

Remembering the Stasi in a Fairy Tale of Redemption: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's *Das Leben der Anderen*

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REMEMBERING THE STASI IN A
FAIRY TALE OF REDEMPTION:
FLORIAN HENCKEL VON
DONNERSMARCK'S
DAS LEBEN DER ANDEREN

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Drawing on Alison Landsberg's concept of 'prosthetic memory' (2003) and Aleida Assmann's 'Modus des emotionalen Nacherlebens' (2006), this article examines von Donnersmarck's début feature Das Leben der Anderen in relation to the surge of recent films about the Nazi past and the Holocaust. The award-winning Stasi-film uses similar narrative paradigms to Schindler's List and The Pianist, thereby invoking the association between Stasi and Nazi and exploiting familiar cinematic stereotypes. Like in these 'Greuelmärchen' (Bathrick, 2000), historical truth is sacrificed for melodrama and suspense. Das Leben der Anderen re-imagines the burdened and traumatic memory of the Stasi as a universal tale of redemption. Unlike the East German filmmaker Frank Beyer, whose film Der Verdacht looks back in anger at the Stasi-state, the Western vantage point of Das Leben der Anderen invites its audience to look back in empathy, thus making a controversial contribution to the memory contests about Germany's second dictatorship.

When *Das Leben der Anderen*, the feature film début of the West German director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, was released in 2006 it was generally referred to as the first film about the Stasi, East Germany's infamous secret police which pervaded every aspect of people's lives in the erstwhile GDR. Set in the Orwellian year of 1984, the film tells the story of Stasi Captain Gerd Wiesler, who is put in charge of 'Operation Lazlo', the intensive round-the-clock surveillance of the successful playwright Georg Dreyman. During the course of 'Operation Lazlo', the idealistic Stasi officer changes sides: instead of collecting incriminating evidence against Dreyman, he protects him and even covers up one of his subversive activities. Dreyman's girlfriend, Christa-Maria Sieland, by contrast, crumbles under the pressure of Stasi blackmail and interrogation, betrays Dreyman and eventually commits suicide.

Das Leben der Anderen is, however, by no means the first Stasi-film, only the first one to get noticed; whereas earlier ones, made by East German filmmakers at the time of the

Wende and produced by DEFA (Deutsche Film Aktiengesellschaft), as East Germany's state-owned film production company was called, failed to reach east German audiences who were too wrapped up in the euphoria of unification to be interested in painful memories of their 'Stasiland'. Moreover, the entire restructuring of the media landscape in the former GDR, the sale of the DEFA studios in Babelsberg, large scale closures of cinemas, the dramatic price increase of cinema tickets and the overwhelming success of mainstream Hollywood films at East German box-offices meant that Stasi-films such as *Der Tangospieler* (dir. by Roland Gräf, Germany, 1991), *Der Verdacht* (dir. by Frank Beyer, Germany, 1991), *Abschied von Agnes* (dir. by Michael Gwisdeck, Germany, 1994) and the documentary *Verriegelte Zeit* (dir. by Sybille Schönemann, Germany, 1990) failed to reach their prime target audience. Meanwhile, audiences in the West who, throughout the long years of the Cold War, had by and large ignored films made on the other side of the Wall, showed even less interest in screen memories of the Stasi than their compatriots in the new federal states.

This may explain why, when *Das Leben der Anderen* garnered award after award, including the European and the German Film Awards in 2006, the Oscar in 2007 and the BAFTA in 2008, critics did not situate von Donnersmarck's film in the context of earlier screen depictions of the suffering and trauma inflicted by the East German dictatorship but either compared it with the popular *Ostalgie* comedy *Good Bye, Lenin!* (dir. by Wolfgang Becker, Germany, 2003) or situated it in the much more familiar context of films about the Third Reich and the Holocaust. Timothy Garton Ash for example suggests that the words 'Nazi' and 'Stasi' are inextricably intertwined in people's minds:

One of Germany's most singular achievements is to have associated itself so intimately in the world's imagination with the darkest evils of the two worst political systems of the most murderous century in human history. The words 'Nazi', 'SS', and 'Auschwitz' are already global synonyms for the deepest inhumanity of fascism. Now the word 'Stasi' is becoming a default global synonym for the secret police terrors of communism.¹

