Germany's colonial history), and importantly, has gaps even in that. One of the biggest of these gaps only recently attempted to be closed by historians and activists alike is Nazi Germany's persecution of queer people long purposefully kept out of memorial sites.¹⁶

A crucial puzzle piece in understanding as to why this absence was kept so glaring for so long is that §175 StGb, the law used to persecute gay men in Nazi Germany, existed not only before, but also after. The Federal Republic of Germany kept intact the Nazi version of this law to criminalise homosexuality and incarcerate gay men until 1973, and only fully struck it from the books in 1994, following reunification with the GDR.¹⁷ What this meant for those queer people – as it has become abundantly clear that arrests under §175 also included trans people¹⁸ and that the larger apparatus also persecuted lesbians¹⁹ – in the concentration camps is that a lot of them were liberated by the Allied Forces, only to be incarcerated again in the newly founded Republic. There is thus a continuation of systemic discrimination of queer people that carries all the way from the German *Kaiserreich* to the Federal Republic of Germany as it exists in its current form, putting into perspective that Nazi Germany was not in all respects an aberration. This is an inconvenient truth both historians of Germany and the German public have long argued, and in respect to queer memory, still continue to have bitter ideological fights, about.

Consequently, then, Germany's broadcast media is part of a larger apparatus born out of a post-fascist rebuilding process often keen to push forward while remembering a horrible past in ultimately incomplete and often unjust ways. One could even argue that this constitutes a failure of *Erinnerungskultur* altogether. It is thus unsurprising to see the systemic discrimination carried out by the state level seep into popular culture, including televisual production. Yet, what I want to argue is that public service television in Germany is ultimately *also* an institution of *Erinnerungskultur*, complicating its role in meaning-making of the past. Tying back this idea to US televisual production and its own crucial role in making queer people (in)visible, it opens up ways to discuss television as a whole as a site of public/collective memory. Anamarija Horvat has recently argued the relevance of both film and television in the formation of a queer collective memory, as well as their potential for 'rhetorical interventions into heteronormative narratives of collective memory.'²⁰ Horvat has focused on the US and the UK – by adding Germany to the mix, I argue, we get an even better understanding of these dynamics and how they are institutionalised (or not).

Soaps Across Borders: *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and *Lindenstraße*

‘Since the beginning of German television, the makers of programs have imitated show ideas and concepts from those countries that, like Great Britain and the United States, had a decade more experience with programming and the invention of individual shows or series. (...) West Germany was thus influenced by Britain and the United States,’ according to Lothar Mikos.²¹ So not only did the US and the UK build the institutions for televisual production in Germany, their own productions also made up a large percentage of its programming – both through the adaptation of non-scripted formats and the dubbed broadcasts of many a scripted series. Over 30 years after the *öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk* had been established, not too much had changed: ‘Even into the 1980s the television market remained very simple, since the introduction of private-sector broadcasting was no more than a proposal discussed in political circles. The programming executives of the public networks, ARD and ZDF, were free to shop around for new stock in Great Britain and in the United States.’²²

One of the series that became wildly popular in Germany was *Dallas*, a prime-time soap surrounding Texas oil barons (most famously patriarch J.R. Ewing, portrayed by Larry Hagman), that had premiered on CBS in 1978 and that ARD began airing from 1981. Steven Capsuto has argued that the popularity of the series in the US reflected an audience ‘nostalgic for the kind of the old-style Hollywood elegance, glamor and prosperity that the Reagans symbolized’,²³ and can thus be read as a symptom of the neo-conservative decade about to unfold. Equally popular was rival product *Dynasty*, premiering 1981 on ABC and in 1983 in ZDF as *Der Denver-Clan*, both series running successfully for years in either country. In Germany, their success even set new milestones for programming, especially when private TV was eventually introduced: ‘Until then, series had not been particularly successful in prime time. After these hits, however, the networks tried to pull domestic productions onto the series bandwagon. In the mid-1980s, when RTL and SAT.1 went on the air as Germany’s first private television broadcasters, their initial programming schedules were filled mainly with American series.’²⁴

