History, Art and Shame in von Donnersmarck's *The Lives of Others*

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Abstract. Commentary on the successful directing and scriptwriting debut of Florian von Donnersmarck, *The Lives of Others*, tends to divide into those faulting the film for its lack of historical accuracy and those praising its artistry and conciliatory symbolic function after the reunification of the GDR and BRD. This essay argues that even when we grant the film's artistic premise that music can convert the socialist revolutionary into a peaceful liberal, suspending the demand for realism, the politics intrinsic to the film still leads to a problematic conclusion. The stern Stasi officer in charge of the surveillance of a playwright and his actress partner comes to play the part of a selfless savior, while the victimized actress becomes a betrayer. Her shame however, is not shared by the playwright, Dreyman, and the Stasi officer, Wiesler, who never meet eye to eye but instead become linked in a mutual gratitude centering on the book dedicated to Wiesler, written years later when Dreyman learns of the other's having subversively protected him from imprisonment. Despite superb acting and directing, dependence on such tenuous character development makes the harmonious conclusion of the film ring hollow and implies the need for more serious challenges to German reunification.
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Every step you take
I'll be watching you . . .
Oh, can't you see
You belong to me

The Police

We are accustomed to saying that beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, and we could easily expand that point by unpacking its figurative meaning, stating more prosaically that an indefinite range of beliefs, values, sentiments and sensations is often ascribed by a spectator, reader, or listener to the text *an sich*. Take the epigraph above, for example. Even in this brief quotation from a song by *The Police*, it is fairly clear that the watching referred to is of an obtrusive sort. Inattentive lovers of popular music not given to close reading, however, may take the song to express the devotion of an ardent lover rather than the jealousy of a possessive psychopath. Nevertheless, the superficial reading which comfortably reflects itself in selected parts of the text is much to my purpose in the present context. In *The Lives of Others* (2006), the highly acclaimed German film that received several prestigious international awards a decade ago, the watching of others by the police changes

from surveillance to protective concern. In this film, aggressive watching with the aim of political control gradually becomes transformed into a virtual means of redemption, a selfless responsibility for the other. To explore this reversal, let us first briefly consider the existential experience of the look – looking at others and being looked at.

Stare long enough into the eyes of a dog who does not know you, and he will begin to bark. Many animals, human beings among them, experience the stare as threatening aggression. But, unlike other animals, human beings can feel shame at being exposed to an unwavering look, a look which threatens the private self that is only shared in deeply trusting relationships. For the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, hell was other people, the gaze of others in a room that was never dark, a place of no exit in which no one could close their eyes. On a broad historical scale, it was not long ago that the punishment of public shaming was abolished in Europe; readers of English literature may recall, for example, the laughing stock in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. While this practice no longer exists in modern society, the expression "to be a laughing stock" persists as do, obviously, situations which provoke shame. But it is not just the exposure of guilt that elicits feelings of shame, nor even the violation of one's integrity, or being personal and vulnerable without receiving a reciprocal confidence. It is an anxious concern with the self, the feeling that the other has taken possession of us and that we have lost something of ourselves past control and recovery. Yet I would maintain that even if one cannot escape from this stark existentialist predicament, one may well spontaneously and without philosophical pretensions object to the bleakness of Sartre's vision. I believe he only got it half right: heaven, also, is other people. Giving and receiving may well outweigh the human cost of living, if it is at all possible to speak of the inestimable in such comparative terms. At any rate, a film like *The Lives of Others* contains both existentialist heaven and hell, making the line "I'll be watching you" both a threat and a promise. Before the face of the other, we may experience not only shame but unconditional responsibility. Acknowledgment of this responsibility can take away our shame, but the attempt also to assume responsibility for others, as we shall see, results in a problem highly resistant to analysis.

How then, is the nature of watching portrayed within *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006), a film that focuses on surveillance in a totalitarian political system, but in which the plot turns on a pure ethical act? What feelings does looking evoke when it is one-way, a spying on others who remain unaware of the relentless, invisible gaze that violates every nook and cranny of their private life? It would seem that this non-reciprocal relation would potentially put the shame only on the dominant, spying side; clearly, it could not affect those unaware of being watched, while on the contrary, the surveillance agents could under certain circumstances lose their detachment, shocked into seeing themselves as exploiters, or drawn into relations of identification. Both possibilities occur in *The Lives of Others*. The agent who changes sides initially reacts, not to the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR, German Democratic Republic) dictatorship, but to the corruption of his superiors, who use their positions of status and power in the pursuit of their own selfish goals.

At the same time, his fundamental change of heart comes also from empathy with the couple whose lives are so different from his, and who introduce him to the world of art and beauty. As Hauptmann Wiesler continues to subvert the orders of his superiors, he becomes increasingly active in defending the playwright and actress under surveillance and protecting them from exploitation. Conversely, as I will show, shame comes to be attached to the surveilled rather than those conducting the surveillance.[1] While the oppressed remain vulnerable and relatively weak, the innate goodness and unselfish dissidence in the transformed oppressor remain the strongest forces of change.