He argues that the contemporary memory boom on the silver screen plays a significant role in cementing 'in the world's imagination the most indelible association of Germany with evil' (Garton Ash). We need only consider which German films succeeded at the Oscars to realize that Bernd Eichinger's cynical bon mot that Hitler is Germany's best export product holds true. Nominations include *Die Brücke* (dir. by Bernhard Wicki, FRG, 1959), the East German Holocaust film *Jakob der Lügner* (dir. by Frank Beyer, GDR, 1976); while Volker Schlöndorff's *Die Blechtrommel* (FRG, 1979) was the first German film to win the Oscar for the best foreign language film in 1979; *Das Boot* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, FRG, 1981) was nominated and so was the satire about the forged Hitler diaries *Schtonk!* (dir. Helmut Dietl, Germany, 1992). More recent contenders for the prize of all prizes were *Der Untergang* (dir. by Oliver Hirschbiegel, Germany, 2004) and *Sophie Scholl — Die letzten Tage* (dir. by Marc Rothemund, Germany, 2005), while the Bernd Eichinger-produced story of Jewish émigrés in Kenya, *Nirgendwo in Afrika* (dir. by Caroline Link, Germany, 2001), won the Oscar in 2002. Maybe, in a few years' time, more Stasi-films will be added to this list, as in the popular imagination the Stasi are 'rapidly becoming a global synonym for

¹ Timothy Garton Ash, 'The Stasi on Our Minds', *The New York Review of Books*, 54:9, 31 May 2007. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20210> [accessed 13 January 2009]. Further references to this article are given after quotations in the text.

communist terror' (Garton Ash). But why the Stasi rather than the KGB, the Red Guards or the Khmer Rouge?

Because [Timothy Garton Ash proposes] the enterprise in which the Germans truly are *Weltmeister* is the cultural reproduction of their country's versions of terror. No nation has been more brilliant, more persistent, and more innovative in the investigation, communication, and representation — the re-presentation, and re-re-presentation — of its own past evils.

This article seeks to explore how *Das Leben der Anderen* resonates with these all-too-familiar depictions of Germany's tainted and traumatic past in cinema. What strategies does von Donnersmarck employ to invoke the subconscious Nazi–Stasi association which, arguably, plays an important role in the film's international success? How did he translate the bureaucratic yet sinister machinations of the Ministry of State Security and the peculiarly East German experience into a film that captured the imagination of German and international audiences alike?² Why is von Donnersmarck's debut feature, a film that speaks to all of us, whereas east German Stasi-films made by ex-DEFA directors after the *Wende*, such as *Der Verdacht* with which I shall compare *Das Leben der Anderen* in this article, by and large failed to attract an audience — and this despite being more authentic?

The Discourse of Authenticity

The issue of historical authenticity has featured prominently in the media coverage of *Das Leben der Anderen*. Numerous critics, in particular east German ones, objected to the film's improbable fairy-tale plot or identified a number of minor inaccuracies relating to the use of language and costume, while others raised ethical objections, suggesting that the film exonerates the perpetrators and trivializes the actual terror exerted by the Stasi upon the lives of thousands of people.³ These critical comments express a latent mistrust in a filmmaker from the West who appropriated East Germany's past and turned it into a box-office hit. However, the authenticity discourse is something of a red herring when it comes to explaining a film's success. First and foremost, claims to authenticity are a clever marketing strategy employed by filmmakers and producers to make their films culturally worthy and historically relevant. But ultimately films like *Schindler's List* (dir. by Steven Spielberg, USA, 1993), *Der Untergang*, *Sophie Scholl — Die letzten Tage*, *The Pianist* (dir. by Roman Polanski, France, Germany, UK, Poland, 2002) and *Das Leben der Anderen* are not historical documentaries or history lessons. They are entertainment — of a particular kind. References to extensive archival research, hitherto inaccessible records, testimonies of eyewitnesses, survivors and experts, biographical accounts of historical figures and similar sources are a strategy of cultural and historical legitimization. Thus, von Donnersmarck, who enjoyed a privileged and cosmopolitan upbringing in the West, and consequently lacks the biographical credentials that would automatically authenticate his film's narrative

² By February 2009, the film grossed \$77.4 million at the box office worldwide. (www.imdb.com). By the end of 2008, 2.8 million viewers had seen it in Germany (www.ffa.de) [accessed 13 January 2009].

³ See for example Stefan Wolle, 'Stasi mit menschlichem Antlitz', *Deutschland Archiv*, 39:3 (2006), 497–99; Rainer Eckert, 'Grausige Realität oder schönes Märchen? Enfach "Das Leben der Anderen" eine neue Diskussion um die zweite deutsche Diktatur?', *Deutschland Archiv*, 39:3 (2006), 500–01; Anna Funder summarizes some of the objections raised to the film in her article 'Eyes Without a Face', *Sight and Sound*, May 2007, 16–21. Subsequent references to Funder's article are given after quotations in the text.