Notably, both series featured gay characters, and how German broadcast handled these speak to cultural acceptance of queer people at the time. Episode 26 of *Dallas*, “Royal Marriage”, was not aired in Germany until 2011, while episode 25 had regularly aired November 17, 1981, and episode 27 the week after, on November 24. Such a gap would have likely confused audiences given the serial narrative structure of soaps, but this did not seem to deter network censors – in total, seven episodes of *Dallas* were never aired in Germany, and thus also originally not even dubbed into German.²⁵

Officially, the reason given was that they were too violent,²⁶ but that does not apply to the episode in question at all. The plot is quickly summed up: Lucy (Charlene Tilton) wants to marry Kit (Mark Wheeler), but Kit turns out to be gay and finally confesses this to both her and J.R. The episode premiered in the US in 1979 to little fanfare, as the late 70s were a time at the height of the Gay Liberation movement's successes and crucially, before the HIV/AIDS crisis. The episode's screenplay was also run by the Gay Media Task Force, as a first draft of the script is part of the archival materials of the organisation at Cornell – this draft also includes several mentions of the slur “f*****” that were consequently removed at behest of activist Newton Deiter.²⁷

In Germany, meanwhile, the local gay rights movement had also become cautiously successful by 1981 – §175 did no longer outlaw gay sex between consensual adults, first Pride parades had taken place, but on-screen visibility was still basically non-existent. Gay filmmaker Rosa von Praunheim's seminal mockumentary *Nicht der Homosexuelle ist Pervers, Sondern die Welt in der Er Lebt* (1971) had been shown in cinemas and since also aired on television, and is often-credited as a central agent in the mobilisation of gay rights activists in the Republic. And yet, even a decade later the mere mention of homosexuality was still not deemed appropriate content for the audiences of a prime-time soap. Television thus remained behind in a time when writer/directors like von Praunheim or Rainer Werner Fassbinder would begin to produce commercially and critically successful queer cinema. It was thus not a lack of authors: Fassbinder himself even had productive relationships with broadcasters WDR (*Westdeutscher Rundfunk*) and ZDF, writing several made-for-TV films, and while they often tackled difficult subject matter, they did not include any interrogation of queerness.¹

Meanwhile, *Dynasty/Der Denver-Clan* notably made censorship much more difficult, as it had an ‘openly gay regular character – or perhaps openly bisexual regular character; a point of contention at the time.’²⁸ The contention stemmed from the fact that Steven Carrington (Al Corley, later Jack Coleman) had relationships with both women and men, but crucially, that changed over the seasons,

¹ Fassbinder's negotiations with the broadcasters or script drafts thus would be another potential case of unproduction I am looking to engage with in my larger research project, but so far, I have been frustrated by a lack of material in the public broadcasters' archives. I have included what I found so far on the *Lindenstraße* controversy below, but their official reasoning behind censorship practices of the US-American soaps remain an equally big question mark, unfortunately. There certainly is irony to researching absences and finding even more archival silence where one hopes to uncover something to make sense of them – I fear however, that this is a feature, rather than a bug, of this system.

with an eye on shifting public opinion on AIDS (and thus, gay men). Generally, the network forbade any even vaguely intimate depiction of his relationships with the same gender: ‘according to [creator Aaron] Spelling, ABC made it clear that anything resembling a kiss was out of the question. (...) to keep the network and sponsors happy, even minor physical affection between gay men, such as a hug, was handled gingerly and unnaturally.’²⁹ Eventually, Steven was written off for a while and recast, and when he returned, his only relationship was with his wife, Claudia. ‘[T]he real world was in an uproar over AIDS (...) and any open treatment of homosexuality in 1983 could not help but bring AIDS into viewers’ minds.’³⁰ Screenwriter Ed DeBlasio equally ‘assumed that concern over AIDS was one reason why the producers had Steven Carrington go straight.’³¹ Thus, *Dynasty*’s treatment of its resident queer character was very much an indicator for “how much homogenized homosexuality was acceptable to a large public, and what was still off limits.”³² The fact that the series’ scripts were regularly sent to Newton Deiter and his Gay Media Task Force³³ thus may have meant a more sensitive handling of language or stereotypical imagery, but could never have stopped such larger processes of unproduction.