On the one hand, *The Lives of Others* is in many ways a realistic portrayal of the East German Staatspolizei, the security police generally called Stasi, during the years before the Berlin wall was brought down and subsequently the German Democratic Republic itself. On the other hand, the central surveillance situation around which the dramatic plot is played out is anything but representative of actual surveillance practices, ultimately giving us a picture of resistance that is remarkable for its apolitical singularity. The story that seems to open primarily with a political theme becomes a tragic love story: the heroic resistance to surveillance turns out to be based on the awakening of ethical impulses in the surveillance agent himself, acting subversively, yes, even according to Christian precepts. His actions are performed without regard for any other reward than the prevention of the exploitation of the surveilled couple by his corrupt superiors and his own sense of justice. Inspired by the beauty of music played by the playwright Dreyman, Captain Wiesler undergoes something like a conversion. It is as if the autonomous experience of beauty opens up an unconditional ethical stance, a pure ethical act performed in empathy with the other and without thought of either reward or the avoidance of personal suffering. It is the triumph not only of the good but also of the humble.

Those who do not think this sounds like the description of a popular culture item would not be entirely wrong, if the frame of reference is a comprehensive international list of popular films, or even of popular films in Germany, but *The Lives of Others* does in fact make the cut. On the IMDb list of top-grossing films in Germany it occupies the rank 260 out of 260! Still, that includes all films screened in Germany, and few domestic films make the cut at all. The international box office results are good for a German (or indeed European) film, while the international critical reception was enthusiastic. Just to name some major examples: Best Foreign Language Film, the Academy of Awards; Best Foreign Language Film, British Academy of Film Awards; best in seven different categories including Best Film, German Film Awards. The most spectacular recognition is perhaps its second place among the best films in European culture on the Europe List, the largest survey of its kind. Seven countries placed *The Lives of Others* first. Among German language

[1]In "Ashamed of Who I Am: Levinas and Diasporic Subjectivity in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*," Zlatan Filipovic's discussion of Levinas' ethics of shame has helped me understand shame in political terms, as Filipovic also examines the context of a post-colonial Other applicable to the colonization of consciousness by the Stasi in the former German Democratic Republic.

films *The Lives of Others* was ranked number 6 on the list of "Top 40 German language films in 2006 – Cineuropa" (23/02/2007, Web.) and first among "Top-US-Grossing German-Language Feature Films Released in 2006." On the list of "All-time box office hits of German-language films in the US", it was ranked just behind *Das Boot*, a World War II submarine thriller which was made twenty-five years earlier. In sum, *Das Leben der anderen* was a great success with German and European movie-goers, a spectacular success in the US within its national category. Some commentators regard the film as being tailor-made for Hollywood entertainment standards, and one could speculate that this is reflected in its US popularity, not to mention the Oscar it received as Best Foreign Language Picture of the year.

Nevertheless, the film has not been spared negative criticism; one could in fact say it has been severely criticized for its lack of historical inauthenticity, despite promotional statements to the contrary, to the same degree that it has been praised to the skies. Some commentators have criticized *The Lives of Others* for offering a sentimental and simplified resolution of the political theme. Writing for the American democratic socialist periodical *In These Times*, Slavoj Žižek is one who takes this position, stating about the emphasis on sexual coercion that "[i]n this way, the horror that was inscribed into the very structure of the East German system is relegated to a mere personal whim." Žižek also comments on a scene where "a dissident directly and aggressively confronts the culture minister, without consequences. If such a thing was possible, as is assumed in the film, was the regime really so terrible?" Also reviewing the film in May of 2007 (*The Guardian*), Anna Funder, a specialist on Stasi history and author of *Stasiland*, challenges the historical accuracy of *The Lives of Others*:

> No Stasi man ever tried to save his victims, because it was impossible. (We'd know if one had, because the files are so comprehensive.) Unlike Wiesler, who runs a nearly solo surveillance operation and can withhold the results from his superior, totalitarian systems rely on thoroughgoing internal surveillance (terror) and division of tasks. The film doesn't accurately portray the way totalitarian systems work, because it needs to leave room for its hero to act humanely (something such systems are designed to prevent). . . . People were horrified to discover what had happened, again, in their country; what human beings were capable of. And they were numbed by shame.
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> Now, it's a different story. Groups of ex-Stasi are becoming increasingly belligerent. They write articles and books, and conduct lawsuits against people who speak out against them, including against the German publisher of *Stasiland* [the reviewer's own book, *my comment*] (page 84, containing allegations about the activities of ex-Stasi in the 1990s, has had to be deleted from new editions).

Critics who have praised the film have often taken a different point of departure for their assessment, arguing that the film should not be considered in solely realist terms, but as a work of art that reflects on the power of art to change our lives. Despite the obvious historical setting, it should be clear that the portrayal of Stasi security police does not remain in the foreground. Subject to the artistic theme, however, history reenters the film itself as event, symbolizing the reconciliation of

East and West and the reunification of Germany. The shame of the collapsed political system of the DDR is washed away by a relationship in which the dynamics of personal sacrifice and artistic mediation take the place of watching and direct interaction. Thus my point of departure in interpreting the film is its major premise: that art can have a transformative effect, humanizing the beholder so as to prevent the use of revolutionary or political violence. By analyzing how the plot unfolds on this basis, however, I will demonstrate how the political aspects of the film are not limited to questions of history and its representation, but primarily concern the construction of a hypothetical, alternative form of history. Finally, I will argue that though *The Lives of Others* is successful as a cinematic work of art, its aim of erasing shame is achieved at the price of displacement and negation – not a true resolution.