as based on his own experience, has emphasized on numerous occasions that his parents were originally from the East, Silesia and Magdeburg, but left before the Wall was built. He recalls that during visits to relatives in the GDR his mother was 'subjected to particularly humiliating checks' and even being strip-searched when crossing the German-German border, presumably because she was 'on a special Stasi list' and considered a traitor 'to the communist cause' on account of having moved to the West.⁴

Yet if one considers the endorsements of experts, famous East Germans such as Thomas Brussig and Wolf Biermann, who were called upon in the film's publicity campaign, it would have been entirely unnecessary for the director to recall his brush with the Stasi in order to be credible. Both attest to the film's historical authenticity. According to Biermann, *Das Leben der Anderen* offers a very realistic depiction of life in the GDR and this despite the fact that the director-débutante 'hat ja alles das nicht selber erlebt!'⁵ And yet, Biermann notes with astonishment, 'kann solch ein junger Mann mitreden! Dieser Westler kann offensichtlich sehr wohl urteilen und auch verurteilen, er kann nicht nur mitreden, sondern sogar aufklären.' Biermann concludes his article in *Die Welt* with the provocative suggestion: 'Womöglich machen [...die tiefere Aufarbeitung der zweiten Diktatur in Deutschland] jetzt besser die, die all das Elend nicht selbst erlitten haben.'

Transforming the Stasi Experience into a Fairy Tale of Redemption

It is precisely this lack of personal involvement which enabled von Donnersmarck to transcend the specific GDR experience of living under Stasi surveillance and turn it into a story of universal significance. For popular appeal, von Donnersmarck's compelling narrative draws on familiar generic conventions of Hollywood cinema: elements of a suspense thriller are combined with melodrama; the film follows a linear plotline which culminates in an individual's heroic decision to overcome adverse powers (the mechanisms of state control and repression), and there is a happy end — of sorts. Most importantly, *Das Leben der Anderen* invokes one of the most popular narrative formulae: it is essentially a redemption narrative, tracing the transformation of someone bad — or morally ambiguous — into someone good.

The screen writing guru Robert McKee provides a long list of films, including *The Deer Hunter* (dir. by Michael Cimino, UK, USA, 1978), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (dir. by Robert Benton, USA, 1979), *Out of Africa* (dir. by Sydney Pollack, USA, 1985) and *Schindler's List*, all of which are based on the narrative paradigm of the redemption plot. McKee identifies

⁴ Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 'Thirteen Questions with Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck', <http://www.sonyclassics.com/thelivesofothers/swf/index.html> [accessed 15 January 2009]. Subsequent references to this interview are given after the quotation. What added a certain poignancy — and good publicity — to the media coverage was that East German actor Ulrich Mühe, who plays Wiesler in the film, discovered that his ex-wife, the actress Jenny Gröllmann, had allegedly worked for the Stasi under the codename 'Jeanne' and spied upon him; see Frank Pergande, 'Sie waren einmal ein Traumpaar', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 29 April 2006, p. 44.

⁵ Wolf Biermann, 'Die Gespenster treten aus dem Schatten', *Die Welt*, 22 March 2006, http://www.welt.de/print-welt/article205348/Die_Gespenster_treten_aus_dem_Schatten.html [accessed 15 January 2009]; see also Thomas Brussig, 'Klaviatur des Sadismus: Die DDR in "Das Leben der Anderen"', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 March 2006, <http://www.filmportal.de/df/4f/Artikel,oFA9D80290E08271E04053D50B376A85.html> [accessed 15 January 2009].

it as one particularly rich in irony and ‘a magnet for Oscars’.⁶ An ironic version of the success story, the redemption plot gained prominence in Hollywood cinema in the 1970s. But whereas the protagonists of success stories get what they wanted all along, protagonists of redemption narratives are obsessed with goals or values that bring them to the brink of sanity or self-destruction. ‘They stand to lose, if not their lives, their humanity’ (McKee, p. 126). However, in a moment of revelation, they manage ‘to glimpse the ruinous nature of their obsession [...and then] throw away what they once cherished’ (McKee, p. 126). In this way, the protagonist of the redemption plot wins by losing. *Das Leben der Anderen* is a textbook example of this narrative paradigm, in as much as the Stasi Captain abandons his hitherto unquestioned loyalty to the totalitarian regime, which he serves as a skilful inquisitor and vigilant spy, by changing sides. He is demoted from his position as Stasi Captain — and thereby victimized — but he gains his humanity.