The complete avoidance of physical intimacy is likely also what made public broadcaster ZDF bite the bullet and show all of *Der Denver-Clan* to a German audience. Interestingly, however, the network cut a scene as late as 1986, when Steven was temporarily allowed to be seen with a man on US screens again. In the episode ‘The Aftermath’ his boyfriend Luke dies following a terrorist attack (a classic case of the bury-your-gays trope), and he gives him a tearful goodbye on his deathbed. It first aired as ‘Nach der Katastrophe’ on October 19 of that year in Germany, and the monologue in which Steven discusses his regrets over living closeted,³⁴ was wholly cut from the episode. Apparently, even that was considered too intimate or risky for German television censors. Notably, this created an environment where trying to produce any kind of explicitly queer content would have run the risk of not getting picked up – and this is where unproduction comes into play.

While it is difficult to find archival material that traces the official reasoning behind these censorship decisions or fully unproduced projects in the German television industry (I have found fruitful cases for the US context), I argue that the following case study of long-running soap *Lindenstraße* in particular can be reframed as one of unproduction. As, confronted with the immense success of the American prime-time soaps,³⁵ German television executives soon decided to develop their own: modelled on the UK’s long-running *Coronation Street* (1960–), Germany’s *Lindenstraße* was

made to showcase a fictionalised version of daily life in the Republic and premiered in 1985 on ARD, where it would run every Sunday night until March 2020. Crucially, this timing meant that it debuted at the height of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and yet, it took the risky step of introducing an openly gay character early on.

‘Schwulen-Küsse’ on the *Lindenstraße* and Anticipatory Obedience

It is necessary to briefly outline the parallels between institutional failures in reaction to HIV/AIDS in the US and West Germany in the 1980s and the resulting stigmatisation of (especially) gay and bisexual men, to better understand the historical context for the events discussed below. In the US, the Reagan administration practiced wilful ignorance until as late as 1985; before, the president would not even speak of the illness in public, and requests for comment were declined at press conferences, even out-right ridiculed by press secretary Larry Speakes.³⁶ Raising awareness, running prevention campaigns and pushing for medical treatment was all left to activist groups like ACT UP, founded by gay rights activists such as Larry Kramer.³⁷ Hundreds of thousands of people, a lot of them gay and bisexual men, were simply left to die or suffer, until AZT, the first antiretroviral drug was approved by the FDA in March 1987 (it still took several more years to become widely accessible).³⁸ Press coverage was salacious and harmful, painting queer men as dangerous pariahs, often reframing them as perpetrators rather than victims. This led to the aforementioned founding of GLAAD to counteract this harm.

In Germany, the federal government reacted sooner, mostly due to minister of health, Rita Süßmuth, but conservative politicians, particularly in Bavaria, were just as discriminatory and harmful.³⁹ Peter Gauweiler, Bavarian minister of the interior at the time and by now an infamous name in this context, cracked down hard on the queer community, sex workers, and intravenous drug users, leading to raids on cruising spots, mandatory HIV-testing for state employees, and more. Horst Seehofer, a member of the German *Bundestag* and later federal minister of health, suggested HIV-positive people should be ‘concentrated in special homes’ (*‘in speziellen Heimen konzentriert werden’*).⁴⁰ Another CSU politician, Bavarian minister for culture Hans Zehetmair, used even more overt Nazi-speak by suggesting such societal ‘fringe groups’ had to be ‘thinned out’ (*‘Randgruppen ... müssen ausgedünnt werden’*) as homosexuality, to him, was a form of ‘degeneration’ (*‘Entartung’*).⁴¹