The director and script writer Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck recounts how the idea for the film came to him:

> Then suddenly something made me think of what I had once read in [Maxim] Gorky, namely that Lenin had said about [Beethoven's piano sonata] the "Appassionata" that he was not able to listen to if often, because if he did he would say 'loving nonsensical things and pat people's heads" although he really had "to bash them in, without any sympathy bash them in", to complete his revolution. (my trans.)[2]

This is what Donnersmarck thinks of as he listens to the "Moonlight Sonata" by Beethoven, at a time when he had to write the first of fourteen scripts for a course on film directing. Many critics cite this inspiration and comment on its relevance for the film. What has not received as much attention from critics, however, is Donnersmarck's elaboration of this statement. He goes on to reflect:

> Some music simply compels one to place the human above the ideological, feeling above principles, love above strictness. I asked myself what might happen if one had been able to force a Lenin to listen to the "Appassionata." If he had been able to believe that he had to listen to the Appassionata" *for* the revolutionary cause. (my trans.)[3]

Donnersmarck does not follow the logic of Lenin's connection between listening to the Sonata and losing revolutionary capability, but imagines another course for revolutionary change taken by the person forced to listen, one that would make primary the "human", "feeling," and "love." Presumably Donnersmarck's point is that if Lenin or someone like him could be made to listen to a beautiful piece of music then we might have, not just the avoidance of violence, but a positive force

[2] "Da plötzlich kam mir etwas in den Sinn, was ich einmal bei Gorki gelesen hatte, das nämlich Lenin über die 'Appassionata' gesagt habe, das er sie nicht oft hören könne, weil er sonst 'liebevolle Dummheiten sagen, und die Menschen die Köpfe streicheln' wolle auf die er doch 'einschlagen, mitleidslos einschlagen' müsse, um seine Revolution zu Ende zu bringen" (Donnersmarck, "'Appassionata' 10).

[3] "Manche Musik zwingt einfach dazu, die Menschliche über die Ideologie zu stellen, das Gefühl über die Prinzipien, die Liebe über die Strenge. Ich fragte mich, was wohl geschehen wäre, wenn man einen Lenin hätte *zwingen* können, die "Appassionata" zu hören. Wenn her hätte glauben können, die 'Appassionata' *für* die revolutionäre Sache hören zu *müssen*" (10).

for change. The relevance of such speculation for the film that was to be the outcome of his reverie is that Wiesler, whose job it is secretly to listen to others, including whatever music they might be playing, is in just such a compulsory situation, and accordingly becomes another sort of revolutionary.

In line with this political dream I will not assess the film in terms of the astuteness of its political analysis and dramatization, nor will I simply claim that the film should only be considered as a work of art without political interests. It is precisely the combination of these that is central: the power of art is tested against the background of totalitarian politics. While not disagreeing with critics who, on the basis of political criteria point to improbable aspects of characterization and action, I maintain that the reading taking Lenin's statement about Beethoven's "Appassionata" as a given can accept these ostensible faults as having a positive function, since they provide a context that enhances the dramatization of ethical and aesthetic themes. What I will add to this view, however, is that the aesthetic experience has not only ethical implications in general, but specifically Christian ones. Furthermore, I will argue that when the film in its closing scenes returns to what appears to be realist historical representation, it actually engages in an ideological, symbolic act of national reconciliation on problematic grounds. This symbolism has a Christian basis, but not in any orthodox sense: it is rather that the Christian theme of selfless action and sacrifice as represented by Hauptmann Wiesler is exploited in order to support the fantasy of conversion by aesthetic means. In this sense, it would be more accurate to say that the resolution was based on an idealized fiction rather than on religious belief, more concerned with figural and rhetorical effects than with spiritual truth. But whatever the case, the good deeds that Wiesler unselfishly and covertly performs address the issue of shame in watching or being watched. As we shall see, even when Wiesler does get his recognition many years after the surveillance is terminated, his identity is not exposed, nor does he meet the donor of his tribute face to face.

Wiesler's actions clearly go beyond non-cooperation with the corruption of his superiors. When he keeps secret the playwright's production of an illegal expose of the DDR suicide rate for a major West Berlin magazine, he takes a risk that will prove ruinous for his career. Suspected of having concealed the evidence of the playwright's authorship of this article, he is demoted to steaming open letters in preparation for censor inspection. We may well ask, therefore, how a ruthlessly dedicated interrogator could undergo such radical and rapid development, acting so unselfishly and assuming such a great risk. It is possible only if one subscribes to the premise that art, in this case music, is powerfully enlightening and humanizing. Even those who do not consciously hold that view, however, may very well succumb to scriptwriter and director Donnersmarck's argument, that is to say, the excellence of the film's directing and acting, including the empathy created with its major characters. So let us examine the film in more detail to see how its relative improbability of character development and plotting from a realist perspective are neutralized, focusing on the classical and humanist concepts of beauty, truth and morality.