The redemption plot in large measure accounts for the film’s box-office success as well as for its divisiveness. While one camp of critics considered Wiesler’s change of heart and his courage in defying the system as implausible, and in fact impossible, in view of the many checks and counterchecks with which the Stasi operated, the other camp praised the film as a celebration of the triumph of humanity. Yet both camps agreed that Wiesler’s transformation from a ‘geradlinigen Täter zum feinfühligem Gut-Menschen, dann zum Helden und schließlich zum bedauernswerten Opfer’ was the kind of stuff that only fairy tales are made of.⁷

The reference to fairy tales is reminiscent of debates surrounding a number of Holocaust films, notably *La vita è bella* (dir. by Roberto Benigni, Italy, 1997), *The Pianist* and *Schindler’s List*. In his article ‘Rescreening “The Holocaust”: The Children’s Stories’, David Bathrick applies the Brechtian term ‘Greuelmärchen’, that is ‘fairy-tale of horror’, to the considerable number of films centring on Holocaust survivors and argues that, although many are based on personal testimonies of Holocaust survivors and are therefore authentic stories, they convey the misleading impression that the success story of survival was the norm, whereas in reality it was a total anomaly.⁸ *Das Leben der Anderen* is such a ‘Greuelmärchen’, focusing on the exceptional case of a good Stasi officer — albeit an entirely fictitious character with no claim to historical authenticity. There was an Oskar Schindler, but there was no Gerd Wiesler. Yet the narrative formula of the Stasi film bears a conspicuous resemblance to *Schindler’s List*. Both films single out the one exceptional ‘good German’ or the one exceptional ‘good Stasi officer’, both morally ambiguous men, and narrate how these men saved the lives of those victimized by the respective regime. Both films end with a proof of gratitude of those who were saved: *Schindler’s List* ends with documentary footage of hundreds of Jews saved by Oskar Schindler, putting down stones on his grave in Jerusalem. *Das Leben der Anderen* ends with Gerd Wiesler discovering that Georg Dreyman has dedicated his book *Sonate vom Guten Menschen* to him, using his code name: ‘HGW XX/7 gewidmet, in Dankbarkeit’.⁹ Admittedly, the analogies between the

⁶ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 126; subsequent references are given after quotations in the text.

⁷ Günter Jeschonnek, ‘Die Sehnsucht nach dem unpolitischen Märchen: Ein kritischer Kommentar zum Stasi-Film “Das Leben der Anderen”’, *Deutschland Archiv*, 39:3 (2006), 501–04 (p. 501).

⁸ David Bathrick, ‘Rescreening the “Holocaust”: The Children’s Stories’, *New German Critique*, Special Issue on the Holocaust, 80 (2000), 41–58 (p. 48 and p. 54).

⁹ The reference to HGW XX/7 is a combination of Wiesler’s initials and a reference to the division of

two films only carry so far: Schindler is a saviour, and not a perpetrator, whereas Wiesler is a perpetrator turned saviour. But in fact, this makes Dreyman's expression of gratitude even more poignant: a victim thanking his perpetrator for having spared him — surely this is the ultimate redemption any screen villain could wish for.

But there is more to Wiesler's redemption. By sparing Dreyman the long prison sentence in Hohenschönhausen that he would have faced, he himself has been saved. Through Dreyman's dedication to HGW XX/7 Wiesler is rescued from the anonymity of the invisible army of Stasi officers and informers. Though still nameless, he has been singled out by Dreyman, addressed as an individual, and he identifies himself as such. When the sales assistant in the Karl Marx bookshop asks Wiesler, whether he wants the book gift-wrapped, he responds: 'Nein...es ist für mich'. In this sense, the film's happy end also celebrates the triumph of individualism over collectivism and, thereby, implicitly the triumph of the Western ethos of individualism over the subordination of the individual under the demands of the socialist collective of the now defunct GDR.

Implicitly the entire film endorses the Western worldview on which all Hollywood genre cinema is based: the firm belief in individual agency and the protagonist's ability to change the ineluctable forces of history and, indeed, his character. Unlike East German films about the Stasi, Donnersmarck's fairy tale endorses this fantasy of autonomy and power and denies the deforming or crippling effects of totalitarian coercion by suggesting that human beings 'no matter how far they have gone down the wrong path' (Donnersmarck, 'Thirteen Questions') are able to do the right thing and thereby prove their humanity in inhumane times.

