

# INTRODUCTION

I stumbled across the name Ernest Borneman while researching another project. In the archives of Radio Bremen, I discovered that he had been the man behind the famous *Beat-Club*—the first German show to bring beat and pop music to television. The discovery lent a sudden and unexpected historical and political depth to a pop culture phenomenon of the 1960s. Borneman’s name rang a bell; I vaguely remembered him as a proponent of sexual emancipation back in the 1980s. I was struck by the alliance of jazz, film, and sex on display in Borneman’s biography—each a vital element of modern culture in the twentieth century in its own right, but which came together in his person in a way that seemed rather unusual. Jazz, film, and sex may play an important role in many people’s everyday lives, but seldom appear in combination as the object of intensive, scholarly research. A common focal point that allows them to be meaningfully set in relation to one another is rare to come by.

There are other hurdles, too, involving the tension between poetry and truth. Ernest Borneman has always been a polarizing figure, celebrated as an early advocate of jazz and emancipated sexuality by some but seen as a pretentious self-promoter and swindler by others. The fodder for these divergent opinions came from his wide-ranging journalistic activities, his work in film and television, and his mass media presence. Borneman was an untiring autodidact who never earned a conventional academic degree, because he fled Germany in 1933, shortly before completing his Abitur (the equivalent to a high-school diploma, and required for admission to universities in Germany). His years of exile in England and Canada marked a turning point in his life—a place outside the confines of a normal German existence, a setting for his political, cultural, and academic socialization, and a projective surface and realm of fantasy after the fact. He worked diligently at crafting his own biography, piecing together fragments of reality and fiction to form a “biographical illusion” (Pierre Bourdieu) of a life lived as an outsider, bolstering his credibility in the process, and especially his authority as an unconventional scholar. At the same time, doubts as to the veracity of this image have also influenced public perception of him. Writing a biography of Borneman, then, has meant constantly tussling with these autobiographical constructions by correlating them to other contemporary sources. Nevertheless, in what follows, readers should not expect to find the final word on these matters; new sources may come to light that would once again change the

picture. What this book has to offer is more a preliminary account, written from a specific perspective.

How is one to approach a biography that immediately communicates such breadth, is so rich in its connections to the politics, society, and art of the twentieth century? Any number of broader perspectives are possible and may further prove highly insightful for future projects: the lasting influence of Borneman's emigration, his journalistic work, the significance of his Jewish background, or how autobiographical constructions function as a form of strategic remembrance. As mentioned above, I have chosen to focus first and foremost on Borneman's interest in cultural products of modernity that were at the time considered to be the epitome of progress and were assigned a special place in society's self-reflection and self-interpretation: jazz—the most avant-garde and popular music style over the first half of the century; film—the most ambitious expression of visual culture in the twentieth century; and the “sexual revolution”—the most extensive transformation of intimate bodily practices and discourses. Given that each of these processes of modernization was particularly effective in raising emotions, it is surprising that Borneman came to them through his own, equally avant-garde self-identification as a Marxist, one moreover in the vein of a “new objectivity” (*neue Sachlichkeit*) as represented by Bertolt Brecht, which advocated processing highly emotional topics in a rationally controlled way. Borneman, however, was anything but a distanced observer. While he succumbed to these modern lusts himself, he also sought to understand them theoretically and shape them practically. This resulted in a kind of tension between pleasure and discipline that was not entirely unusual for a certain type of intellectual in the twentieth century.

It strikes one that Borneman's opinion of himself, one shared by friends and acquaintances but also the public, was of a sensual person, a hedonist who knew how to enjoy the pleasures of life.

And this despite repeated claims of working fourteen to sixteen hours a day, without taking time off on the weekends or for vacations. This self-image of an unremitting Sisyphus was contradicted by other statements and practices—tales of escapades in the bars of London, Paris, and Frankfurt or the handmade leather suitcase with room for two bottles (whiskey and water) and two glasses that was a constant companion in his later years, not to mention the frank accounts of his active sex life and his close relationships with jazz and film stars. In and of themselves, the topics that garnered Borneman's attention were forms of sensory perception specific to twentieth-century modernity. Here modernity is intended in the sense of a “high modernity” as Ulrich Herbert has periodized it, beginning in the last third of the nineteenth century and ending around 1990—a period that coincides almost exactly with the heyday of film, jazz, and the ideal of sexual liberation.<sup>1</sup>