The film at first presents itself as realistic focusing on the DDR police state, with text against a black background stating how many police were employed in controlling the population and how many informers, concluding that the explicit ambition of the STASI was to "know everything." The action then begins with a prisoner being brought to an interrogation room, where we see one of the main characters doing what he knows best: breaking down a subject so that he will testify against others, giving up names of those involved in an escape to the West. The next scene shows the same officer – Hauptmann Wiesler – giving a lecture to a group of new recruits, playing back a sound tape at just the moment when the accused breaks down, after forty hours of interrogation. When a student remarks that this is inhuman, Wiesler puts a mark on the class list next to the student's name and explains that the concern is not with humanity when you are defending socialism against its enemies.

The scenes that follow are not exactly inconsistent with this opening, but they do stray away from it. The exception is of course the surveillance that is set up to enable, if anything suspicious can be detected or fabricated, the arrest of the playwright whose beautiful companion, a very popular actress, is the desired object of a powerful minister. But the person in charge of the surveillance, the same that we saw ruthlessly conducting an interrogation, soon develops empathy with the couple under surveillance and eventually comes to take their side against the corrupt minister. In effect, he comes to confirm the comment of the student he earlier corrected; he now takes a humane attitude. The culmination of this conversion comes when Wiesler listens in on Dreyman playing a piano sonata, expressing musically his grief after having just been told that a friend, another playwright, has committed suicide. He plays this piece from the sheet music that the same friend gave him not long before, "Die Sonate vom Guten Menschen" [The Sonata of the Good Person]. Again the key word human comes up, in the sense of humane and empathetic, though it is not a romantic piece of music, like the Beethoven sonata that gave Donnersmarck the central idea and inspiration for the film. Yet as a modernist kind of elegy it is such a powerful work that Dreyman recalls Lenin's comment on the Appassionata, and he adds, "How could anyone who listens to this piece, I mean really listens, be a bad person (ein schlechter Mensch sein)?" The value system expressed here is that of classical humanism, and the sonata's title may also be translated as "The Sonata of the Good Human Being."

While Dreyman plays, Wiesler's face, through still relatively stiff, shows intense emotion and total concentration on the music. The depth of his response is shown in the ensuing plot, which confirms the notion that art can turn a revolutionary in the service of the proletariat around. The values of beauty and goodness are dramatically invoked in this context, and in the scenes that follow, a third and classical virtue comes into view, namely seeking the truth. Dreyman sets out to protest against the repressiveness of the regime by telling the truth of the high suicide rate in the German Democratic Republic, since many years officially suppressed. He wakes up to the realities of oppression following the suicide of his playwright friend Jerska, which he could have anticipated had he not been so naively

and defensively optimistic. Three times Jerska had made statements about not having anything left in life, even alluding to a happy afterlife in which he wished to be as adaptable as Dreyman. Dreyman now rids himself of his comfortable neutrality, but remains naïve in not being able to consider himself an object of surveillance. His resistance would not have been possible without the subversive actions of Wiesler, who falsifies the surveillance records.

The nature of Wiesler's aesthetic epiphany and its consequences can be illustrated by a brief comparison to a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, "Archaischer Torso Apollos," here quoted in part: "his torso, like a lamp, still glows / with his gaze which, although turned down low, / lingers and shines . . . for there's not one spot / that doesn't see you. You must change your lif. (trans. H. Landman). Like the absent eyes of the headless sculpture in Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo", what Wiesler hears and sees in Dreyman's apartment, without himself being present there, is by means of an inversion made into something that addresses him, and forces him to change. The power of the art object makes the seer into the seen; by means of its absence to itself, it makes the beholder truthfully present to himself. The difference between the speaker of Rilke's poem and Wiesler, however, is not only that one testifies to the compelling power of classical art, but also that Wiesler is entirely lacking in a humanistic education, lacking in *Bildung*. But by contrast to his assistant during the first part of the surveillance, a technician without sensibility, Wiesler emerges as a reflective and introspective person. He seems to be naturally inclined to the study of human nature, even if this inclination as we first meet the character is used for manipulative purposes and in violation of human rights. Putting it this way, we can perhaps understand why many commentators have found him quite unlike actual Stasi officers.[4]

As I have stated earlier, the focus of the film, despite its realist style in the depiction of the police state of the DDR, is focused not only on the transformative power of the arts, but on love, or empathy, which is one way in which we can interpret the phrase "lives of others": the commandment to care for others, to love one's neighbor. This is what is implied in the phrase good person. When this phrase is used in the present context, another, quite different, allusion presents itself: *The Good Person of Szezuan*. This is one of the more well-known plays by Bertolt Brecht, who was director of the national theater in East Berlin. Yet this allusion is also qualified. As Wiesler at one time enters the apartment, he touches the surveilled couple's bed almost reverently, as if in communion with it, and when he leaves takes with him a book of poems by Brecht. On his return home, he promptly starts reading it while lying on his couch, as a voice-over shares some lines of lyrical poetry with the audience. The effect is quite odd, since it both evokes, or even confirms, the allusion to Brecht's play and qualifies it by the quotation from an earlier work of quite a different character.