Yet, ironically, Wiesler's transformation from a Stasi officer who toes the party line and is utterly serious in his endeavour to protect socialism against the subversive activities of the class enemy, to a good person, reconfirms the fundamental belief on which socialist society was based. As Anna Funder puts it in *Stasiland*, 'the idea that human nature is a work-in-progress which can be improved upon and that Communism is the way to do it', was one of the many fictions which GDR citizens were required to acknowledge as fact.¹⁰ Early on in *Das Leben der Anderen*, Culture Minister Hempf and playwright Dreyman talk about this fundamental tenet of socialism. Hempf says to Dreyman:

Aber das lieben wir ja alle an Ihren Stücken: die Liebe zum Menschen, die guten [sic] Menschen; den Glauben, daß man sich verändern kann. Dreyman, ganz gleich wie oft sie das schreiben, Menschen verändern sich nicht.¹¹

Hempf, just like Wiesler's superior, Stasi General Grubitz, is shown to be far less idealistic than Dreyman and Wiesler; equally the high-ranking functionaries pretend to be the guardians of socialist ideology, whereas they are actually cynical opportunists. Hempf wants to get Dreyman behind lock and key so as to pursue his affair with his girlfriend Christa-Maria Sieland and therefore asks Grubitz to set up the 'Operation Lazlo'. Meanwhile Grubitz hopes to advance his career by finding incriminating evidence against

the Ministry of State Security where he works. HA XX/7 was the so-called 'Hauptabteilung Kultur' or 'Sicherungsbereich Kultur', which was in charge of artists and intellectuals.

¹⁰ Anna Funder, *Stasiland: Stories from Behind the Berlin Wall* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 96. Subsequent references are given after the quotations in the text.

¹¹ Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen: Filmbuch* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), p. 34. Subsequent references are given after quotations in the text.



FIG 1 (above). Christa and Dreyman in bed, *Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Germany, 2006.

FIG 2 (below). Wiesler in the attic, *Das Leben der Anderen*, Germany, dir. by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006.

Dreyman. Only Wiesler — and, ironically, also Dreyman, the victim of Stasi surveillance — firmly believe in socialism.

These similarities between victim and perpetrator, between Dreyman and Wiesler, are underscored by the film's editing techniques: a number of graphic match cuts establish visual correspondences between the two men. For example, one scene shows Christa and Dreyman lying in bed with their heads framed horizontally, while the next frame shows Wiesler in the attic, listening on his headphones to what goes on in Dreyman's flat underneath, his head tilted, almost in the same horizontal position as that of Dreyman.

Another scene shows Dreyman hiding next to the front door of the apartment building as Christa-Maria enters while, later on, Wiesler is hiding in the very same place when Dreyman enters.



FIG. 3 (above). Dreyman hiding by the behind the door, *Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Germany, 2006.

FIG. 4 (below). Wiesler hiding in the same place as Dreyman enters, *Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. by Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Germany, 2006.

One of the main factors contributing to Wiesler's gradual identification with Dreyman is the men's shared idealism and commitment to the socialist utopia. Once the Stasi Captain has identified with his victim, he can no longer do his job properly and he begins to cover up Dreyman's one act of dissidence. Following the suicide of his blacklisted friend and colleague Jerska, Dreyman begins to write non-fiction — an article for the West German news magazine *Der Spiegel* about the suicide rates in the GDR which is smuggled to the West. Wiesler, by contrast, who has hitherto recorded every detail of Dreyman and Christa-Maria's life in a meticulous surveillance report, starts writing fiction when he records that Dreyman and his friends from the theatre are working on a stage play about

Lenin to celebrate the GDR's fortieth anniversary.¹² This inversion of roles is due to the fact that both men have become disillusioned with the regime they used to support: Dreyman is devastated by Jerska's suicide; Wiesler has come to realize that he is merely an instrument to advance Grubitz's career. Grasping Grubitz's true motivations, the disillusioned Wiesler reminds his superior: 'Sind wir dafür angetreten? [...] Weißt du noch unseren Eid? "Schild und Schwert der Partei"' (Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen*, p. 60).

Yet this kind of disenchantment is not the only motivation for Wiesler's transformation. The turning point in Wiesler's trajectory (or should one say, his moral education) occurs when he listens through his headphones to Dreyman playing the 'Sonate vom Guten Menschen' on the piano, the score of which Jerska has given him for his birthday. The sonata, composed by Gabriel Yared, who also wrote the score for big budget films such as *The English Patient* (dir. by Anthony Minghella, UK, USA, 1996), *The Talented Mr Ripley* (dir. by Anthony Minghella, USA, 1999) and *Shall We Dance* (dir. by Peter Chelsom, USA, 2004), suggests that Wiesler's contact with high culture has changed him for the better. This is, to come back to the numerous parallels which Donnersmarck's film evinces with the narrative paradigms of recent Holocaust films, also the premise of Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*, which, like *Schindler's List*, is a 'Greuelmärchen' based on biographical fact. In this film, the German officer who finds Wladyslaw Szpilman almost starved amongst the ruins of Warsaw spares the Jewish pianist's life because he is deeply moved by his superb performance of Chopin's Sonata in C sharp minor. The same idea of the civilizing, or rather, humanizing, power of high culture is used as a narrative device in *Das Leben der Anderen*. First taking the little yellow Brecht volume from Dreyman's desk and reading 'Erinnerung an die Marie A.' one evening alone in flat and, later on, eavesdropping on Dreyman's performance of the 'Sonata for a Good Man', mark key moments in Wiesler's transformation.