Lindenstraße, which often engaged with current political events and was set in Munich (Bavaria’s capital), called Gauweiler and his colleagues ‘fascists’ in reaction to this in an episode that

aired on October 1988. Gauweiler sued for defamation and lost.⁴² In a November 1988 episode, the soap depicted the first AIDS victim on German television (notably, the character contracts HIV from a blood transfusion, not sex).⁴³ Yet, the bigger public scandal happened a year and a half later on March 18, 1990, they aired an episode titled ‘Das Horoskop’ (‘The Horoscope’) in which resident gay character Dr. Carsten Flöter (Georg Uecker) kisses his lover Robert Engel (Martin Armknecht). It was not the first gay kiss on German television. It was not even the first gay kiss Uecker had been a part of on *Lindenstraße* – that happened three years earlier, in 1987. Yet, audiences reacted to it in extreme and unprecedented ways, beginning with hate mail and angry phone calls.⁴⁴ As was usual at the time, the regional public broadcasters would air a rerun of the episodes within a week, but the Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR) refused.⁴⁵

Initially, the wave of hate died down, but since several more episodes had already been filmed, there was eventually another intimate gay scene on air a few weeks later – and this time, the reactions escalated to a bomb threat sent to the ARD, as well as threats on Uecker’s life, forcing him to get police protection.⁴⁶ Most letters to the network arrived between March and May 1990, but both public and internal discussions around it continued much further into the summer. Correspondence from late May/early June between showrunner Geißendörfer and producers Monika Paetow and Gunther Witte address their concerns about yet another gay kiss between Flöter and Engel in episode 239 scheduled to air July 1. They all note that they do not want to give in to the audience backlash; Paetow even highlights that they did not see their viewer numbers decline as a result.⁴⁷ She further sees a trend that complaints largely come from a smaller, older (and thus presumed to be more conservative) segment of the audience, but crucially, that this is the same demographic that makes up the majority of the *Rundfunkrat* (board).^{II,48} Paetow and Witte however do share concern that a changed time slot for this particular Sunday would further spark controversy: because of the 1990 FIFA World Cup, *Lindenstraße* was moved up to 3:35 PM from the usual 6:40 PM slot, which Paetow calls the main ‘*Kinderprogrammzeit*’ (time for children’s programming).⁴⁹ This plays into the often-raised argument that all queerness is to be kept away from children as it is perceived to be inherently sexual in ways heterosexual romance is not. This is not to say that the producers here prescribed to

^{II} She writes: ‘Die Beschwerden kommen ja auch (verständlicherweise) größtenteils von einer Minderheit der älteren Generation. Aber diese sitzt in der Mehrheit ja wohl auch im Rundfunkrat.’ (trans. ‘The complaints (understandably) come in large part from a minority of the older generation. But they also make up a majority of the *Rundfunkrat*.’)

this notion themselves, but it to this day is the inherent logic behind structuring linear television programming and the larger media ratings system (such as the MPAA in the US, or the German FSK). Several of the letters sent to the network also reflect this sentiment: in one sent to the WDR on March 27, 1990, a concerned family claims that they had a hard time explaining the ‘Schwuchtelküsse’ (‘f***** kisses’) to their six year old.⁵⁰ The producers decided to cut.

Much of the self-censorship apparently happened as an act of anticipatory obedience to the *Rundfunkrat* as well as reactionary voices on the outside. Paetow’s letter in particular also shows her frustration with having to deal with the controversy, to her, the ‘*Schwulen-Küsse*’ (‘gay kisses’) are not important enough for them to become a ‘*Dauerthema*’ (‘constant topic’).^{III,51} And this despite her and her colleagues’ replies to audience letters explaining repeatedly that the writers and producers of the show regarded homosexuality as a normal part of daily German life.⁵² Their decision to cut however seems to have unfortunately been a smart one: then WDR *Fernsehdirektor* (television director) Günther Struve, as well as church representatives on the WDR *Rundfunkrat* did indeed want eliminate homosexual representation altogether.⁵³ WDR *Pressesprecher* (PR officer) Michael Schmidt even decried that the *Lindenstraße* should not be turning into ‘Peep-Show’ because children might be watching anything that aired before 7 PM.⁵⁴ Struve’s proposed large-scale censorship did however also not go uncommented by gay rights organisations – the WDR archive contains letters from among others, activists with the *Beratungsstelle Homosexueller Männer und Frauen* (Counseling Center for Gay Men and Women) in Cologne protesting his and the network’s statements. Struve even personally replied to a private citizen’s complaints about the cut made in the aforementioned episode, explaining the decision with the changed time slot and wanting to avoid giving homophobes another reason to file complaints under the guise of the ‘*Jugendschutzgesetz*’ (the German law to protect minors).⁵⁵