The values I have discussed in the context of Wiesler's conversion, and his taking sides with the surveilled, are therefore supported by two allusions, one of which is

[4] See Jens Gieseke's "Stasi Goes to Hollywood."

ironic – the allusion to the just mentioned *The Good Person of Szezuan*. The theme of this play is the defeat of goodness by social injustice, the impossibility of innate good to survive in a society in which economic structures require selfish immorality. No matter how the protagonist to which Brecht's title refers strives to be good, her associations with others implicate her in problematic situations. By necessity cooperating with the norms of local commerce, and by extension capitalist society, she is forced to act in ways that compromise her ethical resolve. By contrast, Wiesler remains good in socialist society, opposing those who are corrupted by power. Each author places the test of the good character in a society whose ideology he does not support, while Donnersmarck's protagonist succeeds in remaining uncorrupted. But the issue for Donnersmarck is not social ideology, whether of capitalism or communism; rather, it is individual values and character. The allusion to *The Good Person of Szezuan* is therefore ironic, since the protagonist of *The Lives of Others* succeeds in acting morally, and in reaction to the kind of society which Brecht ostensibly supports.

The second allusion of "the good person" is to the Christian whose ethical commitment is ideally unconditional. If one accepts the premise of the film derived from the quotation attributed to Lenin, Wiesler's development from the dispassionate interrogator to an empathic human being acquires dramatic plausibility within the secret space of surveillance. The action that is performed without the expectation of a reward for others is based in a conviction that one is doing the right thing because of its intrinsic value, without need for the acknowledgement of others. Thus the title *The Lives of Others* acquires a new meaning. The others are those that good Christians should love as themselves or even place before themselves. Christian symbolism is here so subtle, however, that we cannot say for certain whether it is intentional. It may be just the unconscious expression of someone raised in a Christian environment. We know that Donnersmarck was raised a Catholic, but it is not necessary to base the argument on this circumstance, except to note that the possibility of a covert Christian encoding exists. Whatever explanations we devise for their presence in the film, Christian ethics are one basis for Wiesler's development into a good person, an anti-revolutionary in Lenin's sense.

The position of surveillance intended for exploitation instead becomes a locus for benevolent intervention, a place where privileged information in support and protection of others can be gathered. Only through listening in can Wiesler know where the typewriter is to be found that will constitute the evidence of Dreyman's authorship of the Spiegel article on DDR suicide. But it is here that the issue of shame arises, this time irremediably and with fatal consequences. Christa-Maria enters the room as Wiesler's superior is about to remove the floor paneling that conceals the hiding place of the typewriter. When she he meets her husband's gaze, in just a moment the secret of her betrayal of him – her guilt in having aided the Stasi and her shame – are registered in her face as she stands exposed before the eyes of her partner. He sees her guilt, and she sees that he sees, and we see her shame. She rushes away in desperation, not knowing that Wiesler has already

removed the typewriter, and when she dies she just misses his telling her about how she was actually safe from detection. Wiesler is the first to approach her in the middle of the street, where she has run out in front of a truck. He has just begun to tell her that he has already removed the typewriter, but stops at the exact moment of her death, in the middle of that crucial word: "Schreib . . ". Her attention is interrupted once again before the typewriter becomes present to her, whether as object or as verbal sign. Under the oppression that the state of the DDR exacts of her, even on her body, she remains in an artificial world, whether of drugs or, in a similar sense, of theater.

It is tragic that she dies, so dependent on drugs so as to betray the person closest to her. And it is ironic that she implicitly should become added to the DDR suicide statistics that Dreyman has exposed. But Christa-Maria's suicide is also a reminder that the high value of art can be a displacement from life, created in sacrifice. Both Dreyman and Wiesler encourage her to take a stand based on their judgment that she is not just a good actress, but a great artist. In the bar where Christa meets Wiesler by coincidence after the scene in which Dreyman has appealed to her not to go to her enforced sexual rendezvous with the minister, Wiesler repeats Dreyman's words, saying, "You are a great artist" (Sie sind eine grosse Künstlerin), as if he were another embodiment of her companion. Wiesler tells her that her audience needs her, and she replies that he is a good human being ("ein guter Mensch").