Wiesler is moved to tears when listening to the Sonata over his headphones, while Dreyman, oblivious to his audience in the attic above, comments on the music's cathartic effect:

Ich muss immer daran denken, was Lenin von der Appassionata gesagt hat: 'Ich kann sie nicht hören, sonst bring ich die Revolution nicht zu Ende.' [...] Kann jemand, der diese Musik gehört hat, wirklich gehört hat, noch ein schlechter Mensch sein? (Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen*, p. 77)

The next scene illustrates Wiesler's almost instantaneous reformation. He drives home and meets a little boy with a football under his arm in the lift of the sterile apartment block where he lives. The boy immediately identifies him as working for the Stasi and adds that the Stasi 'sind schlimme Männer, die andere einsperren, sagt mein Papi'. Wiesler automatically asks for the father's name — but suddenly resists, changing his question in mid-sentence to: 'Wie heißt denn Dein Ball?'¹³ From here, the film's narrative arc, takes the audience — after a number of unexpected revelations and ironic inversions — to the coda, when Wiesler discovers the book *Sonate vom Guten Menschen* in the bookshop and

¹² See Matthew H. Bernstein, 'The Lives of Others', *Film Quarterly*, 61:1 (2007), 30–36 (pp. 32–33) for a discussion of this and additional ironic inversions.

¹³ Donnersmarck, *Das Leben der Anderen: Filmbuch*, pp. 78–79. In the screenplay, the little boy attests: 'Du bist aber kein schlimmer Mann', thus making the beginning of Wiesler's transformation more explicit. In the film, this sentence has been cut.

the dedication to him. This fairy-tale ending optimistically asserts what we would all like to believe: no matter how compromised someone's actions or flawed someone's character is, they can be redeemed, though, ironically not through communism but through the humanizing power of art.

Looking Back in Anger: the East German Stasi-film *Der Verdacht*

The optimistic message of *Das Leben der Anderen* stands in stark contrast to the pessimistic — or, to use a word that featured prominently in many censorship debates in the GDR — 'nihilistic' assessment of life under Stasi surveillance, expressed in *Der Verdacht*. The film is based on Volker Braun's 'Novelle' *Unvollendete Geschichte*, first published in the journal *Sinn und Form* in 1975. Ulrich Plenzdorf wrote the screenplay and Frank Beyer, who alongside Konrad Wolf was one of the most highly acclaimed DEFA filmmakers, directed the film.¹⁴ Set in the 1970s, *Der Verdacht* tells the story of Karin, the daughter of a council chairman in a small town on the German–German border, and her boyfriend Frank, whose father was imprisoned for currency smuggling, whose parents are divorced and who has a criminal record. Alone with his mother, he lives in a derelict house in Berlin. Karin's father 'has been informed', as he puts it, that Frank is 'planning something' — but this something is merely a vague suspicion. He asks Karin to end her relationship with Frank because her liaison with a suspect young man like Frank would threaten her future and could also have repercussions for himself and his wife. Karin is torn between her love of Frank and her duty as a daughter. Intimidated by two Stasi officers, who pay her a visit at the editorial office where she works, and pressurized by her family and boss, she ends her relationship. Frank thereupon attempts suicide and is in a coma for weeks. Even though the allegation of planned *Republikflucht* is not upheld, his life has been destroyed — and so has Karin's. She is expecting a baby, has forfeited her opportunity to study and will either be sent to work in production (officially advertized as a consciousness-raising experience in the GDR, but in fact, a form of punishment) or become a hairdresser, like her socially *déclassé* sister. Whereas in *Das Leben der Anderen* the suspicion against Dreyman is justified in the end, since he actually writes and smuggles a subversive article to the West, in *Der Verdacht* entirely innocent lives are blighted and destroyed by the all-pervasive sense of mistrust and fear.

Der Verdacht, just like the small number of other Stasi-films made by former DEFA directors after unification, encapsulates what Hannah Arendt has called 'the banality of evil'.¹⁵ These films centre on mediocre, law-abiding citizens, who are morally shallow and who try to protect their own lives and that of their families through obedience and accommodation to power. Karin's father, for instance, is depicted as caring and concerned about his daughter's well-being, yet he has internalized 'the totalitarian nature of bureaucratized evil' (Funder, 'Eyes Without', p. 19) to such an extent that he is unable to follow his conscience with which he has lost touch over decades of blind obedience.