Actor Georg Uecker continued his work on the show despite all the turmoil; when he did leave for several years, it was for private reasons: his partner, an Englishman, had contracted HIV and ended up dying from AIDS in 1993. They spent their last years together in London.⁵⁶ While this circumstance was not public knowledge at the time of the outrage over his fictional alter ego, he had already come out – in fact, he was the first openly gay man playing a gay character on German television.⁵⁷ It is possible, that this, too contributed to the extreme audience reactions. Uecker

^{III} In her exact words: ‘Mir sind die Schwulen-Küsse auch nicht wichtig genug, um sie zu einem Dauerthema der Lindenstraße werden zu lassen.’ (‘The gay kisses are also not important enough to me for them to become a constant topic on the Lindenstraße.’).

himself asked years later why the backlash was this great the second time around, but assumed that it was because the second kiss was more intimate, and that the men were shown in bed together.⁵⁸

Notably, Martin Armknecht's character, Robert Engel, started to date women after this episode aired – similar to *Dynasty*'s Steve Carrington – and even became a criminal⁵⁹ (which is either affirming problematic tropes of untrustworthy bi men, or can be read as straightwashing altogether). Uecker however, had been promised by *Lindenstraße*'s showrunner Hans W. Geißendörfer, that his character Carsten Flöter would not meet the same fate. Long before 'Das Horoskop' caused such trouble, they had sat down to discuss the straightwashing on *Dynasty*, adding another element to how these shows were in dialogue with each other.⁶⁰ Uecker would later return to the show and stay until the end of its run, and his character would get married to a man as well as adopt a son, but this all happened in the 2000s. Beginning in 1996, *Lindenstraße* also featured lesbian characters, showing tides turning with a few years of distance to the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Nevertheless, the case of *Lindenstraße* showcases that even the fairly progressive producers of the soap caved to conservative pressure from both audiences and more crucially, the members of the *Rundfunkrat* and the programming director – even preempting any more potential conflict by cutting scenes before they aired. While this can be read as a classic case of (self-)censorship, I argue that this also constitutes an example of unproduction. The tapering off of the romantic storyline between Carsten and Robert after the backlash meant an unmaking of homosexual visibility on German TV at a time where it was one of the only instances of it. This then further created an environment where the heightened awareness of such potential conflict led to directors like Struwe being even more unwilling to broach the subject – despite, and this is crucial, an actual impact on viewership numbers. If a popular soap like *Lindenstraße* could not do it, who could have? The answer, for a very long time, was no one.

***thirtysomething* and US Audience Reactions in Times of HIV/AIDS**

The extreme reaction to the gay inhabitants of *Lindenstraße* was not unique to Germany at the time. In fact, it eerily mirrors the events surrounding an episode of ABC's popular drama *thirtysomething* that had aired about half a year before. On November 7, 1989, the season 3 episode 'Strangers' made its debut on American television. It featured a two-minute scene in which two gay men (played by series regular David Marshall Grant and guest star Peter Frechette) wake up next to each other in bed. Sex is very much implied, but not explicitly shown. They do not even kiss. They talk, among other

things, about losing friends to AIDS. It was, however, enough to send audiences into a frenzy. Writer Richard Kramer recalls viewers calling and writing letters to the production's office for days on end, delivering both positive messages and hate mail. 'The papers, of course, told only the ugly part of the story,'⁶¹ he would write later. Scholar Ron Becker reports 'approximately 400 phone calls' to the network, out of which '90 percent' were negative.⁶² If those numbers are accurate, given Kramer's contrasting account, is unclear, but crucially, the negative voices would have outweighed the positive in the minds of those in power. ABC lost around \$1.5 million from advertisers pulling out; and should the episode ever be rerun, confronted them with a similar threat – so naturally, it wasn't.⁶³