With Christa-Maria's suicide, the tragedy is complete, and the film could have ended here. We would then have a picture of the former DDR as a state bent on the suffocation of all of its freethinking subjects, with all resistance systematically and ruthlessly crushed, whether overtly for violations of unjust laws or covertly for private exploitation. But this tragedy is considerably ameliorated by the epilogue which then follows. The film reenters the history to which it referred in the opening frames, with their statistics on DDR surveillance and the number of informants participating with the government's suppression of all dissent. It is a paradoxical return to history from the heights of aestheticism and ethics, activated by a form of *deus ex machina*. Only because Dreyman happens to encounter the man who forced himself sexually on his companion, the man who destroyed his life in ordering the surveillance of his apartment, is he able to discover the equipment which remains installed in his home. The scene in which Dreyman rips out microphones and cables all over his apartment echoes the concluding scene from a path-breaking film about surveillance from 1974, *The Conversation* (directed by Francis Ford Coppola and starring Gene Hackman) but, interestingly enough, with two major exceptions. While one protagonist cannot confidently decode the messages he has intercepted, and, fearing that he is himself subject to electronic surveillance, demolishes his apartment in an unsuccessful search for surveillance devices, in Donnersmarck's film Dreyman's discovery of eaves-dropping equipment eventually leads to an elaborate expression of gratitude – a book dedicated to Wiesler. By means of researching the old Stasi archives that have been made available as historical documentation, Dreyman is able to read the story to which the film's audience has already been a witness, and in which Wiesler played a heroic part.

The key element which has unlocked Wiesler's identity from behind its agent code is a red finger print which appears next to the closing entry in the final report ledger. The red smudge that Dreyman recognizes as coming from the red ribbon of the typewriter used for the Spiegel article confirms for him that the Stasi captain has falsified the record to protect him, and that he was the one who had removed the typewriter. The smudge from the red ribbon appears like a blood fingerprint next to Wiesler's code name, signifying not only his sacrifice but that of all Stasi victims, not only the suicides Dreyman writes about but also the most recent: it is the blood of Christa-Maria's betrayal and death.

When Dreyman learns from the minister that his apartment has been bugged, two years have already passed since the time of the first epilogue scene, which in its turn takes place four years and seven months after the tragic ending of the surveillance drama. In this scene we learn that the wall has been opened (der Mauer is offen"). A series of quick cuts establishes the significance of this historic event for Wiesler. After Christa's death and the termination of the surveillance, we move from the scene where the suspected Wiesler has just been informed of his demotion, to a brief cut of the newspaper next to him in the passenger seat of his car. On the first page is photo of Gorbachov, the newly elected chairman of the Soviet Communist party. Finally, there is then a cut to the scene in which the news of the Berlin wall's opening is broadcast, leading Wiesler to calmly and silently walk away from his work desk.

The implication of these rapid shifts of setting is of course that the gradual dismantling of the repressive state apparatuses under Soviet Perestroika and Gorbachov's liberal policies has also led to the liberation of East Germany. The plot is in this instance not driven by internal principles, i.e., the motivation and actions of its characters, but by external circumstances. This is why I have called the post-partition period as portrayed in *The Lives of Others* an epilogue, or even a *deus ex machina*. Nevertheless, the epilogue carries the action of the major narrative one important step further.

This step is significant for what it does not entail. In order to bring out the significance of the plot in this context, one can imagine an alternative, as if the characters were real people choosing their own course of action. If Wiesler and Dreyman had met, they would presumably have had to confront and make explicit issues which are now subtly avoided, such as the question of how both men established their careers in, and in different ways adapted to, totalitarian socialism. The film does not provide a context for such a discussion, because the realist, historical space we have reentered in the epilogue is also the space of what one might call a supreme fiction. It is a question neither of realism nor of sentimentalism, but a rhetorical use of a Christian trope.

It is not just that the absence of contact between the two heightens the pathos and heroism of Wiesler's solitary life, or that Weyman finds in the life of the other the stuff of literature. Most important is that the lack of contact between Wiesler and Dreyman in the aftermath of the tragedy, and in the post-partition period, is the opposite of the confrontation between Christa-Maria and Dreyman, in which her

shame is fatally exposed. In the absence of a face-to-face relation, the relation between the two men is sublimated into a work of art. The shame they might have felt on meeting each other never becomes an issue. Instead, there is the transmutation of Weyman's gratitude into a novel entitled *Sonata of the Good Person*, presumably retelling the story that has just played itself out before our eyes. We may well imagine that the novel testifies to the altruistic capacity of human nature as well as to the catalytic function of art. The reward that Wiesler will reap in reading the book dedicated to him is heavenly in the sense that the book is only for him and no one else since he remains hidden, anonymous, the dedication being to his code name as Stasi agent, HGW XX/7.

"It is for me", he replies to the bookstore clerk who asks him if he wants the book gift-wrapped. The point has already been made that beauty is linked to goodness, but the point is made here with renewed emphasis as the sublime expression of gratitude. This sublimation of the human encounter and simple thank you delivers, so to speak, a treasure that has been laid up in heaven. Dreyman indirectly acknowledges by his absence the selfless ethical actions of the former Stasi agent and the true nature of his reward:

> "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal." (Matthew 6: 19-21 *New King James Version*)

The extension of the narrative into post-partition Berlin, together with the belated recognition of Wiesler, only available under the new political circumstances, establishes the analogy of the reunited Germany and a heaven where true treasures are laid up. It is a strategy of representing the relations of East and West in the spirit of ultimate reconciliation, assigning Christian virtue to the character who stands not only for innocence but more importantly for personal sacrifice, an ex-Stasi delivered from the evils of dictatorship.