Just like politics or economics, desires and the senses that provide the physiological bases for them have a history. It is not only the ways in which people see, hear, smell, taste, and touch—the “sensory mentality” (Martin Jay)—that have changed

over time, but also the interpretation of these senses.<sup>2</sup> The battles fought time and again over these sensory mentalities provide insight into contemporaries' self-images and ideals. Jazz, film, and the sexual revolution may be highly disparate topics, but they do share one thing in common: each represents a specific form of the production of sensuality and sensory perception in the twentieth century. In addition to new fundamental lines of development in society and politics (industrialization, urbanization, rationalization, and individualization), modernity also generated new forms of art that reflected these transformations. The modern novel, modern painting, and photography dealt with the changing times differently than their predecessors; they were more fragmented, more abstract, and closer to everyday life. Some forms of art, such as records, talking films, radio, and television, first emerged during the modern era thanks to new technical discoveries, and came to play a key role in modern society's self-perception. As technical media, they not only changed the auditory and visual landscapes of the twentieth century, they changed sensory perceptions. Two of Borneman's central interests, namely jazz and film, were seen as typical expressions of modernity, ways of perceiving and processing that were well suited to the societal and political changes underway and held the power to alter emotions. Borneman's early involvement with both jazz and film meant he played a role in their development.

In the world of music, jazz figured as one of the most prominent forms of artistic expression in the twentieth century. Although perceived from an early point on as "modern music," according to Ingrid Monson it was not until after World War I that jazz became the "most complex and interesting musical language of the 20th century."<sup>3</sup> For historian and jazz aficionado Eric Hobsbawm, jazz was the most noteworthy cultural phenomenon of the century because it reflected the transformation of society in a comprehensive way, not simply in terms of musical preferences, but also in terms of "race" and class relations, economics, and politics.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, jazz witnessed a struggle over its interpretation that oscillated between the poles of art and popular culture, a debate that played out in similar fashion in film. While individual people could also listen to jazz, its interpretation was primarily a collective act; the level of bodily expression appropriate to the music, for example, was one disputed aspect.

Within the Western tradition, sight has been the most important sense for helping people to conceptualize their world. While photographs were upheld over and against painting as laying greater claim to authenticity, from the end of the nineteenth century on it was the moving images presented in film that gave a stronger impression of reality. At the same time, film became an art form as well as an ideal medium for entertainment via fictive stories, in turn calling into question the postulate of "the victory of the rational eye in modernity."<sup>5</sup> The tension between the pretension of representing reality and the narration of made-up stories played a significant role in the history of film, although a handful of astute observers recognized the constructed nature of documentaries early on as well. At first on the big screen and then later

on televisions all over the world, film was the most significant visual media of high modernity.

The sense of touch—often considered to be less important—experienced a renaissance in the twentieth century. After Sigmund Freud, sexuality was no longer viewed simply as a driving force behind human behavior, but also the creation of culture, by way of sublimation. This stood in opposition to an understanding of sexuality often advanced by the state and the church that focused on the dangers of intimate touching and called for the suppression of the sexual drives. Reform movements in the Weimar Republic that had taken aim at sexual liberation and were cut short by National Socialism ultimately experienced a revival in West Germany after the war in the late 1950s. The pill, commercialization, mediatization, and the idea of the “sexual revolution” as espoused by the counterculture of the sixty-eighters in Germany eroded traditional norms and increased tolerance for all kinds of inclinations and practices, while also setting new boundaries for sexual liberation.

It is therefore all the more interesting and telling that Ernest Borneman should of all things select jazz, film, and sexuality as subjects for intensive research and analysis. He was deeply rooted in the sensory world of the twentieth century, which he sought both to understand and mold from a specific perspective. It must also be borne in mind that these disparate fields hardly conflicted with one another, just as Borneman’s relentless work habits somehow harmonized with a hedonistic disposition. For this reason, it seemed to make sense to approach a biography of Ernest Borneman from the perspective of the senses, which were not only a source of attraction for Borneman, but also opened up paths to insight and changing the world. This book therefore looks at Borneman’s interpretations of jazz, film, and sexuality, how he positioned himself vis-à-vis competing interpretations, and the extent to which he influenced his contemporaries in their own thinking on these subjects. Borneman is not treated exclusively in terms of his self-will, then; his biography also functions as a way of exploring a world of perceptions and emotions that in recent years has piqued the interest of German historiography, not least regarding the history of images, sounds, and bodies. Such an approach means Borneman’s biography cannot be reconstructed in consistently linear fashion even if the book does follow a basic chronology, and while any number of biographical ramifications do appear within this context, it goes without saying they should not be viewed from this one perspective.