¹⁴ Frank Beyer's Holocaust film *Jakob der Lügner* was the only DEFA film ever to be nominated for an Oscar, while *Spur der Steine* (GDR, 1965/1989) was one of the films banned in the wake of the Eleventh Plenum in 1965. See *Regie: Frank Beyer*, ed. by Ralf Schenk (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1995) for an overview of Beyer's oeuvre.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, [1963] 2006), p. 252.

While *Das Leben der Anderen* is set in the bohemian milieu of artists, intellectuals and dissidents, the lives depicted in *Der Verdacht* are small, ordinary and shameful, and the destruction of these lives is quiet and unspectacular. The last scene of *Der Verdacht* is reminiscent of the unhappy happy endings of Douglas Sirk's films, if it were not for the fact that Beyer's film lacks precisely the emotional intensity of Sirkian melodrama. What at face value looks like a happy end, when Karin collects Frank at the hospital and the couple walk down a straight, tree-lined avenue in a tender embrace, actually glosses over the secret and quiet annihilation of these young lives. As a result of the long coma, Frank has lost his memory and cannot recall why he attempted suicide in the first place — and Karin is not going to remind him. As the couple slowly walks off into the distance, they are not facing a bright and happy future but a life of marginalization and social exclusion in which their love is unlikely to survive. This cynical ending is devoid of hope and compassion.

Christa-Maria's unexpected death in *Das Leben der Anderen*, by contrast, is highly melodramatic and redolent with symbolic significance. Assuming that she has brought about Dreyman's destruction, by having betrayed him to the Stasi in order to protect herself and her career as an actress, she runs out into the street, barefoot and half-naked in her white bathrobe and throws herself under a lorry. In the moment of her death, she confesses to Wiesler, who witnesses her act of despair, that she can never undo what she had done, never redeem herself. Dreyman rushes out of the house and holds the dying Christa-Maria in a Pietà-like pose. By having first betrayed the man she loves in a Judas-like manner to Stasi Captain Wiesler, who had been put in charge of interrogating Christa-Maria, and then sacrificing herself like Christ (as the visual reference to the Pietà suggests), she has given Wiesler the chance for his own redemption: the 'good Stasi officer' has, in the meantime, removed all incriminating evidence against Dreyman and has thereby saved the dissident playwright.

Such sudden reversals of fortune, such unexpected twists in the tale and such heroism are the kind of material that dreams on celluloid are made of. For DEFA filmmakers, however, it was impossible to convert their painful memories of living with the Stasi into a saleable commodity. Ulrich Plenzdorf and Frank Beyer approached the topic from a different 'Gedächtnisrahmen', to use Aleida Assmann's term,¹⁶ than von Donnersmarck, who lacks the deep personal connection of his East German colleagues. For East German filmmakers films about the Stasi experience are a genuine form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* which in most cases resulted in a distantiating from the moral dilemmas experienced by both victims and perpetrators. When interviewed about *Der Verdacht*, Frank Beyer explained that East Germans preferred to forget certain aspects of their lives since they had a guilty conscience. Dealing with the Stasi on screen was therefore a difficult and ambivalent matter. However, in order to reach an audience, Beyer notes, films about the old GDR had to tell 'große und ungewöhnliche Geschichten'.¹⁷ And this is precisely what von Donnersmarck did when he used history, that was not his own, as rich source material for a melodramatic thriller. He tells a 'great and exceptional' story about the moral redemption of a Stasi perpetrator. And he tells this story by striking all the right emotional chords.

¹⁶ Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: Beck, 2006), p. 159; subsequent references are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁷ Frank Junghänel, 'Zwei Liebende unter staatlicher "Obhut": Frank Beyer verfilmte Volker Brauns "Unvollendete Geschichte" von 1975', *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 15 November 1991.

Taking an Empathetic Approach to the Past

Das Leben der Anderen largely sidelines politics and relies primarily on emotions to convey its message. According to Aleida Assmann such an emotional approach to history is characteristic of Germany's contemporary memory discourse, which is dominated by what she calls the 'Modus des emotionalen Nacherlebens' (Assmann, p. 192). In *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, Assmann explores the relationship between generation and memory, in particular, the memory of World War Two and the Holocaust. She suggests that today's 'Bekennungsgeneration', that is, the grandchildren of those who experienced the war as perpetrators, fellow travellers or victims — do not blame the experiential generation for what they have done or failed to do during the Third Reich. Unlike the generation of the sons and daughters who perceived their fathers as perpetrators, the confessional generation operates within a different memory framework, accessing the past through multiple layers of mediation: oral history, family narratives, photos and the mass media. This has created a distance which enables the confessional generation to empathize and identify with the experiential generation and to construct a new master narrative. As the empathetic mode of memory imparts a feeling of forgiveness and the recognition that the Germans under the Nazis, too, have suffered, Germany's Nazi past is now re-imagined as a time of suffering and victimhood in German popular culture, literature and film.¹⁸