This is a story often-told, a popular case study also in academic treatment of queer television, as it became 'industry lore – a cautionary illustration of broadcast television's troubled relationship with gay content at the beginning of the 1990s.'⁶⁴ At first, 'ABC and the producers, Marshall Herskovitz and Ed Zwick, insisted that the reaction from advertisers wouldn't keep the show from bringing the gay characters back in the future', but it was clear that the power of advertisers restricted the ability to show any gay content, even such comparatively timid material.⁶⁵ (Notably, a stage direction that would have had them embrace at the end of the scene was already censored beforehand.)⁶⁶ Before the backlash, 'with help from Herskovitz and Zwick, [had] drafted a year's worth of plot for the new character', and had Russell (Grant) appearing in both the show's second and third season regularly, but eventually, he 'resurfaced for two episodes in November, then one last time in 1990.'⁶⁷

The HIV/AIDS crisis – or rather, the conservative backlash to it – had left its mark. As Vito Russo once mused, it was not so much that the public opinion on gay people had turned: 'I don't think AIDS is the reason for an antigay backlash. I think it's the excuse. These are not new bigots. These are old bigots who feel a new permission to be more vocal because of AIDS.'⁶⁸ This, unfortunately, rings true, also considering that there had been cautious successes in representing the victims of the pandemic itself in a more sensitive light (such as in ABC's award-winning 1985 TV movie *An Early Frost*). Furthermore, neoliberalism had started to take full root in the industry, as 'by 1988 all three networks found themselves under new management whose top priorities were to streamline operations and improve the bottom line' leading to more lax quality control, eroding advertisers' confidence.⁶⁹ Additionally, (neo)conservative interest groups, particularly from the Christian right, exuded more and more influence.⁷⁰ The consequence was skittish advertisers who reacted increasingly negative to any kind of queer content, affecting the established characters on *thirtysomething* as well as other contemporaneous series such as *Quantum Leap* (1989-1993), over

which GLAAD and NBC had a highly publicised conflict.⁷¹ ‘Such incidents helped to create a sense in Hollywood that gay material was a money loser. (...) Given such attitudes among network executives, it isn’t surprising that (...) there were no recurring openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters on prime-time network television at the start of February 1991.’⁷² Harvey Fierstein, one of the only openly gay actors and writers at the time had even been “‘hired to write the first openly gay sitcom,’” but the project died because ‘CBS executives told him they were put off by the amount of money ABC reportedly had lost on the *thirtysomething* ‘Strangers’ episode.’⁷³

In a recent article, Nick Salvato looks back at 1991 and queer televisual production, including the eventual cancellation of *thirtysomething* – another significant ripple effect speaking to a larger context of unproduction. He suggests an intertextual reading of queer creators’ work; a historicising of how such TV writers and producers as Richard Kramer, or the few actors willing to ‘play gay’ at the time, that would, like Peter Frechette, appear in similar roles again on other television series, tried to work around the restraints of the big three networks.⁷⁴ What I think he achieves by this is what I am also trying to do here: putting the focus on the larger contexts of queer televisual production, and thus, inherently, its unproduction.