The film thus combines two narratives, the narrative in which the power of art converts loyalty to dictatorship into altruistic faith, and the narrative of DDR's collapse and the implicit reunification of Germany, which functions essentially as a frame. Inserting individual experience within the larger canvas of history, the film gives the impression that there is a causal relation between the two. Viewers may well feel that it is the invincible goodness of human nature that has led to the collapse of a totalitarian state, turning even the invasive and controlling practice of surveillance into a benevolent and watchful eye. It is ostensibly the benevolent forces within the DDR which have enabled the reunification, and what could be a more significant place for the good person to receive his heavenly reward than in the pride of East German bookstores, the renowned Karl Marx Buchhandel? Even in reunified Germany, there is a favorable allusion to this conspicuous legacy of DDR culture.

With seductive artistry, the film evokes our appreciation for its elegant evasions of the more exacting demands, whether political or ethical, of the opposition to

social injustice, the commitment to human rights. And it does so by pure suggestion, together with the implicit promise that if we suspend our disbelief all shame will be washed away. From the perspective of a reunited Germany, the BRD welcomes back its estranged other half, exposing the cruelty and corruption of their secret police while removing their shame through the sacrifices of Christa Maria and Wiesler, one dead and already forgotten, the other receiving his divine reward. The last, bookstore scene of the film ends with a freeze-frame of Wiesler, glorifying him discreetly by a an upwardly angled camera and moderate close-up of his face, as his eyes open somewhat wider than before, his face lighting up with the faintest of smiles. He has just said: "It is for me", and indeed it seems to be, as we can see the symbolic dimensions in this scene more clearly on this second consideration. Perhaps the film is, as the conservative columnist William Buckley calls it, a "holy vessel of expiation", a gift to the world for the shame incurred by the complicity of East Germans in Soviet domination. It could also be a vessel of reconciliation, a symbolic gift and tribute to the unseen and quiet dissenter in the former German Democratic Republic, neutralizing the shame of personal integrity violations in a nation under surveillance.

But the complexity of savior and betrayer roles in *The Lives of Others* calls this symbolism into question if we remember the shame that ends Christa-Maria's life, and that the pathos of a savior requires a betrayer. In this case the two roles are ambiguous, and that is how the film can work its magic. The savior figure Christa betrays her companion Dreyman, while Wiesler, the Stasi betrayer of humanity, plays the part of savior. The initial roles of savior and betrayer have been reversed. Viewers who have not forgotten that exploitation by the Stasi forced the tragic suicide of Christa-Maria, whose name alludes to suffering and sacrifice, therefore, may not want to accept the gift of reconciliation. They may not want to assent to a discourse that portrays a victim of the police state as anxious and fragile, a perpetrator as courageous and selfless. Nor may these viewers want to accept reconciliation based on the former antagonist's surprising enactment of Christian charity. It would not be an unfair judgment on this great film if one were then to conclude that its moving final moment was accomplished through the displacement of shame onto the innocent and the denial of a guilt that belongs to the other. We have no testimony from the Stasi officer: has he offered genuine protection and comfort or does he conceal in his silence the same ideology as before? "Every breath you take . . . I'll be watching you:" threat or promise?

To raise this question in concluding the commentary on the filmic text is also to raise a question about artistic license and ideological resolutions which are at odds with a more strictly historical approach. Generally speaking, discussions of the film either make a case for its relative success or failure with respect to historical accuracy, or praise its artistic achievement, sometimes both. I have attempted, however, to provisionally accept the aesthetic point of departure of *The Lives of the Others*, showing how analysis of the aesthetic premise nevertheless leads back to political considerations. The implication of this conclusion is that we must be careful not to place historical and artistic issues in simple opposition to each other,

succumbing to the simplification of an either/or fallacy. There are discussions of the film that massively reject its representations of history, such as Jens Gieseke's "Stasi Goes to Hollywood," or that wholly defend its accuracy, such as that of Manfred Wilke, historical advisor to Donnersmarck, who argues that the apparently untypical actions of Wiesler can be explained with reference to the decline of the DDR in its last years of existence. More relevant to the present discussion, however, are those who analyze the film with a double perspective, arguing that discrepancies in historical accuracy are permissible in a fictional treatment that has a pragmatic value in offering adaptive or therapeutic resolutions.[5]

Yet there is a danger that such acceptance of artistic merit is enabled by one's not taking the functions of art, whatever the medium, seriously enough. By liberating art from the obligation not just of a realist style, but also faithfulness to historical events, one is apt to liberate it from a serious critique of social life as well, or conversely, from the demand to fully disclose its ideology. It needs to be recognized that art can partake in a political discourse, so that we may assess the quality of its particular mode of intervention rather than the accuracy of its descriptive representations, ascribing its inaccuracies to artistic imagination. What appears as error from the standpoint of historical research can thus be, not just a matter of aesthetic purpose or artistic license, but rather of critique or ideology that find different forms of expression.