Von Donnersmarck's relationship to East Germany's Stasi legacy is characterized by a similar distance, not generational distance, but one determined by national belonging. He grew up on the other side of the Wall and was sixteen when the Wall came down. His memory of the communist dictatorship is what Alison Landsberg has aptly called 'prosthetic'. Mediated through film and other mass media, prosthetic memory is a commodified type of memory, a form of 'mass cultural representation' which is useful (as a prosthesis is in replacing a limb) in that it 'generates empathy' and a 'sensuous engagement' with a past distinct from one's own.¹⁹ It allows a Western filmmaker like von Donnersmarck to see through the eyes of the 'Other' — and to engender a sense of forgiveness and reconciliation, an attitude inconceivable for those who actually experienced the totalitarian regime.

In the companion book to the film, which includes numerous interviews with Ulrich Mühe (who plays Wiesler), von Donnersmarck and Sebastian Koch (who plays Dreyman), words like 'einfühlen', 'emotional', 'Empfinden' and 'Fühlen' can be found on almost every other page. Mühe admits that the film director chose a subject 'mit dem er selber in seiner Biographie wahrscheinlich überhaupt nichts zu tun hatte, in das er sich aber trotzdem vollkommen einfühlen konnte'.²⁰

¹⁸ See for example Klaus R. Röhl, *Verbotene Trauer: Ende der deutschen Tabus* (Munich: Universitasverlag, 2002); *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany*, ed. by Bill Niven (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); *Screening the War: New Perspectives on German Suffering*, ed. by Paul Cooke and Marc Silberman (Rochester, NY: Camden House, forthcoming 2009).

¹⁹ Alison Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture', in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. by Paul Grainge (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 144–61 (p. 149).

²⁰ Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, Christoph Hochhäusler, Ulrich Mühe, 'Es hat ja schon viele Versuche gegeben, die DDR-Realität einzufangen', in *Das Leben der Anderen: Filmbuch*, pp. 182–200 (p. 184).

In fact, the transformative power of feelings and music is, according to the scriptwriter-director's own testimony, the film's central conceit. The little anecdote about Lenin and the *Appassionata* served as von Donnersmarck's chief inspiration for the script and evoked the image of a man, sitting in a bleak room listening to wonderful music through his headphones, in his mind. 'Manche Musik', von Donnersmarck muses, 'zwingt einfach dazu, das Menschliche über die Ideologie zu stellen, das Gefühl über die Prinzipien, die Liebe über die Strenge'.²¹

In depoliticizing the Stasi past, *Das Leben der Anderen* pursues a strategy similar to the many films about the Nazi past which contribute to the normalization of Germany's past. Like these recent historical imaginaries about the solidarity of Germans and Jews and the triumph of humanity in inhumane times, *Das Leben der Anderen* transcends shifting ideological agendas and relies on the universal and timeless appeal of emotions. By depicting Stasi Captain Wiesler first as perpetrator, then as hero and finally as victim, who does penance for his crimes by being relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy, the film makes a significant and controversial contribution to the memory contests over Germany's second dictatorship. *Das Leben der Anderen* rewrites the memory of East Germany's tainted and traumatic past as a 'fable of forgiveness' that, as some commentators have argued, makes 'an inappropriate plea for the absolution of the perpetrators' (Funder 'Eyes Without', p. 20). It sacrifices historical authenticity for affect,²² appealing to our sense of compassion and releasing us from the cinema with the uplifting feeling that, ultimately, humanity will triumph over evil. Engaging with a past in which he holds no stake, von Donnersmarck's prosthetic memory of the Stasi state makes it possible for him to look back in empathy, not anger — and to seduce his audience into doing the same.

²¹ Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, "'Appassionata': Die Filmidee', in *Das Leben der Anderen: Filmbuch*, pp. 169–70 (p. 170).

²² Critics of the film have argued that Erich Mielke, the head of the Ministry for State Security, would have punished Wiesler more severely than merely demoting him to working in a subterranean post room. Disloyal Stasi agents were sentenced to death. See Manfred Wilke, 'Wieslers Umkehr', in *Das Leben der Anderen: Filmbuch*, pp. 201–13 (p. 201). On the other hand, high-ranking Stasi officers like Wiesler were unlikely to end up distributing junk mail in the New Germany. Former Stasi officers fared generally better than their victims, assuming positions as private detectives, policemen, insurance salesmen, security officers or setting up their own business (Funder, 'Eyes Without', p. 19).