Conclusion: The Potential of Unproduction Studies for Queer Collective Memory

Looking at the few things Kramer or Fierstein could do, also necessarily means noticing the glaring holes in programming, in the ‘representation’ of what they could *not*. While Becker, Capsuto and others do gesture at what was lost as a consequence of such censorship, it is not where the focus of their studies lies. Yet this is exactly where studying the unmade, where unproduction studies can come in to fill gaps, to make sense of these indexical absences. They outline what a perceived ‘failure’ (an unproduced project), in the Halberstamian sense, can teach us about capitalism’s power to undo, to *unmake* queerness in public memory. Kramer, himself a gay man that had previously decried that the show was unrealistically ‘white and straight’⁷⁵ had written ‘Strangers’ following his friend David Bombyk dying of AIDS.⁷⁶ He was dealing with his personal loss through artistic expression, telling a, by then scarily common, almost mundane, story of the 1980s and early 1990s – one that was consequently removed from reruns and thus further erased from public memory. *Lindenstraße*’s episode fared a similar fate, and Germany’s network censors were overall even more thorough in erasing even US-American depictions of queerness from public consciousness, as I have shown.

This, I would argue, constitutes a case of what Aleida Assmann calls ‘weaponized forgetting’⁷⁷ while it might not be as drastic as the public burning of books, the removal of such work from public access has significant impact on how queer lives are remembered. Additionally, and crucially, it also made it even harder for gay writers like Kramer, and gay actors like Georg Uecker, to tell their stories within the frameworks of the shows that had given them the platform to do so. And it also impacted other creators to tell more stories like this for years to come, forcing them to change storylines, rewrite characters, or at worst, completely discard ideas before they could ever even come to fruition. This unproduction of queer television – such as Harvey Fierstein’s unmade gay sitcom, for which a pilot script probably still lies in a drawer somewhere – then had, and still has, a direct impact on how a larger public remembers the HIV/AIDS crisis specifically, and queer lives more broadly. Public memorialisation of the crisis has been, as any activism for its visibility and fight against the disease itself, been mounted largely by the queer community. The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, the massive travelling public memorial to those lost in the US, is perhaps the most well-known, but there are also physical memorials in places like Key West or New Orleans. In Germany, they can be found in Berlin and Munich, but neither usually receive much attention in tourist guides and remain community sites, if situated in public places. There is no larger-scale federal attempt to memorialise the victims in either country, and so popular culture, especially the (at least traditionally more) easily accessible television contributes in large parts to younger generations knowledge about these events.

As Ron Becker writes on cases like *thirtysomething*’s ‘Strangers’, ‘by caving into advertiser fears and special interest group pressure, (...) the networks were compromising artistic freedom and failing their mandate to serve the public interest.’⁷⁸ This ‘mandate to serve a public interest’ cements the power of television for collective memory, and not just within the unique framework of German *Erinnerungskultur* and *öffentlich-rechtlicher Rundfunk*, but also within the US. Studying television as an important actor of public history, then, can open up new inroads into how we see the medium, and how we can further give voice to the silences in the archives where queer history is concerned. Unproduction studies unlocks all of this for an interdisciplinary project of media studies and history, building on what Vito Russo started when he shed light on the queerness that was hidden in plain sight, and dug into archives to tell an untold history of gays and lesbians on screen. By looking past the idea of (in)visibility or representation,⁷⁹ and moving these spectres of absences to the forefront, and thus by treating television seriously as an institution of public memory, we can then get a fuller picture of systemic queerphobia in the entertainment industry, and beyond.

Endnotes

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47. Internal correspondence, letter from Monika Paetow to Gunther Witte, May 23, 1990, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, Archiv des Westdeutschen Rundfunks.
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52. The archives of the WDR contain a large number of audience letters sent to the network and the production team of Lindenstraße to most of which [who I assume must have been] Paetow’s secretary, Monika Brinkmann, and others wrote personalized replies over several months.

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79. I want to at least mention Melanie E.S. Kohnen's seminal book, as she also made great arguments for a more nuanced, critical view of representation on screen that I don't have more space to discuss here, but work with in my larger research project: Melanie E.S. Kohnen, *Screening the Closet: Queer Representation, Visibility, and Race in American Film and Television* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

Biography

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TMG Journal for Media History

Volume 27 No (1)/2024

DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18146/tmg.870>

PUBLISHER

Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision

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