By the same token, in what follows, “modernity” is dealt with as a social and aesthetic but also political concept, in which the idea of democratization played a significant role. As a Marxist, Borneman strove for equality not only in the sense of representative democracy but in every aspect of society, in particular in social life. This was quite clear from his programmatic goals while involved with the National Film Board of Canada and his work as a jazz critic, but also from his efforts as a sexologist and gender researcher, where he lent emphatic support to the cause of women’s emancipation—to the intermittent dismay of those he championed. At the same time, Borneman’s appreciation for precursors to modernity gave him a broader

frame of reference and sense of orientation. In a letter to his then girlfriend and future wife Eva, for example, Borneman drew similarities between their mutual sources of inspiration, “odd as that collection must appear to outsiders. Joyce-Hemingway-Blues-Elizabethan folksongs-medieval love lyrics-Büchner-Brecht-de Coster—it’s really one line of affinity.”<sup>6</sup>

All of this cannot be read one-dimensionally as one chapter in the story of progress, as Borneman’s work on the place of jazz in African American culture and his sex research both make clear. The African American experience—slavery, racial segregation, exploitation, and political oppression—revealed the dark side of modernity, as did the struggle against exclusion based on ethnic criteria, one that also took place at an aesthetic level. In the realm of sexuality too, a special “dialectic of sexual enlightenment,” as sexologist Sophinette Becker has deemed it, justified “sexual liberation” as an ideal, but one whose absolute quality also—against Borneman’s will and to his great dismay—ensured its failure.<sup>7</sup>

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There is no particular egotism involved in keeping materials that bear witness to your own life such as letters, memorabilia, or one’s own writing. Borneman was a collector when it came to his work, but also to his private life. From the very beginning, he kept everything he either produced himself or that concerned him. That was not all, however. He routinely made carbon copies of his own letters to other people, which means that the correspondence from both sides—and not just the letters that he received—were kept in his archives. What’s more, he would sometimes ask recipients to return a handwritten letter if he thought that its contents were particularly valuable and something he wanted to use again. His estate includes letters to Eva, his wife (which he kept after her death), but also letters to his parents, which he must have asked to have back after the war. He sorted everything according to type—letters filed by correspondent in alphabetical order—and stored everything in file folders for easy access. Quite clearly, this was the work not simply of a manic encyclopedist, but of a giant ego. Moreover, as a freelancer, Borneman was his own office. He did not have a secretary, so he had to make sure that he could find the materials that he needed quickly, especially professional correspondence and manuscripts. After his death, even with his large collection of materials on jazz already stored in the archive of the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Arts, AdK), seventy large moving boxes of additional files still went to Berlin, not counting his books. Despite the files’ internal organization, this is a tremendous amount of material that is difficult to assess, especially since it has only been sorted roughly, with the exception of the sources on jazz.<sup>8</sup> It has all yet to be cataloged properly in detail. I have sifted through the majority of these sources and consulted further archives in Europe and North America where Borneman left traces, partially in order to fill in gaps (despite the great mass of materials), but more importantly to broaden the range of sources and

better reconstruct how he was seen by those around him. Similarly, the collection of Borneman's personal papers contains only a small portion of his many publications, another gap that cannot be filled by his estate alone. This owes in part to the fact that Borneman's enormous library, including his own books and copies of his articles that were published in edited volumes and journal issues, were given to the Chamber of Labor (Arbeiterkammer) in Vienna, where they were not kept as a separate collection but rather incorporated into the library's general collection. Although manuscripts in different version can be found within Borneman's collection at the archives, the publications themselves had to be located separately because the manuscripts were not always sufficient. Thus despite the overwhelming amount of materials, neither the files nor the following account can claim to be complete; a more systematic and targeted analysis of various aspects can only be brought about once the archives are organized and cataloged. Therefore, although a detailed reconstruction of his life may be possible in parts, this biography can only offer an incomplete picture.<sup>9</sup>

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## Notes

1. Herbert, *Geschichte Deutschlands im 20. Jahrhundert*.
2. Jütte, *Geschichte der Sinne*; Classen, “The Senses”; Smith, *Sensory History*; Jay, “In the Realm of the Senses.” See for instance, Morat, “Die Stadt und die Sinne.”
3. Monson, *Saying Something*, 19.
4. Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene*, 1.
5. Smith, *Sensory History*, 21.
6. Ernest to Eva, 13 March 1942.
7. Becker, “Pädophilie zwischen Dämonisierung und Verharmlosung.”
8. The sources mentioned in the endnotes can be found in this collection (AdK) unless otherwise noted. All of the sources that are not from Borneman’s papers in the archive of the Akademie der Künste are identified by an archival abbreviation and corresponding file numbers.
9. Since almost all of Borneman’s private correspondence between 1933 and 1960 was written in English, many of the quotes used in this book were originally in English. They were translated by the author into German for the original German edition of this book in order to improve readability but have been faithfully restored to the original English for this translation.