I believe that critics who address the historicity of *The Lives of Others* tend to give too much emphasis to this issue, forgetting, or not realizing, that the transformational power of art to inspire ethical conduct is primary, though not without its political and ideological aspects. This means that Donnermarck's much noted declarations of commitment to authenticity could well be regarded as being in service of his artistic goals. In order to make a plausible case for a Stasi officer abandoning his principles and duties under the influence of the humanizing effect of aesthetic experience, a context of sufficient realism would be necessary to meet a potential charge of biased or stereotyped representation. At the same time, the numerous discrepancies that historians and direct witnesses find in Donnersmarck's representation of history suggest that some liberty had to be assumed to fulfill the

[5] For example, Mary Beth Stein praises the film for dealing seriously with the GDR past, though she finds a number of major inaccuracies. Praising the artistry of the film chiefly in the "victim-perpetrator" Wiesler, "who both reflects and observes the contradictions of life in the GDR," she concludes: "audiences may be misled to falsely conclude that "they have glimpsed into the abyss of the DDR 'as it really was' but to dismiss *Das Leben der anderen* as a "fairy tale" is to demand too much [of] a film, whose humanistic message and artistic merits are undeniable (577). Similarly, Thomas Lindenberger views the objective realism of the film as marred by some significant inaccuracies, but lauds the way it addresses the need of German citizens for a sustaining mythology (561, 563). Cheryl Dueck puts an even greater emphasis on the healing power of art, arguing that the film allows people to access a cultural trauma. While these three studies have contributed to my understanding of the film and the demands of German reunification, I am skeptical about the claim that distortions in the objective representation of social reality can be justified by corresponding gains in subjective peace of mind. Isn't this ideology pure and simple?

inspiration drawn from Lenin's concern with the anti-revolutionary effects of great music. This anecdotal source of a politicized aesthetic evidently suited the director/scriptwriter better than a more philosophical source. Cheryl Dueck, in her "The Humanization of the Stasi in *Das Leben der anderen*," draws a parallel between Friedrich Schiller's *Die Aeshetische ehrziung des Menschen* and *The Lives of Others*: "Schiller writes his letters on aesthetic education, which connect beauty and morality, in response to the French revolution" (606). In his contribution to an educational pamphlet on the film, Rüdiger Suchsland also alludes to this source and comments on its relevance for *The Lives of Others*. He finds Donnersmarck's adherence to an idealist philosophy in which art and politics are opposites to be regressive, far removed from politics:

> In constructing such a contradiction between art and politics, the film ties in with the classical aesthetics of German idealism, the aesthetically educated person as a contrary program to the raw power of the politics characteristic of the French Revolution. . . . Its real theme is not, as it is always said, the DDR or the Stasi, but rather the question, what it means to be good. (my trans.) [6]

Discussing the implication of this idealist position for the representation of DDR society and the principal characters in *The Lives of Others*, he draws the blunt conclusion: "Politisch ist der ganze Film ein Bluff" (Suchsland 35).

My method has been to avoid this art/politics dichotomy, identifying the subject of *Das Leben der anderen*, in the final analysis, not as an objective reality independent of the text, but as an immanent content, the actual problem defined by the procedures of the film itself. The content of the film as such is a relation between problem and solution, or question and answer: the struggle to eliminate the shame of seeing and being seen in the East-West relation by idealizing the principal perpetrator as a representative of all good East Germans, converting rather than confronting, and thereby idealizing the benevolent West German as well. Anna Funder, the author of *Stasiland* whom I quoted at the beginning, has quoted Donnersmarck as saying:

> "I didn't want to tell a true story as much as explore how someone might have behaved. The film is more of a basic expression of belief in humanity than an account of what actually happened." The terrible truth is that the Stasi provide no material for a "basic expression of belief in humanity". For expressions of conscience and courage, one would need to look to the resisters. It is this choice, to make a film about the change of heart of a Stasi man that turns the film, for some, into an inappropriate - if unconscious - plea for absolution of the perpetrators.

[6] "Indem der Film ein solchen Gegensatz zwischen Kunst und Politik konstruiert, knüpft er an die klassischen Aesthetik der Deutschen Idealismus an, der Aesthetische erzogene Mensch als Gegenprogramm zu den rohen Kräften von der Französischen Revolution geprägten Politik. . . . Sein eigentliches Thema ist nicht, wie es jetzt immer heiβt, die DDR oder die Stasi, sondern die Frage, was es heiβt, gut zu sein" (34-35).

The outcome, as I have attempted to demonstrate, is that the resolution achieved by the idealization of a Stasi satisfies a certain need for unity and mutual understanding, but at considerable expense. Inasmuch as the plot resolution requires the death of the aptly named Christa-Maria to enable the sublime bonding between the two men; the insertion of the surveillance drama within the narrative of political collapse; and the Christian ethics of the surveillance leader whose thoughts remain unspoken, what I have called the epilogue remains unconvincing. The deeds of the perpetrators are diminished and the victims partly blamed for their naiveté and weakness of character, perpetuating the problem and diverting viewers from the more difficult challenge of real forgiveness.

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